PLAYING FOR HIRE: DISCOURSE, KNOWLEDGE, AND STRATEGIES OF
CABDRIVING IN SAN FRANCISCO

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By
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Abstract

This study, based on participant observation and ethnographic interviews, investigates the discourse of San Francisco cabdrivers concerning their occupation as a body of knowledges and strategies. This discourse is not treated as translucent in itself, but must be approached in terms of the interactional and occupational power relations which drivers experience in the course of their work. In particular this study focuses on the interplay of power and interpretive strategies in taxicab radio dispatch; this is contextualized historically and with reference to other ways in which drivers “play” cabdriving. The phrase “playing for hire” is intended to capture the contradictory nature of an occupation which combines liberating aspects such as mobility and freedom of interaction with drudgery, danger, and monetary calculation.
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A large number of people deserve thanks, or perhaps blame, for teaching me what I attempt to communicate in this thesis. Most prominent among them are naturally my fellows in the San Francisco cab industry, not just those whose words and actions are recounted here, but all those who intentionally or not taught me something about cabdriving—anyone who was an inspiration or a friend in need, or just generally a pleasure to be around. Several people deserve special thanks, and I would have liked to have put their full names below, but in the interest of thanking everyone in the list equally, I list them all by familiar names only (my apologies for any misspellings): Adebayo, Ahmad, Ali, Andrew, Andy, Anne, Avram, Bing, Bernie, Bertie, Bob, Bob, Buzz, Byron, Carl, Charles, Damon, Danny, Dave, Ed, Eddie, Fakhri, Frances, Frank, George, George, Ghazi, Gordon, Greg, Guy, Hamadou, Herb, Hugh, Ike, Inge, Jack, Jackie, Jim, Jim, Jimmy, Jeff, Joe, Joe, Kenny, Larry, Leon, Mario, Mike, Moe, Mohammed, Mohammed, Pat, Paul, Peter, Peter, Phil, Phil, Phil, Rajah, Ritchie, Rogelio, Roger, Roy, Royal, Sai, Serge, Shane, Skiff, Steve, Tom, Tomson, Vince, and Zied. These folks include cabdrivers, dispatchers, cashiers, gasmen, mechanics, managers, a taxi detail officer, and a taxi commissioner; I am sure there are others I am leaving out.

Warm thanks go to my advisor and thesis chair, Peter Claus, for all the support, encouragement, and opportunity he has provided me with during my time in Hayward; and to the other members of my committee, Rita Ross and Laura Nelson, for many
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Playing for Hire

The social game has a deeper double meaning—that it is played not only in a society as its outward bearer but that with its help people actually ‘play’ ‘society.’ (Simmel 1971: 134)

Pulling the cab into the gas line at the garage after a frustrating day, I once found myself thinking, “This game stinks!” As soon as I formulated the thought, I was struck with the realization that what I was complaining about was not a game at all, but a job—work, which is, after all, not usually expected to be fun. Nevertheless, there is an important aspect to cabdriving which is brought out in its potential confusion, by an addled driver at the end of a long day’s work, with a game, albeit one that is not always enjoyable.

It will be emphasized throughout this study that cabdriving is something that is “played,” in occupational terminology: a driver “plays the airport,” “plays the streets,” “plays the stands,” “plays the city.” On one level this is a recognition of the fundamental element of luck—no matter where the driver goes, no matter what strategies she\(^1\) employs, no matter how well she knows the city, the capture of fares is ultimately a matter of luck, of being in the right place at the right time when the pedestrian’s arm goes

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\(^1\) The gender of hypothetical individuals will alternate throughout this text, insofar as the social roles they stand for (in this case, “driver”) are not gender-specific.
up, or of happening to have just turned left instead of right, and chancing upon a “bingo.” Bingo itself is a game of luck, of things lining up just right.

There is more to driving than luck, however, because a driver must know how to minimize the damage of bad luck and how to maximize the value of good luck. This is where strategy fits in, in which the little, momentary games of chance in which drivers compete for fares are strung together into a larger pattern over which the driver’s skill can have more effect. Both the element of luck (as serendipity or frustration) and that of strategy (as success or stress) give cabdriving the character of a game which can be both pleasurable and dissatisfying.

Unlike those who play for fun, however, drivers play for hire. The object, after all, is to earn a living. This gives an added urgency to those occasions when luck is bad and money is not to be found. On the other hand, when business is good, the cabdriver experiences a freedom and pleasure in the job which many would envy. “Playing for hire” is meant to emphasize the contradictions inherent in a job which offers drivers an unusual scope of mobility, self-control, and opportunities for experience and reflection on a wide range of society—but which at the same time subjects drivers to pressures, constraints, and dangers resulting from social and occupational hierarchies. This study will focus on the discourse, knowledge, and strategies employed by some San Franciscan drivers as they attempt to negotiate the good and bad in their occupation, the contradictions which riddle their trade.
Discourse, Knowledge, and Strategies

This study looks at the occupation of cabdriving in terms of some forms of discourse, knowledge, and strategies associated with it. There is nothing meant to be holy about this trinity: these terms simply reflect three foci which developed in the course of the study, both on account of my personal theoretical interests as a researcher and on account of my experiences as a cabdriver, and the reflections thereon made by myself or recounted to me by other drivers.

By discourse is meant here primarily the way cabdriving is talked about and described by cabdrivers: what drivers say they do, and what they say about what they do. Discourse in this sense plays an important role in passing on the “canon of work technique” important in any occupation, as a significant way in which new drivers learn the “techniques, verbal expressions, and customs of work” essential to successfully carrying out their job in both its practical and its social aspects (McCarl 1986: 71-2). On another level, discourse involves, in each of its instantiations, the negotiation and renegotiation of the identity of the driver as one who drives a cab and possesses the knowledges involved in doing so, on which strategies of competence and control are founded. Discourse is thus at once the mode of transmission of knowledges and strategies, and the meaningful setting in which identities and competences are affirmed. For the purpose of ethnography, discourse is therefore a fitting method of entry into the exploration and understanding of what cabdriving means to those who do it, as well as to how it is practiced.
In this study, there is a certain conflation between a linguistic definition of “discourse” (as “that which is said”) and a Foucauldian definition (as the range of institutionally pertinent statements relating to an object of knowledge; a discursive domain). As understood here, the latter underlies the sense of the former, and the former both brings about and gives force to the latter. But little will be found here along the lines of a \textit{langue}/\textit{parole}, competence/performance, or structure/event distinction: the method of exposition in this study is not programmatic but descriptive, following the lines and tracing the patterns of cabdriving discourse as it is known to myself and my interlocutors. In keeping with this my presentation of cabdriving and its discourse will necessarily be partial and incomplete; rather than presenting an outline of the logic of cabdriving discourse, I give only the view of a participant, or of some participants. My wish is for this study to be understood, thus, as being within the discourse on cabdriving, rather than taking that discourse as its object from the outside.

In Foucauldian terms, discourse involves the dual constitution of a knowing subject and an object of knowledge. In this case, the knower is the driver and the object is the city, both as the terrain in and through which the driver moves and as the flows of people and money which the driver must master. The knowledge of how to drive a cab is of course passed on in the discourse on cabdriving; at the same time, the solitary, atomized nature of the cabdriving experience means that, more than in many occupations, learning to drive a cab is an individual affair.\footnote{This is exacerbated by the tendency in many cities, such as San Francisco, to put the new driver on the street with almost no training whatsoever.} Learning is accomplished by doing.
However, even here “discourse” is an operative concept, since the driver’s reflections on driving, and her formulations of knowledge and strategy, must find their place within the occupational discourse for her strategies and knowledges to become competence and her identity to become that of a knowing, driving subject. Knowledge, thus, does not only flow out of discourse, but as the particular objective of that discourse, makes that particular form of “knowing” possible.

This knowledge is necessarily practical, as it forms the basis of the interpretive and spatio-temporal strategies of which cabdriving is composed. Spatio-temporal strategies are those which the driver deploys in time and space; interpretive strategies are those by which the driver gleans information from the city streets, the radio, other drivers, or any of a multitude of other sources, and combines that information with a body of practical knowledge in order to be successful in the game of cabdriving. Thus, interpretive strategies, as the ways in which knowledge is used, underlie both the spatio-temporal strategies made use of by drivers as well as any situational tactics they may deploy in the course of competing for radio orders, anticipating traffic conditions across town, or attempting to squeeze tips out of grumpy passengers. Strategies make use of knowledge; both strategies and knowledge are transmitted and given meaning through discourse; and in discourse is found the key to an ethnographic understanding of what cabdrivers do, how they do it, and what meaning it has for them as drivers, driving.
Truth and Power

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (Foucault 1980: 133)

An ethnography focused on discourse cannot presume to represent the truth of its subject in the manner traditional to social science. It object is not to portray the objective reality of cabdriving as an institution—constructing a knowledge outside the periphery of cabdriving as a practice—but to glean, through the meaningful things drivers say during and about their job, an understanding of how knowledge works practically, for drivers. Certainly the truths which drivers produce in the course of interpreting and discoursing on the institutional and situational power relations they encounter daily—interactions with dispatchers, passengers, other cabdrivers, as well as with police, pedestrians, and the driving public—have all the effects of “truth” in positioning the driver as a knower and perceiver, and giving impetus to the deployment by the driver of situationally appropriate tactics and strategies. This is so even when drivers are incorrect in their interpretation, i.e. when their “truth” is not “true;” but in most cases the fleeting, fluid circumstances—in which a driver must decide immediately if a passenger is trustworthy, if another driver is lying about his location, if a dispatcher is telling the whole story, or even if the left lane or the right lane of traffic will move more quickly—are rarely subjected to the sort of test whereby a more than momentary validity would become relevant. If these momentary interpretations are recovered at all, it is when drivers retell their day, in which case these “truths” are subsumed into that of discourse, through which statements and subjects are
produced. Thus, in this study, there are statements and interpretations given by drivers which may well not be “true” in the account-book of all-seeing Objectivity; however, they are included for the truth they convey about the organizing concepts of cabdriving discourse and the everyday power relations it reflects and constitutes. The intent here is to follow the way these situationally true interpretations and statements are used and have meaning for those who make them.

Which brings us to the other reason to focus on discourse: its imbrication with the workings of relations of power. For Foucault, any society is composed of “manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body;” these power relations are dependent on discourse for their functioning (Foucault 1980: 93). For the purposes of occupational ethnography, the most pertinent relations of power are those of an institutional nature: the relationship of driver to dispatcher, driver to driver, driver to passenger. These relations involve both conflict and cooperation, and there may be a disparity or an equivalence in the ability of either party to dominate—in all cases, the actual negotiation and re-iteration of the terms of these power relations takes place, and is reflected in, discourse. A focus on discourse thus helps to illuminate the day-to-day significance of power relations in the cab industry, the “network of practices of power and constraining institutions” in which drivers find themselves (Foucault 1988: 17)

It will become apparent to the reader of this work that unequal relations of power seem to generate more discourse than equal ones, such that conflict is emphasized over cooperation and consensus. Thus, there is much more discussion, in the discourse among cabdrivers, of “bad” dispatchers than of “good” dispatchers, of “bad” passengers than of
“good” passengers. This is a bias of the focus on discourse, since it is in situations of unequal or contested power that drivers are compelled to produce more subtle, elaborate knowledges and strategies. This has the benefit of highlighting the forms of those relations of power which are most significant in the cabdriver’s day, but I am forced to keep reminding the reader, and myself, that cooperation and trust play a much larger role than may be evident from a cursory reading of this study.

Fieldwork Context and Methods

I was working as screenprinter out on Pier 80—the pay was low, business was bad and I was having trouble getting enough hours. I was starting to have trouble with my wrists from the repetitive motion. While I was at a lunch break at a Mexican restaurant, a guy eating a big bowl of menudo soup told me that at my age, the best job was driving a cab. Cash every day, he said, and you’re a free man, and you get to know the city like you’ve never imagined. As it was winter and business was down the boss was anxious that I use up the two weeks or so of vacation I had coming, so I took the time and used it to switch to my bright new career.

Driving a cab in San Francisco first involves getting a letter of intent to hire from a company. I had to pay a hundred bucks and sit through cabdriving school for a week, in which the instructor alternately complained and boasted about his own experiences behind the wheel, and had us watch movies about cab driving, such as Night on Earth. I paid another hundred bucks and sat in an auditorium at the city jail for a day while a police officer from the taxi detail complained about the antics of cab drivers and boasted
about his own ingenuity at foiling their tricks. He also told us that hair-spray works much better than pepper-spray at blinding violent passengers, with the added advantage of not requiring a permit.

My first day on the job, a guy from the office who I never saw again took me and three other guys who were new that day out to a cab—we all got in and he turned on the radio. He explained the basics to us: what the dispatcher was saying, how to check in with our locations, what “bingo” meant, etc. The whole thing took about two minutes and I forgot it instantly. Then I was out on the road, having little idea of where to go and no idea how to play the radio. Unlike many drivers, I don’t remember my first fare; I do remember, though, the hour or so it took me to find it.

Learning to drive a cab through this bureaucratic hoop-dance culminating in abrupt immersion forms an unofficial rite of passage, one I share with my respondents. I have known many of my interviewees, some as friends, some on a work basis, for up to seven years—as they have seen me off and on over time they have come to recognize and accept me, and I found that even oldtimers who never deign to talk to new drivers will treat you as a buddy once your face becomes familiar. As a member of the community which I study, I do not feel it is presumptive to assert that I have not had to face the issue of establishing “rapport” which dogs the ethnographer of the “other.” On the other hand, since my explicit fieldwork began long after I had become accustomed to the job, lost forever to me are those “imponderabilia of actual life” which Malinowski claimed only the fresh outsider could be fully conscious of.
The bulk of the material in this study relates to four large cab companies, referred to here pseudonymously as the Ulysses, El Dorado, Viking, and Gotham cab companies. The two companies for which I have worked in the city, and from which the majority of the material is drawn, each run about a hundred cabs and employ several hundred drivers. The number of drivers employed at each company is constantly shifting, primarily with the seasons; in general companies employ between 3 and 4 drivers per cab. Of the other two extant companies on which material was gathered, one runs 130 cabs and the other runs just over three hundred. There are currently 1381 cabs licensed to operate in San Francisco; the total number of cab drivers, full or part-time, in San Francisco was estimated at 6,000 in 2001 (SPUR 2001: C-8).

As my intention is not to present the “truth” about cabdrivers, but to delve into their discourse about cab driving and to glean insights from it, I did not attempt to make my sample of drivers statistically representative. I did rely on my own experience as a cab driver to assure that the opinions gathered at least represented the general range of perspectives as I saw them. Respondents for interviews were at first sought out by convenience; whoever was available and willing to be interviewed. Also, I sought out drivers whom I knew to be opinionated, experienced, and ready to express their thoughts on the industry. At a certain point in the course of gathering interviews, I made a list of all the individuals I had observed or gotten information from, whether in formal interviews or during participant observation: from this list I was able to discern gaps in what I had collected, and to focus further interviews on individuals whom I felt could share knowledges or represent points of view of which I could not yet speak. My
presentation of this study relies heavily on the words and stories of the drivers I interviewed or observed, but no manner of sampling would have altered my role as interpreter, selector, and arranger of the discourse of these other drivers.

I drove a cab in San Francisco from 1996 to 2003, and my experiences in the industry are drawn on extensively in this study. I began making more careful observations and keeping fieldnotes in the summer of 2002, continuing until I quit a year later. Participant observation is thus the primary source of data in this study. Locations in which participant observation was undertaken include cab company garages; cab stands at hotels, the airport, and other locations; cabs driven by other drivers; bars frequented by off-work cabdrivers; and most especially my own cab, as I negotiated my way through the streets of San Francisco.

The Discourse on Cabdriving

The “truth” about cabdriving is created, contested, and recreated as the object of an ongoing, amorphous discourse, taking place not only over the air but over cell phones and walky-talkies, at bars and driver’s lounges after work, and among drivers speaking in hushed tones at cab stands, or shouting across lanes of traffic at stop lights. Since a fairly early date, this discourse has found its way into print in the form of trade journals, or filtered into mainstream media through driver’s memoirs and autobiographical accounts. Trade journals and publications of interest to cabdrivers, published by unions, companies, local governments, or loose collections of drivers, can be traced back at least as far as 1846 Paris (Papayanis 1993: 122). In San Francisco this genre is represented today by
company newsletters such as *Meter-and-a-Half* and the *DeSoto Gab*, and by *United to Win*, put out by the United Taxicab Workers.⁴ There are also nationally recognized or distributed magazines, of either a local focus (such as the *Chicago Dispatcher*⁵ or the *Trip Sheet* of Las Vegas) or serving as the mouthpieces of national groups, such as the *Regulator* (of the International Association of Transportation Regulators)⁵ or *Transportation Leader* (of the Taxicab, Limousine, and Paratransit Association).⁶ Even England’s *Call Sign⁷* and *Taxi Talk⁸* occasionally drift into the driver’s lounges of American garages.⁹

Autobiographical accounts and collections of cabdriving stories are a well-established genre, and the primary way in which the cabdriver’s viewpoint, however attenuated, is filtered into a larger societal discourse on work and the city. Townsend (2003) in London; Hazard (1930), Maresca (1948), and Lobas (1991) in New York, and Carson (2002) in San Francisco are examples of this genre, smaller samples of which are to be found scattered through newspapers and magazines over the last hundred or so years.

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³ www.utw.us
⁴ www.chicagodispatcher.com
⁵ www.iatr.org
⁶ www.tlpa.org
⁷ www.dac-callsign.co.uk
⁸ www.taxitalk.co.uk
⁹ Interest in non-local associations and publications is more prevalent nearer the top than the bottom of the occupational hierarchy (which is described in Chapter Two).
Cabbie discourse of course takes place on the internet as well. In addition to providing an excellent and wide-ranging collection of articles on the cab trade and its history, www.taxi-l.org hosts a heavily trafficked national email list devoted to the subject of cabdriving. Locally, a list based at www.sftaxi.org covers driving in San Francisco. Drivers construct websites to serve as electronic business cards or to communicate more personal messages. Cabdriving and photography seems frequently to be a productive mixture; two San Franciscan driver/photographers are Greg Roden\(^{10}\) and Phil Sterlin.\(^{11}\)

Two sources which have been found useful in this study are *Taxidriving Made Simple: How to do it Profitably, Pleasurably, and Professionally* (1989), a how-to book written by Oakland driver Michael Santee, containing much of an analytic and ethnographic character; and *San Francisco Taxicab* (2001), a video documentary by San Francisco driver Peter Kirby, describing the history and operational details of cabdriving in this city.\(^{12}\)

*The Social Science Discourse on Cabdriving*

The coincidence of a number of factors—urban mobility, high public profile, ease of hire and interaction, and a recognition of professional uniqueness—have made

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\(^{10}\) see [www.metroactive.com/papers/sfmetro/03.98/taxis1-98-3.html](http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sfmetro/03.98/taxis1-98-3.html)

\(^{11}\) Sterlin’s work can be seen at [www.sanfranciscoviewsfromacab.com](http://www.sanfranciscoviewsfromacab.com)

\(^{12}\) For more about Kirby’s movies, see [http://peterakirby.com](http://peterakirby.com)
cabdrivers and their profession the objects of a surprisingly wide number of studies done under the aegis of one scientific discipline or another. Thus drivers have been studied in terms of their risktaking behavior (Burns and Wilde 1995; Peltzer and Renner 2003), superb memory for addresses (Kalakoski and Saariluoma 2001); their exposure to air pollution (Zagury et al 2000) and musculoskeletal illness (Anderson and Ranaas 2000); their experiences with traffic accidents (Dalziel and Job 1997; Maag et al 1997); the effects of driving on their reproductive ability (Figa-Talamanca et al 1996); as a vector of sexually transmitted disease (Paris et al 2001); and how close to them their passengers choose to sit (Watson and Kearins 1988; Kenner and Katsimaglis 1993).

The literature reviewed below is only that fraction of social scientific discourse on cabdriving which, through the use of unstructured interviews and/or participant observation, incorporates to some extent the discourse of drivers themselves. This constitutes what is probably a near-exhaustive review of ethnographic writings in English on cabdriving in the United States and Canada (with one digression to Finland). Included in each review is the length of time each writer drove a cab; this is not meant as a measure of authenticity or authority per se, but certainly points to trends in the amount of time commitment considered appropriate for participant observation. Length of time as a driver can be taken as an indication of relative exposure to cabdriving culture and discourse; also of possible relevance is the conclusion of Maguire et al. (2000), that navigation-related changes in the structure of cabdrivers’ hippocampi correlates with amount of time spent in the occupation.
Ethnographic and Related Studies of Cabdriving

Many people inquired, ‘What is the subject of your dissertation?’ After being told that it was a study of taxicab drivers the usual response was a surprised and bewildered ‘WELL!’, followed by such phrases as ‘you sure got some subject,’ or ‘you should find that very interesting,’ or ‘how come you ever to select such a subject?’ or ‘how interesting!’ or ‘I sure want to read that thesis when it is finished,’ et cetera. (Miles 1953: 151-2)

When Robert Park first published in 1915 his “suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the city environment,” he included “cabman” among the “types it would be interesting to study” (Park 1915: 586). By 1921, Max J. Stross, a student in Park’s Chicago school of sociology, had produced a seminar paper featuring his experiences as a cabdriver. Stross’ piece on cabdriving seems to have been largely anecdotal; historian Joshua Lupkin (see below) speculates that he was influenced by the “detached and almost relativistic analytic style” of the early Chicago school (Lupkin 2001: 57). Some decades passed before cabdriving as an occupation and an activity came under more sustained scrutiny.

Charles Morris (1951) interviewed white male New York City cabdrivers about their “occupational choice and adjustments” as considered pertinent to the sociological theories of his day concerning lower-class occupational trajectories. “Negro” drivers were excluded because it was felt that race—non-whiteness, that is—would complicate the “perception of oneself in relation to occupational life” (ibid.: 48). Morris is valuable

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13 Stross’ paper is in the special collections at the University of Chicago. I rely on Lupkin’s discussion of Stross’ work (Lupkin 2001: 55-66).

14 Stories and occupational jargon were collected from New York cabdrivers by folklorists from the Works Projects Administration in the late 1930s: see http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html
for including some insightful description of the structure and workday of cabdriving in New York City in his era, as well as for appending four complete interview transcriptions, in which his informants discuss their reasons for becoming and remaining cabdrivers.

Like Morris, Herbert J. Miles (1953) did not drive a cab, but did hang around Oklahoma City garages and ride in cabs with drivers he was interviewing, observing their experiences. Although he employed a fairly structured interview schedule, Miles felt that “usually thorough rapport was reached” (Miles 1953: 10). Miles’ interest in studying cabdrivers was to see how the occupations selected drivers (and vice versa) and shaped their behavior patterns, not only at work but in their home life and leisure patterns. Miles is valuable for his description of the cab industry in mid-century in a mid-size midwestern city.

Edmund Vaz, later known for his contributions to the sociology of sport, drove a cab for three years in “a large Eastern Canadian city,” presumably Montreal (Vaz 1955: 1). Vaz takes advantage of his ability to speak as a driver, as well as his extensive interviews, to paint a vivid picture of the concerns and self-conception of cabdriving in his day. He constructs typologies of drivers (service-oriented, business-oriented, and hustler types), and undesirable passengers (drunk, critical, and threatening types). Like Morris and Miles, Vaz emphasizes the low social status of taxicab work, and analyzes the conflict between the driver’s perception of public disdain and his drive to build a positive self-conception.
Fred Davis (1959), who drove a Chicago taxicab for six months, was the first sociologist of the taxi to publish in a major journal (the *American Journal of Sociology*), and, equally significantly, the instigator of what he was later to call the “Simmel-early Goffman plot” (Davis 1974: 316) which came to shape much of later writing about cabdriving, particularly the driver-passenger interaction. To this combination of facts he owes his status as the most cited driver-ethnographer in later cab literature. As a student of Everett C. Hughes (a founder of occupational sociology), as well as a classmate of Erving Goffman, it is not surprising he should have taken this approach. Davis placed the “fleeting relationship” of the driver and the passenger in the context of Simmel’s impersonal metropolis and delineated the Goffmanesque strategies pursued by drivers in attempting to predict and influence their passengers’ tipping behavior and in trying to exert some (inevitably illusory) control over the randomness and unpredictability which their occupation exposes them to. Davis is most cited for the typology of passengers which he lists, and for the strategies he describes by which drivers attempt to increase the size of tips.

Robert Karen (1962) took a job as cabdriver “during the summer months” in the small coastal town of La Jolla, California (ibid.: 69). Inspired by Davis’ account of drivers’ passenger typologies and strategies for affecting tipping behavior, Karen kept track of each passenger’s tipping behavior for about one month. In doing so he became the first to actually study passengers rather than drivers\(^\text{15}\), although he treated them from

\(^{15}\) Vaz and Davis had studied driver’s reactions to passengers, not the actions of passengers themselves.
a driver’s perspective (tipping behavior) rather than seeking to understand how passengers viewed themselves as cab riders. Karen divided passengers by riding behavior into “La Jolla Regulars” (those who he knew to have taken local cabs more than once) and “Transients” (tourists and others taking local cabs no more than once); and by tipping behavior into “Tippers” and “Non-tippers.” Among his other findings, the generalizability of which are questionable, Karen found that, in contrast to Davis’ driver-inspired typology, Transients tipped better than Regulars. Karen felt this called Davis’ observations into dispute; the difference between Karen’s and Davis’ experiences, however, is probably due to the differences in ridership between large and small cities.16

James Henslin drove cabs in St. Louis, Missouri for a total of six months over a two-year period. He is perhaps the most prolific of driver-sociologists (Henslin 1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1974; Psathas and Henslin 1967). In what he described as a “social-psychological ethnography” (Henslin 1967a: 8-9), Henslin expanded on many of Davis’ insights and provided the most extensive look to date at the interactions of cabdrivers with passengers, dispatchers, and other drivers, including a description of stand-based radio dispatch. Most notable is his concept of “trackability” (see Chapter Four) in determining the relationship of trust between drivers and their passengers (Henslin 1968).

D.L. Stannard (1971) drove for a year in San Francisco. He echoed Davis in delineating a driver’s typology of passengers, emphasizing the role of stereotypes and preconceptions in discrimination by white cabdrivers against black fares, which he related to Davis’ income-increasing strategies and to Henslin’s concept of trackability, as

16 This will be discussed in Chapter Four.
well as to strategies used by black passengers to deflect the suspicion they face from white drivers. Stannard described as “colleague contact points” the locations—lunch counters, red lights, taxistands, cashier’s and dispatcher’s windows—at which “cabbie culture” is transmitted and reinforced.

Anthony Cantiello (1974) drove a New York City taxicab for over two years. Using Goffman’s terminology, Cantiello delineated the interactional strategies (“moves” and “counter-moves”) engaged in by cabdrivers in competition with each other, in interaction with passengers, and in conflicts with the occupational hierarchy of the industry. Cantiello’s discussion is valuable, but I feel that his focus on the strategic aspects of cabdriving gives too instrumental an impression; mitigating concepts such as “knowledge,” “discourse,” or even “culture” are necessary for an understanding of what these interactional strategies mean to those who act them out.

David Trojan (1976), who drove for a summer in the small Wisconsin city of Eau Claire, wrote of the confusion among passengers and other drivers over his dual status as college professor and cabdriver. The profile of his regular customers and their tipping behavior sharply contrasted with Davis’ and Henslin’s big city experiences; although he did not cite Karen, it is notable that their descriptions were similar. Trojan explained the difference between cab driving in large and small cities in terms of the role community size and social structure plays in establishing a “more extensive trust pattern” in small cities than in large, which affects the interactions of drivers and passengers (ibid.: 137).

No review of this literature would be complete without noticing Charles Vidich’s *The New York Cab Driver and His Fare* (1976), a book widely and uncritically cited by
anyone wishing to make a quick reference to cabdriving culture, despite the poorly substantiated, vitriolic nature of its content, which has singled Vidich out for pointed criticism by Schlosberg (1980) and Berry (1997). Vidich does not claim in his text any relationship to the cab industry, whether as driver, owner, manager, or even as passenger; nevertheless, the clear passion of his sometimes outrageous text seems to indicate some deeply felt connection. Vidich focuses on cabdriving as conflict, between driver and dispatcher, driver and passenger, and between medallion driver and gypsy cabbie. In these conflicts it is always the cabdriver who is at fault: “Nobody is cheating the cabbie; nevertheless he finds it necessary to cheat his boss and oftentimes his customers” (ibid.: 12). Despite its biases, Vidich’s book is valuable for its historical treatment of cabdriving in New York, for its discussion of the competition between medallion and gypsy cabs, and for the sheer color of his style.

Jane Burns (1979) did not drive a cab, and chose to study cabdrivers in the small town of St. John’s, Newfoundland because “the kind of knowledge which the cab driver attains through his contact with so many people is fascinating, as is the driver’s organization and subsequent application of that knowledge” (ibid.: 79). Approaching cabdriving knowledge as occupational folklore, she described the experiences of a handful of informants using Goffman’s terminology and applying insights gleaned from Davis and Henslin. Interesting, she initially had trouble gaining the trust of drivers whom she wanted to interview, one of whom asked her point-blank, “Do you have a federal

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17 Lupkin (2001: 8-9) describes Vidich as “unscholarly” and “anecdotal.”
grant to study us?” from which encounter Burns concluded that “the Eastern Provinces have been overstudied” (ibid.: 79-80).

Folklorist Philip Nusbaum drove four years in New York City, on account of which he was sufficiently able to “engage informants in culturally viable interaction about driving a taxi cab” so as not only to establish trust but to evaluate drivers as to their ability to tell stories good enough for their inclusion in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, with which he was associated (Nusbaum 1980: 86-7). Nusbaum emphasized the “‘anonymous’ aspect of socializing” (ibid.: 70) among cabdrivers due to their impermanent relationships and haphazard interactions with passengers and other drivers; this shaped, he insisted, the work-related emphasis of storytelling among cabdrivers, by which drivers were able to evaluate and interpret stories as culturally relevant.

Richard Schlosberg drove a cab in New York City, apparently for three years (Schlosberg 1980: 18). His 1980 dissertation is in part a reworking of material from his Master’s thesis (Schlosberg 1975); rejecting, however, the limitations of the interactionist perspective from which his earlier work had been written, Schlosberg came to insist that all aspects of cabdriving had to be understood within the historical and structural context of the industry. Thus, he faulted Davis and Henslin for their limited perspective on the in-cab interaction between driver and passenger, arguing that “while it appears that drivers and their fares are involved in an exchange network that involves the driver trying to extract profits from his passengers, little, if any, mention is ever made of the fact that fleet drivers are also involved in another exchange network with the garage owners.... their relationships with their passengers are dependent on this former relationship in
which drivers’ wages are determined.” (Schlosberg 1980: 4). He suggests that systems of remuneration, such as the commission system prevalent in his time, are crucial in shaping driver behavior in all aspects of their work; also significant is what he called the “atomization process,” an effect of work conditions and employment structure whereby competitive individualism is encouraged and class consciousness suppressed among cabdrivers. This atomization process is reflected in the historical shift from the commission to the leasing system, the beginning stages of which Schlosberg documented for New York City; ironically, this shift led to the demise of the particular occupational structure framing Schlosberg’s writing, thus dating the relevance of his observations.¹⁸

Sociologist Raymond Russell studied the occupational structure of the cab industries in Boston (Russell 1983) and Los Angeles (Russell 1984),¹⁹ and also interviewed a number of drivers in other cities, including San Francisco. Interestingly, it was Charles Vidich, whom Russell met when both were working on Stewart Perry’s study of San Francisco garbagemen (Perry 1978, 1984), who suggested that Russell should look at the structure of cab companies (Russell 1985: xiv). However, Russell’s careful analyses of the rise and fall of owner-driver cooperatives, as well as the role of class, culture, ethnic differences, and government legislation in shaping the cab industry historically, serve as correctives to Vidich’s myopic, sensationalized account of the industry. Where Schlosberg had projected an analysis of the driver’s daily interaction in

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¹⁸ This shift, and the effects of Schlosberg’s atomization process, will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

¹⁹ Both of these studies were included in Russell 1985.
terms of the occupational structure in which it took place, Russell described how the strategies of drivers in constructing careers, as well as in dealing with the daily vicissitudes of the job, affected the longterm success of cooperative ventures.

Geographer Richard Anthony Davis (1990), who drove for five years in San Francisco, overtly targeted his work to the attention of local policymakers, whom he felt needed to be better informed about the workings of the cab industry. To this end he combined an analysis of the spatial and temporal aspects of cab demand and service, with a description of the technical details of cab and company operation. Davis provides a valuable discussion of the mental maps and spatiotemporal strategies employed by San Francisco cabdrivers, particularly in regards to the urban geography of ethnicity and crime.

Allen Russell Stevens (1991) spent a decade behind the wheel of a New York taxicab, witnessing the transition, first documented by Schlosberg, from the commission to the leasing system. In research conducted after he stopped driving, Stevens interviewed drivers about the changes wrought by the shift from commission to leasing and their attitudes concerning the two systems. The controversial nature of such questioning was shown by the suspicion Stevens met with from management (who asked him to leave company premises) and drivers (who suspected he was a spy for the Limousine and Taxicab Commission) (Stevens 1991: 167-8, 150). Stevens found that a majority of drivers preferred the greater freedom of the leasing system, although they also

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20 Stevens allayed driver suspicions by showing his hack license, the low number of which revealed him to be an experienced driver.
found it to be more conspicuously exploitative than the commission system had been. Stevens echoed Schlosberg’s concerns about the sapping of union effectiveness by the switch to independent contracting.

Cynthia Boyd (1997), while not a driver, identified herself as a “weekly, if not daily” passenger in St. John’s, Newfoundland (the same community Burns wrote about in 1979). Her article, which is based on interviews with a small number of women drivers, outlines the situational tactics they deployed when faced with sexual harassment on the job, and considers the occupational folklife of cabdriving in the light of gender.

Kimberly Berry drove a cab for about six years in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In The Last Cowboy (1995) she described the expressions of both division and community in the culture of Halifax cabdrivers, as well as the role played by the driver’s “cowboy” image. In She’s no Lady (1997)21 Berry turned to the experiences of women drivers in the masculine work culture of the cab industry. Building on Boyd’s commentary, Berry detailed the strategies and tactics women had to develop to deal with the prejudicial attitudes of the public and other drivers.

Community Health student Marcia Elaine Facey (1999) studied the health-related behaviors of “visible minority” cabdrivers in Toronto. Considering traditional occupational health studies to be plagued by a lack of other than “managerial perspectives,” Facey sought with her work to employ ethnographic interviews to bring into community health discourse the drivers’ motivations in pursuing various health

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21 A shorter version of this was republished as Berry 1998.
behaviors, and how these were related to the occupational context within which they worked. Facey’s contribution in bringing together cultural and health-related studies of cabdriving is significant, as is her detailed and sensitive account of the troubles experienced by drivers due to racism, exploitative occupational structure, and the health risks of their work environment.²²

Kalle Toiskallio spent six years driving a cab in Helsinki, Finland. In two articles published in English (Toiskallio 2000, 2002), Toiskallio considers cabdriving and the social psychology of urban traffic from a Simmelian perspective. His cabdriving article builds on Fred Davis’ discussion of the passenger-driver interaction; Toiskallio draws more deeply on Simmel’s theories of urban mentalities and modes of sociability to develop a typology of passenger-driver interactional strategies, and a concept of “taxi-sociability.” Aspects of Toiskallio’s work will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Historical Treatments of the Cab Industry

It is indeed possible to “get another job” after being a taxi driver—to wit, as taxi historian. (Davis 1998a: 6)

A considerable number of interesting works have been done on the history of the taxicab, which it is not possible to review here in any detail. On the history of cabdriving in London, Moore (1902) is the grand-daddy; some more recent works are those by Georgano (1973), May (1995), and driver Warren (1995). In the U.S. the only full-length

²² Health risks associated with cabdriving include wrist and back injuries resulting from repetitive motion, prolonged sitting, and lifting luggage; skin cancer from exposure to sunlight (on the window arm);
history is Gilbert and Samuels (1982). Of note are Joshua Lupkin’s (2001) study of the public’s perception of cabs and their drivers in the struggle over the use of public space in early twentieth-century New York and Chicago; and Nicolas Papayanis’ (1993) work on the development of class consciousness among nineteenth-century Parisian coachmen. Papayanis (1996) relates how the public transport industries, and the cab industry in particular, were vital in the nineteenth-century bourgeois project of reshaping Paris in its own image, as previously argued by Harvey (1985). A number of short pieces are available on Canadian cab history, by Edward Sutton (1992), Donald Davis (1998a, b), and driver/scholar Norman Beattie (1998). Beattie has also produced an online collection of “Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes” relating to the industry (Beattie nd) and an essay on cab references in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Beattie 2000).

*Cabdriving In and Of the City*

It is a commonplace in textbooks on urban ethnography that it should be done not just *in* the city, but *of* the city (Low 1999: 2). Although the distinction is made for the purpose of building a bridge between the *in* and the *of*, it highlights a division, persistent in urban studies, between two ways of knowing cities—from the inside, as participant, and from the outside, as observer. The distinction between these two ways of knowing serves a number of purposes: for instance, in Kevin Lynch’s groundbreaking study *The
*Image of the City*, the failure of individuals’ knowledges of familiar routes to build into coherent images of the city as a whole is seen as a form of alienation:

In our own world, we might say that almost everyone can, if attentive, learn to navigate in Jersey City, but only at the cost of some effort and uncertainty. Moreover, the positive values of legible surroundings are missing: the emotional satisfaction, the framework for communication or conceptual organization, the new depths that it may bring to everyday experience. These are pleasures we lack, even if our present city environment is not so disordered as to impose an intolerable strain on those who are familiar with it. (Lynch 1960: 5)

For Lynch, the solution is for urban planners to seek to create cities which their inhabitants find more comprehensible and are capable of living in more fully. Similarly Fredric Jameson, who expands Lynch’s urban model to the “world space of multinational capital,” calls for a “new political art” to embark on the project of cognitive mapping, freeing individual subjects from the spatial and social confusion which limits their capacity for struggle (Jameson 2000: 232). In these perspectives, transcendental knowledge of the city (and of social space) liberates knowers from the limited nature of knowledge in the city.

A quite different model privileges intimate knowledge of the city over the abstract knowledge of the observer. De Certeau’s famous chapter on “Walking in the City” (1984) introduces two figures—the voyeur and the walker—who illustrate contrastive ways of interacting with the urban environment. The alienated term is the voyeur, who, looking down on the city from on high, seeing things spread out and in their geographical arrangement, in their “proper” places, in their synchronic, reversible relations, stands for the viewpoint of power, the urban planner, cartographer, or administrator for whom the
city is something to be read, a legible array of relationships, a spreadsheet to be queried for data relating to the project of governance. Opposed to the voyeur are the walkers, the pedestrians deep in the heart of the city,

whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it....The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (de Certeau 1984: 93).

In this model as well, however, the knowledge of walkers is presented as limited, in that for de Certeau, blindness and illegibility characterize these moving urbanites. Thus, for both versions of the participant-observer split (Lynch’s and de Certeau’s) there is a limit to what can be known through familiarity; and yet the gaze of the voyeuristic mapper is shot through with the implications of authority, whether of de Certeau’s rationalizing bureaucrat or Lynch’s benevolent urban planner. Neither term of the binary seems adequate as a way to do justice to how the city is lived and known.

There have been attempts to bridge this binary (cf. Ethington and Meeker 2002), not the least of which being the method of “participant-observation” itself. Another attempt of thinking past this divide was made by French sociologist, philosopher, and urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, whose two years behind the wheel of a Parisian taxicab “deeply affected his thinking about the nature of space and urban life” (Harvey 1991: 426). Lefebvre developed the approach he called rhythmanalysis as a way of discerning the city as a body of flows and rhythms, both spatial and temporal, as a structure (in the way that music has a structure) which both persists and is transformed synchronically and
diachronically. These rhythms can be fully grasped neither from within nor from without:

To understand and analyse rhythms, one has to let go, through illness or technique, but not completely. There is a certain externality which allows the analytical intellect to function. Yet, to capture a rhythm one needs to have been captured by it. One has to let go, give and abandon oneself to its duration. Just as in music or when learning a language, one only really understands meanings and sequences by producing them, that is, by producing spoken rhythms.

Therefore, in order to hold this fleeting object, which is not exactly an object, one must be at the same time both inside and out. (Lefebvre 1996: 219)

Lefebvre chose as rhythmanalysist someone looking over a street from a balcony, but he could as well have used the figure of the cabdriver; for the knowledge of the city crucial to driving a cab is just such a mixture of inside and outside, of participant and observer, combining the meaningful trajectories of experience and identity with a vision of the population and the city as such, a vision that is no less cartographic for being seen from below, in the midst, rather than from on high.

Like any occupation, cabdriving involves knowledge. First and most obviously, this means practical knowledge: how to deal with the equipment, how to deal with passengers, fellow drivers, or employers, not to mention the police, other drivers on the street, pedestrians, and the public at large. The driver has to learn the physical layout of the city, street names, the locations of important buildings, and where and when various services, licit or illicit, can be found. Most cabbies who survive years of ten- or twelve-hour shifts on the street become more than typically competent drivers, withstanding, both physically and emotionally, the continuous onslaught of minor inconveniences,
slights, peccadilloes, and occasional serious hazards that goes by the name of city driving. Successful cabdriving, like many jobs, also involves the compilation of a repertoire of bodily practices and little, circumstantial knowledges which tend to be acquired through kinesthetic and situational repetition rather than conscious reflection.

However, taken as a whole, these technical and daily knowledges add up to more than a collection of practical mental notes and unconscious activities, and take as their object the source of the cabdriver’s income, what he or she must understand to make a living—the city itself. As Malinowski (1955) noted of Trobriand fishermen, city cabdrivers make use of a body of inferred principles and rules of thumb which form a practical science, although not generally articulated in such terms. Moreso even than the urban planner, or the urban anthropologist who is enjoined to not only think ethnography “in” the city but “of” the city, the cabbie, to be successful, must think or know the city as a whole, as an organism, in the same way as a fisherman must think or know the ocean.

“Population and wealth tend to collect wherever there is a break in transportation” (Cooley 1969: 76). So wrote Charles Horton Cooley in 1894, and whether or not this statement is true across the board it can be taken as the fundamental, indispensable premise on which the industry of cabdriving depends. The cabdriver’s business is to transport that population in exchange for wealth; and to succeed in this the cabbie has to insert him or herself into the urban flow and facilitate it. To be optimally successful, he or she must find the right spot to be in at all times, the right spot where a fare is waiting to take the cab to the next right spot, where another fare is waiting. Cabs are full when they are in tune with the flow of the city, and empty when they are not.
In his short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” Edgar Allen Poe’s narrator, who entertains himself by studying the faces and demeanors of a crowd of passersby, discovers a mysterious figure, and resolves to follow him through the streets of London. To his surprise the mysterious man’s trajectory through the city mirrors and surpasses his own: the strange man seeks only to follow and join the crowd wherever it may be, and his frenetic wanderings take him over the course of a night from public square, to thoroughfare, to late-night bazaar, to lowly tavern, in a desperate effort to stay in the company of other people at all times. Finally the streets fill again as day returns, the mysterious wanderer fades happily into the diurnal traffic, and his follower, exhausted, gives up the chase (Poe 1983).

This peculiar story could be taken as an insight into the occupational character of cabdriving, except for one crucial factor: unlike Poe’s man of the crowd, the cabdriver is not interested in merely following the crowd; he must anticipate the crowd, and help it in its movement, since only in this way will he be paid. In order to be making money, he needs to be taking someone else where they want to go; any moment in which he can choose his own direction is one in which he is not being paid. For him, freedom of movement equals lack of income. Moreso than any other social actor moving through the city, he is ultimately dependent on the movements and trajectories of others, and yet he is also more dependent than they are on remaining in tune with the flow of the city. An experienced cabdriver not only keeps in mind a mental image of the city’s hour-by-hour social morphology, he also reads as best as he can the directional intentions of his prospective passengers, whether by location (certainly people downtown at five pm on
weekdays are heading for the neighborhoods) or by “botanizing on the asphalt” (clearly the businessman with the suitcase is going to the airport). Moving as a particle in the stream, the driver comes to sense the city’s flow bodily, experiencing the rapids and resistances of traffic, acquiring a feel for the timing and locations of surges and lapses of motion. Like an experienced river rafter, she comes to know how to exploit each eddy and current, and how to avoid the doldrums. This is the essence of what the cabdrivers of London famously call “the Knowledge;” a spatiotemporal map of master routes and timely tactics on which any two locations can be plotted and swiftly connected (Georgano 1973: 78-81).

Thus, cabdriving involves a knowledge of the city which is both in and of, a vision of the whole the purpose of which is practical mastery. Cabdrivers are outsiders because the paths they follow are not their own but those of their passengers. Cabdrivers are insiders because they work where others pass by, because they inhabit urban space so possessively that, as an irate civilian once informed me, “You cabdrivers think you own the road!” Although attention in this study is limited to certain strategies and forms of knowledge involved in cabdriving, this larger urban knowledge remains in the background, as subtext, the intent of this study being to match up, if possible, participant-observation as anthropological method with participant-observation as cabdriving practice.
Plan of this Study

Although this study seeks to portray crucial aspects of cabdriving as a whole, as it was experienced by this author while a cabdriver, it is organized through its focus on discourse, knowledge, and strategy, and the way these illuminate and respond to the everyday institutional and situational relations of power entered into by cabdrivers in San Francisco. It is further shaped by a preponderance of attention given to the experiences of drivers working for a large radio company—thus the experiences of independents, monthly lease drivers, and drivers who work for smaller companies are presumably not as well reflected in this representation of how cabs are driven in San Francisco.

A relatively large portion of this work, towards the end, is devoted to the procedure of radio dispatch and to the contested power relations between drivers and dispatchers surrounding this. In a way this can be taken as the core of the study, as it is the place in which the importance of interpretative strategy and practical knowledge is most prominent; it was also the subject matter which first convinced me to undertake this ethnographic project. As the study progressed, however, it became clear to me that this account of radio play needed to be contextualized, and the rest of this work grew out of that need to spell out context.

First, in Chapter Two, the occupational structure of the taxicab industry is briefly described, to familiarize the reader with important distinctions such as that between drivers and owner-drivers. Cabdriving discourse must be understood in terms of the occupational structure of the industry, that is, the relations between drivers and the other personnel with whom they work; this also involves the processes by which cab drivers
learn how properly to behave in these relationships. Also, the history of San Francisco’s cab industry is discussed, primarily in terms of important changes in occupational structure and dispatch technology. Chapter Three centers on interaction between drivers and the cashier at the cab garage, illustrating the way occupational hierarchy comes into play in the process whereby drivers acquire cabs each shift. Chapter Four turns to encounters between drivers and passengers within the cab. As this is the aspect of cabdriving most heavily theorized by previous writers, this section involves a good deal of interaction with the ideas of these other driver-ethnographers.

The rest of the study turns around important modes whereby drivers acquire fares. Chapter Five describes the playing of cabstands and of the airport. In Chapter Six the practice of cruising the streets is addressed. Chapter Seven concerns the central role of the dispatcher in radio dispatch, and the strategies drivers employ in trying to “play” the radio against other drivers and the dispatcher. Chapter Eight looks at the contemporary shift from radio to computerized dispatch. As the history of cabdriving, and dispatched cabdriving in particular, is deeply shaped by technological change, it seems appropriate that a description of radio dispatch should be contextualized in relation to computerized dispatch, by which it is in the process of being replaced, as well as in relation to the proliferation of smaller-scale communicative devices, which have the potential to radically change the profession.

From this emphasis on structural and historical context I hope it is clear that the “discourse” on cabdriving, as conceived here, cannot simply be understood on its own terms, but must be situated and interpreted in terms of the institutions of cab driving, and
the relations of power of which these institutions are composed. For this interpretation I call primarily on my experience as a participant observer. As stated before, I do not offer the “whole truth” of cabdriving in San Francisco, but only a limited, personal view, supplemented by the accumulated knowledge of other drivers communicated to me through our occupational discourse. I ask readers only to sit down, put on their seatbelts, and trust me to conduct them safely and swiftly through. I hope the ride is not unenjoyable.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{23} I consider this work an auto-ethnography, but have avoided using the term since in the present instance it constitutes a terrible pun, as was pointed out to me by Ana Alonso.
Chapter 2
Structure and History of the San Francisco Cab Industry

Structure of the San Francisco Cab Industry

In San Francisco there is a two-part hierarchy among cabdrivers: there are owner-drivers and mere drivers. Owner-drivers, commonly referred to simply as “owners,” are those who hold a permit to operate a cab (known as a medallion), which they either operate themselves (as “independents”) or lease to a company. The companies provide cars, a garage, a color scheme, and a radio or computerized dispatch service; they might also arrange to assign drivers to a cab to fill the shifts that the owner does not work. Since owners control the cabs the companies need to run, companies compete to attract owners. Owners also must be treated well, as a disgruntled owner can switch her or his cab to another company with little or no personal loss.

Drivers, properly called, are hired to drive the car but own no stake in the industry. Most drivers, who are technically self-employed, pay the company a set fee per day for the privilege of taking out a cab. This is called a gate fee, or “gates.” Other drivers lease the cab by the month.

Besides management, the larger cab companies also employ mechanics, gasmen, and what will be called here dispatch office personnel. In the dispatch office there are three positions: dispatcher, cashier, and order taker. The job of the dispatcher is to call out orders over the radio (or to work the computer if dispatch is computerized) and to
assign orders to drivers. The dispatcher may also provide information, advice—even entertainment—to the working fleet, and serves as the unifying voice which connects drivers to each other and to the garage during the shift. The cashier handles money and assigns drivers to cabs. The order taker assists the dispatcher in answering phones. These three positions may be combined or separated variously at different companies: some large companies strictly differentiate between the positions, even spatially segregating them into different offices; at smaller companies one individual may handle all three jobs simultaneously, or two workers may switch between roles. At large garages the three roles sometimes form a hierarchy. Drivers who want to get into office work start by answering phones; they may move up into the position of cashier; and if hard-working, lucky, and well-connected, might eventually become dispatchers. When office personnel are punished by management, it often takes the form of a temporary slide down the ladder. Thus dispatchers are punished by being put on the window (cashiering) or limited to taking orders; cashiers might be put on the phones or, heaven forbid, made to drive a cab.¹

Some companies control a number of corporate medallions (see below) whereas others are dependent wholly on the medallions of owner-drivers. This leads to a difference in management styles: management at the first kind of company can be more autocratic, while at a company with a large number of owner-drivers power is more diffused. These differing power structures reflect the internal class structure of

¹ This is complicated by the fact that some dispatchers retain driving shifts, and order takers almost all drive.
cabdriving in San Francisco, in which those who drive are divided into those who own and those who don’t, and those who own are divided into those who drive and those who don’t. This complicated scenario needs to be understood historically, and so we turn now to the broad sweep of cab history.

*Origins of the Cab Industry*

The first modern predecessors of today’s taxicabs were *hackneys*, coaches for public hire, which came into use in Paris and London in the early 17th century (Papayanis 1996: 13; Georgano 1973: 13). They were generally the cast-off former coaches of the nobility, and could be found waiting for passengers—“standing for hire”—in the courtyards of inns. Entrepreneurs soon established fleets of cabs with drivers in livery at prominent locations, in Paris at the sign of St. Fiacre (now the patron saint of cabdrivers), and in London at the Maypole on the Strand (ibid.: 14). In a world where public carriages were novel, “standings” (today known as stands, ranks, hazards, or queues) were essential in identifying hackneys to the public as vehicles that could be hired.

It was not long, though, before the number of hacks grew, and the popular stands came to be overcrowded. This, along with the growing recognizability of the hackney as an urban service, led some hacks to abandon the stands in order to cruise the streets for passengers, which was known as “plying for hire.”

Cabs plying for hire joined the sudden swell in the number of coaches wandering the streets of the 17th century

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metropoles, as, due to a confluence of economic and demographic factors, as well as the gradual improvement of the roads, travel in general became much more possible and was indulged in by a greater sector of the population (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 8). Traffic, a new urban phenomenon, began to appear and attracted the attention of the authorities: in 1635 Charles I ordered London hacks to be licensed “to restrain the multitude and promiscuous use of coaches” which “were a great disturbance to his Majesty, his dearest consort the Queen, the nobility and others of place and degree in their passage through the streets” (ibid.: 15). Complaints about traffic in Paris appear as early as 1615. Traffic was an annoyance to the nobility not just because it blocked the streets but because travel by coach had previously been the privilege of the aristocracy:

For aristocrats the coach was not only a convenience but also an elaborate social symbol and mark of nobility and privilege. The well-to-do outside the court joined social aspiration to practical advantage and chose to ride in coaches not only in order to negotiate the growing city but also to copy the manners of the aristocracy. (Papayanis 1996: 8)

As few of the emerging bourgeois could afford to keep coaches of their own, hiring hackneys was the way to ride in style, which was further enhanced by the fact that drivers of those days dressed in livery. Thus urban traffic is tied in its origins to the emergence of the bourgeoisie. In any event traffic was interpreted in the 17th and 18th centuries as a bourgeois phenomenon, posing not just an impediment to the movement of the nobility but a challenge to their command of the streets and of the social markers involved in moving through them; both these factors were presumably behind the 1768
law requiring English hackney drivers to give way before “persons of quality and gentlemen’s coaches,” or pay a fine of five pounds (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 16).

Gaining control over hackney coaches was achieved by licensing and limiting their number, but most markedly by limiting the nature and scope of their circulation through the metropolis. From the mid-17th century, hacks were repeatedly forbidden to cruise the streets for fares, ordered instead to wait patiently at the standings and innyards from which they had sprung not so long before (Georgano 1973: 19, 34). A curious transformation took place: the first hackney stands, which had been established partly by custom and partly by the entrepreneurial initiative of hacks themselves, were haunted by watermen, who, effectually lower-status assistants to the hack drivers, watered the horses and kept a lookout for passengers as the drivers rested or refreshed themselves; by the 19th century, stands in both Paris and London were set by municipal ordinance and the watermen had evolved into police personnel charged with overseeing not just the running of the stand itself but with keeping tabs on the drivers and the hacks that passed through (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 12; Beattie nd: “Watermen”; Papayanis 1993: 34-5).

Hackney coaches and their 19th century successors the cabriolets (two-wheeled carriages from which the modern term “cab” is derived) were subject to increasing regulation, in terms of fare structures, conditions of the coach, and the licensing of both coaches and drivers. By 1720 Parisian fiacres “were required to attach to their side panels an official number assigned by the police” (Papayanis 1996: 22) a number used by the police to identify the coach, and precursor of both the modern taxi medallion and of the civilian license plate. Similarly, hack and cab drivers themselves were required to be licensed to
drive long before this requirement was extended to the general public. These regulations eased the job of surveillance of public vehicles, a surveillance which primarily took place at the official cabstands.

In both London and Paris cabs were allowed to accept hails as long as they were on the way to their designated stand—this was of course the loophole which hack and cabmen exploited to the best of their ability. It is not known to what extent the early regulations were successful in keeping hacks and cabs from cruising the streets for fares, especially during busy times such as during rains. At such times cabs abandoned the stands, cruising the back streets for fares, trying to stay out of the eyes of the police (Papayanis 1993: 34). Unlicensed cabs came into London in the evening from surrounding jurisdictions, taking advantage of the cover of night to ply for hire (Georgano 1973: 21).

Hack and cabmen were looked upon, rightly or wrongly, as unsavory characters, and were subject from an early date to a number of so-called “nuisance laws.” The 1831 London Hackney Carriage Act, which, with the 1843 London Hackney Carriages Act, forms the backbone of much subsequent regulation of the cab industry, “regulated drivers and their licensing, regulated hours and days of work, and forbade refusing passengers, abusive language, furious driving, drunken driving, blocking traffic, and overcharging passengers” (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 16). Similar laws which remain on the books in modern times include injunctions against spitting and carrying members of the opposite sex in the front seat (ibid.: 143). The rules of conduct for San Francisco drivers today include the following:
1. No Taxicab Driver shall speak in an obscene, boisterous, loud, threatening, or abusive manner while in the course of their employment as a Taxicab Driver.
2. No Taxicab Driver shall threaten, harass, or abuse any other person while in the course of their employment as a Taxicab Driver.
3. No Taxicab Driver shall attempt to use any physical force against any person except in self-defense or in defense of another.
4. Drivers shall be clean in dress and person.

(San Francisco Taxicab Commission 2001)

Gilbert and Samuels wax indignant that

...a public which wants courteous, professional taxi drivers still often has ordinances which treat taxi drivers as criminals (ibid.: 142).

Berry notes that

The close involvement of the police in a local industry is unusual and indicates that the municipal leaders, and their electoral public, considered hackmen and taxi drivers some sort of threat to public order and safety, requiring extraordinary measures of control and monitoring. (Berry 1995: 10)

Cabdriving arose in an era in which the streets were not used primarily for travel and urban circulation, as they are now, but were home to an entire vibrant world of street life and occupations, such as tinkers, peddlars, and other vanished trades, as well as others, such as prostitution, which have become less visible. The demimondaine association of cabdriving perhaps dates from its enumeration as one of these unseemly, ungovernable trades of the street. The role hackneys and the mobility they offered played in disrupting—literally, physically—the pre-industrial social order of the city marked them out for particular attention as police forces began to be established and the focus of
urban security shifted from the territory outside the city walls to the population within (Virilio 1986: 64, 136; Rudé 1964). That today cabdrivers and their passengers are subject to persistent police surveillance, that fares must be recorded and vehicles accounted for, that many cabs now contain surveillance cameras and bear numbers designed to be visible from a helicopter, speak not only to the threat drivers pose to their passengers, nor to the threat posed by passengers to their drivers; but also, and fundamentally, to the continuing threat posed by the liminal character of the cab—between public street and private space, enclosed and open, mobile and mobilizing—to the ideal of a transparent and easily policed urban order. As Joshua Lupkin pointed out in his analysis of the public reception of the motorized cab in early Twentieth century Chicago and New York,

Taxicabs aroused mixed emotions. On one level, consumers desired the convenience of taxicabs but worried about extortionate fares. More vocal were those who resented the cabs’ chaotic presence on the streets. Although the thoroughfares of New York and Chicago had been crowded, unpleasant, and dangerous long before the invention of the automobile, taxicab’s insistent and ruthless clamoring for customers aroused calls for their control. The streets, according to reformers, should be dignified and predictable paths for traffic instead of unofficial stands and ‘cruising’ lanes for excessively large fleets of unprofitable taxicabs. Public officials, including the police officers called upon to license and discipline cabs, pointed with dismay at the alliances between cab companies and crime syndicates. (Lupkin 2001: 280)

The very attempts of authorities to impose order on the cab industry increased the stigmatization it was under. The numbering of cabs and their drivers is a case in point.

3 On the use of the “liminal space” of taxis in negotiating social and political contexts in South Africa, see
Numbered badges for drivers, enforced in London since 1843, were resented and resisted by drivers, as they “carried strong overtones of criminality and pauperism” (May 1995: 35, 98). In Winnipeg, where there was a two-tier system of livery cabs (dispatched from private yards on request) and street cabs (hired from public stands), the less-desirable street cabs were distinguished by the numbers they bore:

The tell-tale stigma identifying a street cab was its license number, prominently painted on the glass of the lamps flanking the driver’s seat, and any stable owner who dispatched a numbered cab in answer to a call ran the risk of having it sent back. In 1910, when the city’s License Committee proposed numbering livery cabs, the livery owners protested. “The ordinary woman when she wanted a cab to make a call was not going to take one that had a number blazoned all over it”.... “Some men... would not get into a cab with a number on it.” (Beattie 1998: 38)

Until a few years ago, San Francisco cabs could be distinguished from Oakland cabs by the oversize numbers painted on the hoods and trunk tops of the latter. Since these numerals are intended for viewing by police helicopters, their presence on Oakland cabs was interpreted by San Franciscan drivers as a mark of the shadowy, dangerous character of the cab industry in Oakland as compared with San Francisco. A few years ago these numbers were imposed on San Francisco cabs; as of this writing, pleas from drivers before the Taxicab Commission to have the stigmatizing oversize numerals removed have fallen largely on deaf ears, despite the lack of any indication that these numerals have ever been made use of by police.

Hansen 2003.
**Cabdriving in San Francisco**

The first mention of cabs for hire in San Francisco was in a newspaper article in 1853:

None of the public carriages of this city are shabby, and they are considered to be superior as a general rule, to those of any other city in the world. There may be a very few finer carriages in London, Paris, or New York than any we have here, but the great majority of their public carriages can not be compared to those of San Francisco.... (Kirby 2001)

A year later, the same paper devoted an article to the heinous acts of extortion by the city’s cabmen. San Francisco journalist and wit Ambrose Bierce included the following definition in his *Devil’s Dictionary*:

**CAB** n a tormenting vehicle in which a pirate jolts you through devious ways to the wrong place, where he robs you. (Bierce 2000: 30)

Cabdriving by this time was a well-established urban phenomenon, expected in most large cities. The progress of cabdriving in San Francisco in relation to that in other world cities can be seen in the chart below:

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4 This definition first appeared in the *Wasp*, San Francisco, June 4, 1881 (Bierce 2000: 354).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>First Hack or Cab</th>
<th>First Metered Cab</th>
<th>First Motorized (Gas) Cab</th>
<th>First Union Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>c. 1600</td>
<td>1895?</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1846?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>early 1600s</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>1853</td>
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<td>New York</td>
<td>by 1789</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1911 or 1915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>1853</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buenos Aires</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>1903</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Historical Cab Industry Benchmarks in Selected World Cities**
(Sources: Papayanis 1993; Georgano 1973; Vidich 1978; Gilbert and Samuels 1982; Davis 1990; Kirby 2001; Parapugna 1980)

In the cab industry the 1920s were marked nationally by cut-throat competition sometimes resulting in violence, and the situation was no different in San Francisco. Lack of entry regulations made for an excessive number of cabs on the street.

In those days permits were worth, you might say, dime a dozen. As a result, San Francisco was overcabbed. And to make a living was very difficult. Then along came the depression, and many cab companies folded... (Tealdi and Greif 1978).

The major companies, including Black and White Cab, Checker, Yellow, and Red Top⁶, engaged in bitter rate wars to undercut each other’s business.

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⁵ Electric cabs appeared first but competed unsuccessfully with the horse-drawn variety.

⁶ Historical cab companies are referred to by their real names; for contemporary companies, however, pseudonyms are given.
Bishop⁷: In the old days the companies would have these special cabs, they would make—they weren’t just normal cabs—they were steel-plated on either side, on the side walls, and they’d have two engines—two engines so they were pretty darn powerful. And they would use them to drive other cabs from other companies off the road. They would drive up and just run them right off the road, and of course they wouldn’t have any damage because they were made out of steel! The cab wars... they were much more serious back then, real serious, those cab wars... and of course there were underworld elements...

In the end it was Checker that won; however, Checker’s owner W. Lansing Rothschild used the name of recently acquired Yellow to consolidate business in San Francisco and spread out into what became a statewide empire (Davis 1990: 14; Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 52-3). Yellow inherited a vast majority of the cabs and almost all of the cabstands in the city. This set the scene for the business for most of the Twentieth century, during which mammoth Yellow cab faced guerrilla warfare of sorts from smaller operators which Yellow drivers dismissively termed “pirates” (Davis 1990: 15; Stannard 1971: 44).

World War II, during which San Francisco was a major staging area for the war in the Pacific, had a profound effect on the cab industry. Gasoline was rationed, and cab hoods had to be bolted down to discourage theft.

...while there was more than enough business to go around (and a lot of shared rides) this also meant that once you used your ration of gasoline, your shift was over and you had to return to the garage. (Alix Stenbeck, quoted in McGuire 1996)

Cabdrivers of the time still figured out ways to make money:

⁷ All names or nicknames of drivers quoted or referred to are pseudonyms.
Bishop: In World War Two it was easy, all the drivers knew how to make money. All the cabdrivers during the war were connected with scams to make money. Drivers always knew a prostitute and a used car dealer. Why? Because anytime sailors or soldiers were on leave, they’d want a prostitute and buy a used car. Then when their stay was over, they’d sell the car back. And the cabbie would get a cut. Everybody was happy.

The war years marked the first time that women were hired in large numbers to drive cabs in San Francisco (McGuire 1996). Women of course filled many occupations in those years, but the appearance of women behind the wheel of the taxicab seems to have been received with suspicion, as the story told to me by a perfectly respectable elderly female passenger illustrates.

About ten years after the war, she said, she’d been at a women’s dinner party in the Sunset and the topic of what people had done during the war came up. She had been a college student during the war, but being a bit jealous of the all the other ladies’ tales of having been Rosie-the-Riveter and whatnot, when her time came to speak up she thought she’d claim to have done something exciting, and so announced that she had driven a taxicab in San Francisco during the war years. As soon as she said this, a shocked silence fell over the table; and it was only much later that she discovered that “everybody knew” that all female cabdrivers during World War II had been prostitutes! “So,” she said, “I really put my foot in it!” She added that she’d been told that rumors and complaints about cabs and prostitution got so bad that the manager of Yellow Cab decided to look into the matter himself. Hailing a cab one evening, he had asked the young female
driver, “Can you take me to a whorehouse?” The driver, who did not recognize her boss, replied, “Buddy, you’re in one!”

The truth or lack thereof of this story notwithstanding, it does point to a societal discomfort with women filling the roles of cabdrivers which lingers in some sectors to this day. After the war the female drivers were let go, and it was not until 1957 that Yellow and the other companies began hiring women again, and even then they were restricted to the day shift (Kirby 2001).

The rivalry between Yellow cab and the independents and small companies flavored much of the history of San Francisco taxicabs in the 20th century. Much of this rivalry centered around the hotel stands, of which Yellow controlled all but a very few. Drivers from other companies could use these stands only so long as a Yellow did not come along. As a Yellow driver of the era recalls:

**Lotta:** Yellow had a monopoly on everything, the only stands that were open was the Greyhound, that then was still on Seventh street, and the East Bay Terminal, and I forgot what else, where every cab could stop. I think maybe the airport terminal that they used to have on Ellis and Taylor. Everything else belonged to Yellow, you know, and sometimes another cab would sit in front of the Huntington, especially when I was driving nights, and I would just beep my horn and they would go. (laughs)

The independent drivers had their own ways of getting back at Yellow:

**Jake:** Oh, they had stands, Yellow had stands all over the city. I used to see some of them, the one at the Cliff House, the one at, like, Thirty-Seventh and Noriega, right where those parks are you know? ...Yeah and

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8 The association of cabdriving with prostitution, and its effect on the experience of female drivers, will be discussed briefly in Chapter Four.
then like Park Presidio, there was a cab stand there, Fort Miley was one of them, you could see certain cabs sitting there, I think. St Francis hotel was a Yellow cab stand! I used to pull up in front when, on like, convention nights, I used to pull up, all these Yellows are sitting there, then you’d pull up, drop a fare and then a customer walks up and says “Are you available?” I’d say “Yeah, get in!” And then they get in, and the driver of the Yellow behind you would be honking the horn at you!

The doormen of the hotels were sometimes complicit with the independents in cheating the Yellow drivers out of a load:

**Lotta:** And that’s when all this stuff started with piecing off the doormen, cause all these hotels would sell airport loads to these [non-Yellow] cab drivers out of the side and back doors, and so that’s how this whole bad habit started, that the doormen all want money from the cabdrivers when it’s an airport load.

[They didn’t do it, they didn’t sell it to the Yellow guys in the front?]

**Lotta:** No, you just got whatever was coming.

Although there are no longer any closed company stands in San Francisco, drivers are still at the mercy of doormen who exploit their ability to trade good fares for tips from the drivers (see Chapter Five).

*Dispatch Technology*

In the 1860s, San Francisco livery stables offered “transportation from your door to your destination” (Davis 1990: 12). Of course this required a previous agreement with the driver or the company. As in all cities in the 19th century, cabs in San Francisco could find passengers only by waiting at stands or by cruising the streets. Taxicab “dispatch,” in the modern sense of the term, had to await the invention of the telephone.
The telephone-stand dispatch system, inaugurated in the early Twentieth century, worked through the placement of telephones at strategically located cabstands, with direct lines to the cab company. A person needing a cab would walk up to a stand, and if there was no cab there could use the phone to call the company, which would send a cab from the nearest occupied stand. Drivers upon coming to an empty stand would pick up the phone and be advised whether they were needed or to wait for a call. Passengers could also call the company directly from home; the company would then dispatch a cab from the stand nearest to the customer’s house (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 42; Davis 1990: 18-21; McGuire 1996).

Even after the two-way radio superseded the telephone as the technology of dispatch, companies kept telephones with direct lines at strategic points around the city to draw in customers:

**Jake:** When I was a kid they used to have telephones. We used to pick up the phones on the sides of apartment houses. Taxicabs. Eagle Cab Company, Yellow Cab Company. You know. Like in Chinatown, they had one at Washington and Grant right on the post, the light post. “Taxi.” Pick up the phone, call a taxi.

Today a few companies retain direct lines at valuable locations, such as hospitals.

In 1946, two-way radios were demonstrated at a national cab-owner’s convention in San Francisco, and the major companies rushed to install the new device (Davis 1990: 18; Tealdi and Greif 1978). Telephone-stand dispatch was replaced by radio-stand dispatch, which is still used in many cities around the country. In radio-stand dispatch, the city is broken into a number of zones, with each zone assigned a number and
corresponding to a physical stand. Passengers can take a cab from a stand, but there is usually no longer a telephone available to call the office. Orders are dispatched over the radio by zone, sounding much like this modern dispatcher, who mimicks the old style of stand dispatch in an interview:

Dispatcher\(^9\): “Viking Cab\(^{10}\) stand Seven, stand Twelve, stand Five, anybody for the Marina... Viking Cab stand Two!”

[Where were the other stands?]...

Dispatcher: Yeah, they had stand Six, stand Five, stand Four, stand Three, Two, One. I know where all of them are, cause I worked for Viking too.

[So they covered the zones, right?]

Dispatcher: Stand Seven’s the Marina, stand Six is California and Spruce. Stand Twelve was the Holiday Inn on Kearny street. And stand Four was Bay and Columbus, the Villa Roma hotel, where the Marriott is now.

If a driver is “first-up” at a stand called, then he or she checks in “bingo” and is given the order. If no driver checks in, the dispatcher calls a neighboring stand or calls the order an “open,” in which case any driver may check in and the order is given to the closest one. Descriptions of radio-stand dispatch systems can be found in Henslin (1967a) and Berry (1997). Variations on stand dispatch are discussed by Santee (1989: 88-9), such as plug or zone dispatch, in which orders are still broken up by zone, but drivers do not have to be physically present on a stand in order to receive calls.

\(^9\) Office personnel are not assigned pseudonyms, but referred to by occupation.

\(^{10}\) As noted above, extant companies are referred to pseudonymously.
Over the last few decades of the Twentieth Century, the stand system gradually gave way in certain cities to a style of dispatch in which all orders were given as “open” (as opposed to restricted to a given stand). Santee terms this a “call and response” or “bidding” system (Santee 1989: 89). With this, taking radio calls became less like the hallowed cab tradition of standing for hire in a set location, and more like the almost-as-hallowed (but never before quite as acceptable) tradition of cruising for fares. This shift released the possibilities for mobility and readiness of response that lay dormant as long as a stand system of dispatch was in use. The fact that each phase of the history of dispatch is reminiscent of the one preceding it—zone dispatch of stand dispatch, stand dispatch of telephone dispatch, telephone dispatch of the early stands—recalls Marx’s observation, expanded upon by Walter Benjamin, that often new technologies

...imitated precisely the old forms they were destined to overcome. Early photography mimicked painting. The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames. Newly processed iron was used for ornament rather than structural supports, shaped into leaves, or made to resemble wood (Buck-Morss 1989: 111).

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11 A more detailed description of the call-and-response radio dispatch system as used in San Francisco is given in Chapter Seven.

12 One reason companies keep stand-dispatch systems may be to keep their drivers dependent and less likely to switch to other companies. Drivers must invest some effort at learning a stand system and will thus be reluctant to move to another company where everything is different (Santee 1989: 88). With the increase in cruising, companies shifted the cost of gas to drivers.
The question of to what extent old social and spatial forms determine the use of new technologies will come up again when we briefly turn to the question of computer dispatch in Chapter Eight.

**Meters, Surveillance, and Employer-Employee Relations**

Jake: When I started driving a cab it was a windup meter, and I used to hit the meter all the time. Wind it up like a clock. Yeah... you’d wind it, it goes “tick tick tick tick.” And you could hear the meter jump, so you'd know your meter's on. Like with the digital meters now, you don't even hear it. Sometimes you forget it’s on!

From the days of the hackney coach, fares were usually judged by distance (and/or time), but disagreements were not uncommon between drivers and passengers; a passenger of the mid-19th century spoke of the importance of learning every distance “as if I had been an Ordnance Surveyor,” to foil scheming cabbies (Hollingshead 1860). Many early attempts were made at an automatic device to calculate fares; the prototype of the modern meter, measuring distance, time, and extras, was invented in Germany in 1891. As Georgano notes, though, many “independent cabmen refused to allow their incomes to be regulated in this mechanical manner;” and the inventor of the device was at one point thrown into a river by a mob of angry German cabdrivers (Georgano 1973: 56). However, not all drivers received the invention with such hostility, and in Paris it was the drivers’ unions which supported the installation of meters well before the cab owners and

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13 Vidich (1976: 33) gives the “standard city block” as the basis for fare calculation before meters in New York.
companies did (Papayanis 1993: 154-5). In this case drivers supported the new meters as a means of rationalizing the cab industry, eliminating the custom of tipping, and establishing a straight wage for drivers, which among other things would result, they felt, in a higher social status for the occupation (ibid.: 156).

Before meters drivers, unless they owned their own coach, almost invariably hired their vehicle by the day, paying a set fee to the owner regardless of how much money they themselves grossed. As a Parisian horse cabbie at the turn of the 20th century reported:

> The day begins at six o'clock. 'Tis then I get my first horse and pay my day—eighteen francs, at present; sometimes the rate is higher, sometimes lower; if it rains the patron puts up the price; if there is a fête day he puts it up—for the day of the Grand Prix we paid thirty francs this year. (quoted in Thompson 1903)

With the new meters came a new driver/employer relationship based on percentages, and the era of cabdrivers as employees was born. In this work relationship, the meter’s ability to keep track of all trips for the entire shift—the cab’s bookings—became all-important. The driver paid the company a set percentage of all money taken in, and so had a built-in incentive to maximize his or her income. With this came naturally an incentive for drivers to hide from the company the actual amount taken in. Since the meter recorded the fares, this could be done by making an arrangement with the customer to ride with the meter off.
Jake: So what I'd do, I'd just tell the customer, don't worry about it, we'll go by the time, so what I'd do is we left at twelve forty two, now it’s twelve fifty two, that's ten minutes, okay ten minutes, as a rule, it’s a mile a minute, so I'd just say, its about eleven dollars. That’s what I'd say—a dollar a minute. It works out pretty much....

The term for this in San Francisco was “high-flagging;” Hazard, who drove in New York during the early decades of the 20th century, uses the phrase “riding stick up” (Hazard 1930: 78). In both cases this refers to the fact that the early mechanical meters were turned on by pushing down a lever (shaped from early on like a flag).14

High-flagging caused a major loss of revenue to cab companies, so much so that surveillance of drivers, in order to ensure that every fare was dutifully recorded and that the full percentage was paid to the company, became a major part of the driver/employer relationship. Company surveillance (complementarily with police surveillance) of drivers predated the invention of the meter (Papayanis 1993: 38ff); however, it was not until the 20th century that it really came into its own.

Bob: Then when they got the mechanical flag meters, they said there were all these ways that they could affect it. Guys had ways that they could affect the way the meter worked, or not use it, because they were paid on commission, so they didn’t want to pay the company the full amount. So there were a lot of spies out, and the company had two guys who drove around in unmarked cars, they were bosses of the company but they used to drive around, and spy on the drivers. Then there was a guy with a camera mounted in the front of his car like a gun, and he would see you

14 Papayanis (1993: 85) includes a photograph of an early meter on a horse-drawn Parisian cab, c. 1904. The “flag” appears to be quite literally a flag, sticking up from the meter with the word “Libre” signifying that the cab is available. The meter is also adorned with iconic flags, perhaps signifying to prospective passengers that this is a metered cab, in much the same way as late 20th century cabs sometimes bear images of radio towers or futuristic zigzags on their sides to indicate that they are radio- or computer-dispatched.
and take pictures of you to see if you were speeding or what you were
doing, or high-flagging, whatever.

Besides the flag itself, which was not very visible outside the car, the toplight,
which is on when the meter is not running, was another indication to police and company
spies that a driver was high-flagging:

**Bob:** And to avoid the high-flagging thing, they had a way that they could
short out the light, the toplight, which—it was connected to the
transmission see, and to the meter, and they could just disconnect it. And
that would short out the top light—disconnect it from the meter, so they
could turn it on, turn it off, how they wanted.

Drivers with this set-up would manually switch off the toplight when they had a
fare (whether they were high-flagging or not), and then switch it back on when the fare
left the vehicle, thus giving the illusion to anyone watching from outside that the toplight
and meter were functioning normally.

**Bob:** They could make a little switch in there, that would be to disconnect
the meter altogether so that it didn't work—someone would get in the cab
and you would show them that the meter wasn't working and if you then
wanted to take a fare to Sacramento or wherever, you didn't have to pay
the company...

The above trick did not require the collusion of the passenger in order to high-
flag; the meter was switched off and made to appear dysfunctional before they got in. As
always in high-flagging, it involved an ability to size up a fare, judging where they were
likely to go and if they would go along with not using the meter.
Bob: ...because back then, of course, being closely watched, you know, and kept track of, anytime you hit the meter at all you were paying for it, you were in debt from that if you weren't going to get paid for the trip, like if it was a stiff.

In other words, another motivation for high-flagging, besides the extra income, was the insurance it provided against losing out twice on a non-paying fare. A fare who took a cab on a long trip and then ran off without paying would leave the driver effectively in debt, since he or she would owe the company a portion of the amount on the meter, even if no money was collected.

Bob: And then you could just have this little thing under the steering column that could turn it on or off, screw it in, screw it out, and that would turn it on and off, [meter and toplight] so there was no sign that you had left it like that.

The driver could turn the cab back in with the meter and toplight functioning normally, so that nobody in the company would be any the wiser.

The driver who wanted to beat the company didn’t just have to worry about surveillance from the outside, but from the backseat as well:

Bob: ...they used to have these guys called Pinkertons who—it was a separate agency, Pinkertons, who would be hired to go in and take cabs, fill out a waybill, all day long [the agent]’d be taking different cabs, then he'd turn that waybill in and he'd write down the cab, where he'd picked him up, where he went., and what the fare was—then the guy would turn in the waybill at the end of the day, and they'd compare that against the waybills for the drivers. And of course the same company did this for the waiters, and barkeepers, and everything—going in and checking up on them.
Obviously a driver caught with a false waybill would have some explaining to do when called before the management.15

Cheating the company in this way required subtlety and skill. Besides avoiding cops and Pinkertons, and finding passengers willing or gullible enough, a driver had to make sure to turn in enough bookings at the end of the day so as not to raise the suspicions of management. A driver who turned in too little money could get fired; a driver who turned in too much could get beat up by other drivers for making them look bad. Hazard, observing that drivers who turned in at least $75 a week never got hassled by the boss, himself kept strict track of what was on and off the meter, always turning in between $75 and $80: “Why make the boss a present of forty-five dollars a week?” (Hazard 1930: 91-2). Vaz reports that the average turn-in for a given shift was called the “speed;” a driver starting a shift, and wanting to stay close to what other drivers were turning in, would ask a driver who had been out longer, “What’s the speed today?” (Vaz 1955: 67). Since opportunities to make money on or off the meter depended on a multitude of circumstances throughout the day, the ability to meet a target of recorded versus unrecorded income involved a considerable amount of experience and ingenuity. An extensive discussion of cheating the meter as a social norm among cabdrivers is given by Vaz (1955: 117-156).

The old method of hiring cabs out by the day for a set fee never wholly

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15 Today Pinkertons are not hired by the companies, but the Police Taxi Detail uses a similar ruse, with undercover officers, to catch drivers who illegally pick up fares from the top deck of the airport. A few drivers have told me of having been “stung” this way, and made to pay a hefty fine; others, however, have assured me that like all cops, the ones at the airport can always be recognized by their shoes.
disappeared: in 1930’s New York it was engaged in by small fleet owners and called “horsing” or “horse-hiring,” probably on account of its association with the horse-drawn era (Hatch 1938). In the 1970s large numbers of cab firms nationwide started going back to the model of horse-drawn days, hiring drivers as independent contractors paying a daily “gate” fee, instead of hiring them as employees paid commission (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 104-5; Stevens 1991). Locally, the commission system ended with the collapse of Yellow cab in 1976. Under the leasing system, cab companies are assured of a daily amount of income per cab on the street, and so the atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance between company and drivers which characterized the days of commission driving has evaporated. Pinkertons and company spies have fallen by the wayside, and drivers have no longer any incentive to high-flag, although it is still illegal to do so. At the same time, the shift from commission to lease driving corresponded with the mass extinction nationwide of cabdriver’s unions. This was the result of two factors: first, as legally “independent contractors,” the rights of lease drivers to unionize are severely curtailed by law. Second, the leasing arrangement emphasized and reinforced the individual, competitive aspect of the job, to the detriment of driver solidarity. The decline of unions and the shift in work relationship from one of direct employment to independent contracting was part of a much wider shift away from traditional forms of employment in this era (Stevens 1991: 1-3), potentially reflecting an even more

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16 The bankruptcy of Yellow Cab of California (affecting San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other cities) is described by Gilbert and Samuels (1982: 53-4), Davis (1990: 22-3), and Russell (1985: 136-8).
significant shift towards “flexible” labor in the global economy (Harvey 1990).

The past, no matter how violent or full of suspicion, is remembered as a time when dispatchers were more skillful, cabdrivers were more professional, and the general public more respectful in their attitude towards cabbies:

Jake: Yeah, we had our own clientele. And back then I worked night shift, on a Friday night I would get about—we had good dispatchers back then, Andrews, he was an auctioneer, he sounded like a tobacco auctioneer. He talked so fast. And I used to average around fifty radio calls a night. And out of the fifty radio calls I would maybe get two no-gos, and that would probably be at a bar. And the bartender would tip you a couple of bucks for it. Yeah, back then. Cause they’d take the two bucks from the customer when the customer called for the cab, they'd say “Yeah, let me have two bucks deposit in case you change your mind. Or you leave, you know? So I can give the cabdriver something.” And um, we had good dispatchers.

Relations with the police were different as well:

Bob: One time a motorcycle cop followed a driver into the old garage and was going to give him a ticket right there. Well, the boss looked out his window and saw this, so he went down there to see what the matter was. And you know what he told that motorcycle cop? “You're on private property, get out of here! You're not going to give that guy any ticket!” And the cop left! You know why? Because he had pull. Real pull, with all the Catholic churches in town. Why, Friday, Saturday nights all the priests and nuns all over town came to Yellow and came to us and got their cars serviced and gassed for free. Cause they had all the pull in town. And drivers would get tickets and the police would leave them alone. Or the boss would just call up one of his big guys in the police

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17 Locally, the Teamster’s union met its demise with the bankruptcy of old Yellow and the shift to independent contractor status. As of this writing, no more than a handful of Teamster drivers in the city remain: with employee status, they enjoy health and retirement benefits, unlike all other drivers. More recently, the United Taxicab Workers, affiliated with the Communication Workers of America, has represented driver’s interests vocally, as well as offering health and dental plans. Union membership among drivers is low, but the UTW’s actions are for the most part supported among rank and file drivers. For more on labor history in the San Francisco cab industry, see Rathbone (nd).
department and they'd say forget it, tear it up.

*Atomization and Class*

Richard Schlosberg coined the term “atomization process” to describe the “particularly alienating quality of taxi work” (Schlosberg 1980: 11). Primarily, he was referring to the “isolating nature of the work situation in which drivers are constantly pitted against each other” (ad loc.), but he also referred to the split between drivers and owner-drivers which he felt contributed to racism and lack of class consciousness among drivers (ibid.: 12). Internal class divisions and individualism are closely related and have a long history in the cab industry.

Marx once referred to the French peasantry as a “sack of potatoes” on account of their inability to rise above their individual interests to act as a class (Marx and Engels 1978: 482). If this was true of the peasants, how much more so the urban *lumpenproletariat*, the seasonal, unskilled labor force—shiftless, shifty, shifting—which starred in the *Communist Manifesto* as “the ‘dangerous class,’ the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” (ibid.: 482). The *lumpenproletariat* are workers who are a social and economic step below the proletarians Marx sought to organize; and cabdrivers were thought of as lumpen in Marx’s day, a stigma which carried both social and economic consequences. The coachmen’s unions of nineteenth century Paris struggled not only for better pay and for better working conditions, but against the perception, both in the minds of management and of other unionized trades, that drivers were not truly of the working class: the
Compagnie Generale des Voitures (CGV), one of the largest firms of the day, insisted that

The coachman of a voiture de place\textsuperscript{18} is not a worker. In effect, a worker is a man who works in a workshop or building site, under the surveillance of a foreman, or who produces a determined number of goods or a number of hours determined beforehand. (Papayanis 1993: 40)

What distinguishes cabdrivers from “real” workers in the above quote—that they don’t stay put, cannot be properly supervised, and don’t put out an easily definable product—is as accurate a description of the industry today as it was then. An anxiety over this borderline status between lumpen and proletarian has continued to haunt, and sometimes divide, the trade. Miles, for instance, documents the contempt in which a core group of long-time, steadily employed Oklahoma City drivers, mostly homeowners and family men, held a seasonal, part-time, and unprofessional group of drivers (referred to as “drifters” or “floaters”) to whom they attributed much of the poor reputation of the industry (Miles 1953: 139-40).

One important distinction between cabdriving and normal work is that the former has almost never been waged labor. The exception to this was during an experimental phase in the early twentieth century when the new larger fleets which came with automobilization introduced the idea that cabdrivers should be treated as employees (hence as proletarians rather than lumpen); wages were soon done away with in favor of the commission system, which was a better fit for the surveillance technologies available

\textsuperscript{18} A cab.
to companies (Vidich 1976: 81). As noted above, the shift from commission to leasing later in the century was accompanied by a shift away from a unionized employee workforce to a workforce of self-employed entrepreneurs, which has since acted in many ways like a sack of potatoes.

Modern ethnographers have described cabdrivers as “no longer part of the working class” (Schlosberg 1980: 83) and as occupying a position “neither explicitly capital nor labour” (Berry 1995). Raymond Russell focuses on the division of Boston drivers into categories of commission and lease fleet drivers, independents, and small fleet owners, and concludes that “the distribution of Boston cab drivers across ownership categories is no mere accident” (Russell 1983: 368). The loss of employee, and hence of worker, status, along with the opportunity for some drivers to own individually their means of production (the cab) while still being subject to the dispatch-brokering and financial structures of their trade, contribute to a process Russell terms “embourgoisement,” in which the exploitative nature of cab work is obscured by the lack of a wage relation and by the illusions of independence and ownership.

Of course, as Russell notes, the shift to leasing was mostly favored by drivers, although the subsequent decline in union strength was probably not fully anticipated (see also Davis 1990, Stevens 1991). The atomization process, in fact, is sometimes welcomed by drivers and does not exclusively work against their interests. And as Berry (1995) points out, drivers share a “common work culture” and sense of community even if they are not technically working class and do compete against each other. Atomization is thus an ongoing process which is never completed and never complete. The opposing
poles of worker solidarity and competition coexist, although one or the other may
dominate as economic and managerial trends transform the working context.

**Proposition K**

The passage of Proposition K in 1978 revolutionized the San Francisco taxicab industry. Previously the value of a taxicab permit (also called a medallion or “plate”) had fluctuated wildly with the amount of business in the industry. Medallions could be held by anybody: many were held by individual owner-drivers, others were held by persons with no relationship to the taxicab industry who simply leased out the medallions for the passive income. A significant proportion of medallions were held directly by the large companies, which also tended to handle the leasing of the non-driver medallions.

Proposition K, which was partly a reaction to the bankruptcy of Yellow Cab in 1976, mandated that all taxicab medallions should be held by active cabdrivers:

No permit shall be issued unless the person applying for the permit shall declare under penalty of oath his or her intention actively and personally to engage as permittee driver under any permit issued to him or her for at least four hours during any 24 hour period on at least 75% of the business days during the calendar year. No more than one permit shall be issued to any one person. (from text of Proposition K, in SPUR 2001)

Subsequently there have been three types of medallion holders in San Francisco. Those who hold the “Prop K” medallions issued after 1978 are required to drive, can only own one medallion, can not transfer or sell the medallion, and upon retirement or death must relinquish the medallion back to the city for reissuance. To receive a Prop K medallion a driver must pay a one-time fee to put his or her name on “the list.” The wait
for a permit on the list is currently a little over ten years. As drivers near the top of the list their status changes: companies start treating them better (wooing them for their medallion), and they themselves start thinking and acting more like “owners” than like mere “drivers.”

Those individuals who hold “Pre-K” medallions are not required to drive and can own multiple medallions (as long as they were acquired before 1978), but are subject to the other restrictions. Some Pre-K medallion holders express bitterness about the Proposition which took away their ability to sell their medallions:

Harry: We [he and his wife] bought our medallion in 1961. That was a good investment, back then, up until [City Supervisor] Quentin Kopp wrecked it for us, with Prop K. That was gonna be my retirement, the money from that medallion.

Other Pre-K owners compare their situation favorably to the post-K owners:

Jake: I'm a pre-K, and I can take off anytime I want, I can lease it out and not work. I'm sorry I didn't buy ten of them at the time, at the time I only needed five thousand dollars down. If I had known what the future was gonna be, I woulda maxed out all my credit cards and the downpayment for at least ten permits! I would have been sitting pretty!

Jake is less put off by his inability to sell the permit:

Jake: You don't have a retirement on the K permits now, but the pre-K permits you do. Yeah, I could retire right now! .... I can not sell it, but it stays with me till the day I die. And then it’s reissued as a K permit.

A third category of permits are those held by companies and politically well-connected individuals. Corporate medallions were supposed to be phased out and turned
over to drivers, but the companies which hold them have managed to be granted repeated extensions of ownership over the last twenty-five years, in what most drivers perceive as a clear violation of the spirit of the law. Also, certain well-placed individuals, with or without connections to the taxicab industry, have managed to retain family control of medallions despite the death of the original owners, regardless of the supposed non-transferability of the medallions.

Jake: But there are people that got a K permit, their permit went back to the city and they got it back! Which is not right either, but you know, how bout the ones like me, we should be able to do it too, if they're able to do it, why can't we? The pre-K permits I'm talking about. Like L____, his father died, and he got [his father’s] permit. And that woman [who died] with the eight permits, their eight children sued, and got the permits back!

Proposition K has thus never been fully implemented, being subject to the peculiar manipulations of San Francisco politics; nevertheless, it has greatly enlarged the number of medallions held by individual drivers, creating a new and powerful class of owner-drivers, with whom companies must deal. Instead of having to take out loans to acquire medallions as in other cities\(^\text{19}\), San Francisco cabdrivers since Proposition K receive their medallions in the natural course of their career.\(^\text{20}\) San Francisco’s unique medallion system thus serves as an incentive for experienced, skilled drivers to stick with an industry that otherwise offers few opportunities for advancement or financial security.

\(^{19}\) Predatory loans for permits, targeting immigrant drivers in particular, are a blight on the industry in many cities: e.g. Boston (Russell 1983); New York (Lobas 1990); Toronto (Facey 1999); Philadelphia (Russell 2004).

\(^{20}\) Assuming they have put their name on the list. Some never do, for various reasons.
That said, it has had some less than progressive side effects. By inserting a large group of “owner-drivers” into the work hierarchy between “mere” drivers and company owners, Prop K has created political and social divisions among the cabdrivers throughout the city and at any given company. Not truly employer, not truly employee; an owner, and at the same time a worker; the owner-driver occupies a confusing position in the political economy of the taxicab industry. In a substantial way 1978’s Proposition K supplemented the concurrent trend towards the “self-employed” driver in defracting and atomizing the consciousness of drivers vis-à-vis the companies they work for, and in increasing the “flexibility” of cabdrivers as a workforce.
Chapter 3

The Cab Garage

Getting “Put Out”

At five o’clock on a Friday afternoon, the driver’s lounge of a large San Francisco cab company is full of activity. A tv is on, which nobody is watching; three drivers are standing around the pool table as another one breaks; a ping pong ball goes bouncing off under a chair. Conversations are going on in at least three languages, both in person and over cell phones. Several night drivers waiting patiently to go out are sitting here and there at tables and chairs reading books or cramming down burritos.

At one table a group of day drivers is boisterously shuffling around papers and bills, alternately complaining and boasting about their just-finished day’s work and income. One by one, as they finish calculating the amount they owe, they fold their money for “gates and gas” along with paratransit coupons, vouchers, and a tip into their “waybill,” or daily trip report, and walk over to what seems like an amorphous mass of drivers, but is in fact three lines—one for day drivers checking in; one for night drivers checking out, and one for day drivers paying for their shift. These lines all converge at a shelf under a small window.

Made of bullet-proof glass, with a small slot underneath for the passage of documents and money in and out, the “window” is the drivers’ sole view into the inner sanctum of the dispatch office. Just on the other side, the cashier takes in money from the returning day shift, then leans down to a microphone and calls out the names of night
drivers who are next to get out; as he calls each name he shoves a waybill and a small metal square called a medallion out the chute below the window; it clanks as it falls on the shelf below.

Inside, beyond the cashier, behind a bank of computer screens, sit the dispatcher and the order taker. The order taker watches a row of lights indicating phone calls—she races to cover each one, acquiring the necessary information about each order—address and time needed—as swiftly as possible, then moves on to the next light, often before the previous callers are finished speaking. The dispatcher watches two screens, one with upcoming advance orders and one with the current list of calls; as he types the numbers of cabs alongside the addresses to which he is dispatching them, he rattles off the list of available calls. As drivers on the street check in with their locations, the dispatcher evaluates the distances between drivers and calls and decides which drivers to assign to which calls. Busy and constantly physically active in the office, the dispatcher is at the same time somewhere else, tuned in through his headset to a representational space, a constantly expanding, contracting, and shifting space, an ethereal geometry of cabs, orders, cross-streets, and the incessant computation of distances. The dispatcher is at once physically confined in the dispatch office and floating through the city.

Back out in the driver’s lounge, the cashier’s voice booms out your name over the microphone. You wade your way through the mass of drivers and pick up the waybill and medallion, look at the cab number on the waybill to evaluate the quality of the cab you have been assigned, and shove an appropriate number of bills through the window. The cashier takes the money and nods a thank-you. Through the window you might
catch the eye of the dispatcher, who nods hello; he also is watching who comes in and out of the garage and what passes through the window.

You walk out into the cab lot and find your car. You walk around it looking for dents or scrapes, and inspect the tires. You drive it over to a wash rack and clean it, then vacuum it out. Finally you are ready; you arrange everything the way you like it, as this will be your office for the next ten hours: the medallion is slipped into the slot where it goes, the waybill attached to a clipboard or folded and stuck over the visor with a rubber band. Pushing the trip miles to zero, you pull out of the lot and turn on the dispatch radio.

Spares

Not all cabs are created equal. In any company there is a range from brand-new, much sought-after cabs, to clunky old jalopies which tend to be “spares.” To explain: any cab in San Francisco must have a medallion placed above the dash in its holder. The number on the medallion must match the number on the side of the cab. However, so that companies can still run the same number of cabs when those matching the medallions are out of service, companies are allowed to keep spares, which are cabs with a number in the 2000-series on the side, and which are allowed to take any medallion in the front holder. Spares tend to be the oldest cabs in the fleet, playing their final role before the Great Cab Lot in the Sky, although one company used to keep a few high-quality spares, which only owner-drivers were supposed to drive.
The significance of spares in allowing companies to keep medallions on the street is taken to an extreme in the following story, one told of an infamous San Francisco cab character (here nameless) who owned a small cab company and chafed under the restriction of being only allowed to put out as many cabs as he had medallions. But he hit on a bright idea: he sent one of his medallions to off to Taiwan and received back ten perfectly identical copies. They looked just like the official ones, bearing the logo “San Francisco Taxicab” and everything, the only problem being that they all had the same number. This was solved by sticking the fake medallions in spares—thus, the company was able to run ten extra cabs. Everything worked just fine until the fateful day when an officer from the Taxi Detail was inspecting cabs in line at the Marriott and came upon five of these cabs in a row, all spares. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that all five cabs bore the same medallion!

Returning to the subject of spares versus regular cabs: some driver has to drive the nice new cab and some driver has to drive the smelly old cab. To some extent this has to do with seniority, as well as with each driver’s reputation for being able to keep a car in one piece. To discover the extent to which there is some leeway, however, in what cab gets assigned to what driver, we must return for now to the cab garage and pay more attention to the transactions at the window.
At the Window

They usually surreptitiously tipped a horse groom to get a healthy animal and a well-built coach and then inspected their equipment, for once outside the depot, they were liable for any damages to it. (Papayanis 1993: 64)

Since the time of Papayanis’ Nineteenth-century Parisian horse-cab drivers, some things might be said to have remained the same the more they have changed. One change: drivers today get their cabs not from a horse-groom but from a cashier. At large garages, the cashier (or cashiers) sits behind a pane of bullet-proof glass in a reinforced wall. Below the “window” there is a slot and a shelf on which drivers tend to lean while they interact with the cashier. Security is the primary reason behind the physical barrier surrounding the window: without such precautions the large amount of cash which flows through taxicab offices would be a compelling target for late-night armed robberies.¹ However, the psychological barrier which it imposes between the cashier and drivers is significant in many an interaction, as is clear in the response of one cashier when I asked him the reason for all the security:

Cashier: Huh, it’s to keep you out! (laughs)

Drivers and cashiers may try to get around the imposed social distance of the window and reestablish the level of conversational familiarity more common in

¹ My understanding is that although smaller cab companies may not have such imposing physical barriers to robbery, being located for instance in trailers or temporary buildings, they do tend to take other security measures, making them unwise places in which to plan hold-ups.
workplace relations. Drivers may find themselves leaning down to speak directly into the chute in order to pass comments to the cashier on a more intimate level; the egalitarian intent of this move is offset for the driver, however, by the need to crane one’s head down sideways to speak up at the cashier. The cashier may control a microphone to amplify his own speech, but may find it difficult to hear comments on the drivers’ side of the window. Behind the cashier, there is the banter in the dispatch office from which drivers are wholly excluded unless the cashier chooses to pass it on.

The cashier occasionally establishes more direct contact with specific drivers by coming out of the office to interact face-to-face. At one garage where I worked, the cashier’s window was next to a split-level door; official business was transacted at the window, but if the cashier wanted to pass on more information he stepped over, opened the top half of the door, and leaning on the bottom conversed with drivers through this larger aperture. On occasion he opened the door wholly and came out, leaning against the outside of the window as he called names, delivered advice, or offered cab choices to the collected drivers. The vicissitudes of his relations with the various drivers during his shift could be traced in his day’s dance between the window, the door, and the outside wall.

As with any daily interaction in which a cabdriver meets a gatekeeper of one sort or another, money is made to change hands. In the cab business, historically and synchronically, informal tipping relations are nearly universal; Hazard, for instance, recounts how the service personnel (gasmen and cab washers) would approach cabbies
“with a box with coins in it which he shook and said, ‘Put something in the kitty, coffee money for the boys.’ Nobody dared refuse” (Hazard 1930: 73) Fred Davis writes:

In the garage out of which I worked, nearly everyone connected with maintenance and assignment of cabs expected tips from drivers for performing many of the routine tasks associated with their jobs, such as filling the tank with gas, changing a tire, or adjusting a carburetor. Although they resented it, drivers had little recourse but to tip. Otherwise, they would acquire reputations as “stiffs” and “cheapskates,” be kept waiting interminably for repairs, and find that faulty and careless work had been done on their vehicles. (Davis 1959: 164)

At San Francisco garages tips are made to dispatchers, cashiers, order takers, gasmen, and mechanics. For the driver this is no different than the need to buy a ticket when stopping at the airport, or to pay the city an increasingly hefty fee every year to renew the pleasure of being a cabdriver. The difference between informal tips and formal fees, for the one who pays, is that the former tend to come in smaller increments and give more immediate practical results. Cabdrivers themselves expect tips, and they expect to pass these on to their co-workers. This is institutionalized by the fact that workers such as cashiers, dispatchers, and gasmen are paid low wages in the expectation that they will also receive tip money.

Whom to tip, when to tip, how much to tip, and how to tip are all things which vary in detail in different times and places and so must be learnt by new drivers when they come to the garage. The following driver recounts his experiences when nobody told him he was supposed to tip the cashier:
George: My first day, at the old garage, they gave me a clunky old spare, of this kinda car, I don’t think [the company] even has them anymore, and I went down from the old garage to Tenth and Market, and broke right down. Within twenty-five or thirty minutes of starting! And I had to wait an hour to be towed back! That was my first day, I was thinking, man, what kind of a shit job have I got myself into? And it stayed like that, every day, I didn't know to tip, nobody told me, they just kept giving me these terrible cars and I was wondering why I got these terrible cars when everyone else was getting new cars? Nobody ever told me, I just eventually figured it out myself, looking—“Well, why are they doing that? Why are they putting money in the window? Is there some kind of bank in there, a special bank or something?”

In the excerpt below, the new driver has the greater fortune of being explicitly lectured by an experienced hand on how to tip. The conversation takes place at a table in the drivers’ lounge while day shift drivers are turning in and the night drivers are waiting to get out. Jill, a new driver who has just switched from days to nights, has just complained about the possibility of not getting out at all:

Jorge: So it’s your first day extra?² So she [the cashier] doesn't know who you are?
Jill: (nods)
Jorge: (significant look) So do you, uh... do you—you follow the same strategy you would in the morning, right?
Jill: (shrugs)
(pause)
Jill: What are you saying that I'm supposed to do?
(silence)
Third Driver: I don't think its quite the same in the morning [on the day shift].
Jorge: Sure it is.
Jill: Could you please tell me what I'm doing wrong?
Jorge: Well, everyone should be fair—that's really how it ought to be. But you have to give a little back—you got to take care of people.
Jill: Oh, I know! But I thought the best time to do that was after...

² The meaning of this term is explained below.
Jorge: (shaking his head and smiling) It's better before.
Jill: So should I go over there now and slip her... five bucks?
Jorge: Three, maybe five. Maybe now is not so good. But next time.

Jill is already aware of the need to tip when she gets a cab, but Jorge is suggesting that she make herself “known” to the cashier by tipping when she first arrives, in order to assure that she is able to “get out.” That not all drivers agree this strategy is wise or necessary is evidenced in the third driver’s question as to whether it is really “quite the same in the morning.” Throughout the exchange a tension builds as the new driver, not wanting to be seen as ignorant, nevertheless is anxious to hear what it is she hasn’t been doing right. At the end, the tension is released, and the participants, relaxed and joking, explain themselves:

Jill: I just wanted to know what I was doing wrong.
Jorge: (humorously) Yeah, that's why I'm just trying to juice you up on it.

The drivers waiting outside the window can be stratified into four groups: owner-drivers, assigned drivers, scheduled drivers, and extras. The top level of the hierarchy are, as always, the owner-drivers. These already have their own cabs and the cashier’s role is simply to issue them with waybills; they do not need to tip the cashier unless it is for some small favor regarding the cab. Some owners, expressing revenge for all the years when as lowly drivers they had to tip, make a big show of tipping insultingly small amounts, which the cashiers accept uncomplainingly.

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3 Cf. Morris (1951: 2-3) on the last three groups: “steady drivers,” “steady extras,” and “extras.”
Next in the hierarchy are those non-owning drivers who have assigned cars. For their specific shift they have a specific vehicle which either the owner or the company has picked them to drive. The cashier has little control over this, but assigned drivers usually tip the cashier some amount anyway to keep on good terms. When I was first trained as an assigned driver, it was considered standard to tip “five in and five out,” meaning five dollars each to the morning and evening office shifts. The money was simply handed to the cashier with the understanding that he or she would divvy it up with the other office personnel.

At the bottom of the pyramid are the drivers who have a scheduled shift but no assigned cab, and those not on the schedule who have come in “extra” to get out if there are cabs available. The scheduled drivers have priority over the extras in being offered cabs, but the extras have the ultimate freedom of being able simply to leave if they don’t like the choices they are presented with. These two categories of drivers are the ones who most need to stick their noses in the window and jockey for the attention and favor of the cashier.

The cashier’s job is not simply, or even primarily, to glean tips from desperate “extras.” Rather the cashier has to balance the competing interests of management and drivers with the need to keep his or her own sanity. The cashier has to keep track of what cabs are scheduled to come in or go out at what times, what owners are expected to come in and how demanding they are, while keeping in constant dialogue with the shop mechanics as to what cabs are out of service, for how long, and what cabs may be coming into service soon, as well as remembering what drivers are waiting for cabs and where
these drivers fit on the owners-assigned-scheduled-extras continuum. Last-minute calls from owners not coming in or radio pleas for tows from cabs broken down on the freeway continuously change the array of materials the cashier has to work with. The fluidity of the situation can either increase or decrease the cashier’s ability to control what driver gets what car. This puts the burden on the cashier to let the driver know when he or she is being the recipient of favoritism, and not to let them know when it’s merely the luck of the draw.

**Doc:** Well, this ain’t my car. This is ten dollars today. “I got a brand new jeep for you, Doc.” Well I’m extra, you know, I don’t wanna drive a fucking piece of shit. I’m a primadonna, twenty-five years....

One morning I came in extra and when I waved to the cashier he told me he had “one coming in”—that is, a cab turning in that I could then take out. I got my five-dollar tip ready, standard for “whatever’s next,” and while I was waiting around the cab came in, and the driver came up and stuck his waybill and medallion through the window. The cashier should have punched the other driver’s waybill and returned it to him, then given me the medallion with a new waybill; instead, there was a puzzling lack of activity while the cashier moved things around on his desk and I and the other driver waited outside the window. Finally, the cashier pushed my waybill and medallion out the window, while asking the other driver, “Hey, did you give me the medallion for 905?” At this point I put my five away and gave the cashier a ten-dollar bill, asking for a couple back, because I knew he had done me a favor.
How? By reversing the order—giving me my waybill before taking the other driver’s—the cashier had pointed out that he was not simply giving me the same car which had just pulled in. Also, by mentioning the number of the car, 905, which the other driver was turning in, he called my attention to the fact that I had received instead medallion 928, which was for a much nicer new car. Without saying anything directly, and without making it apparent to anyone but me, he let me know that he had controlled the selection of cars, and that I was not simply receiving “the next one in.” I increased the tip not so much out of gratitude as to give the message that future favors would also be appreciated.

Davis illustrates the fact that breakdowns in the tipping system work to the advantage of the tippees rather than the tippers. When Davis drove there was no radio dispatch; he uses the term “dispatcher” for what is now called, in San Francisco, a “cashier:”

Particularly with the dispatcher did the perversion of the tipping system reach extortionate proportions. His power derived from the assignment of cabs; to protect themselves from being assigned ‘pots’ (cabs that would break down in the middle of the day), drivers tipped him fifty cents at the beginning of every week. Since nearly every driver tipped the dispatcher and since there were more drivers than good cabs, a certain number of drivers would still be assigned ‘pots.’ Some, wishing to insure doubly against this would then raise the bribe to a dollar and a half a week, causing others to follow suit in a vicious spiral. (Davis 1959: 164-5)

During busy shifts when everybody wants to go out in a swanky car cashiers find themselves barraged with drivers all wanting to be their best friends and receive favored treatment. Naturally, the cashier can’t make everybody happy, and oftentimes can’t even
make all the good tippers happy. Although there is a certain inflation inherent in the
tipping system as drivers compete for the favor of the cashier, tip size may not be the
ruling factor in a cashier’s decision. There are cashiers who give the best cabs to their
friends, or to well-behaved, unassuming drivers they find easy to work with. In these
circumstances the driver who tips large “to be known” is a chump, and may well drive
away in a spare for all his trouble.

Drivers whose requests are considered exorbitant by the cashier may well find
their money refused. The following day driver wants to pull a “reverse” shift (going out
at midnight), paying the lesser day gates on one of the busiest night shifts of the year:

**Louie:** I was expecting it to be a busy night tonight because of the Black
and White Ball and all the after parties, you know? So I just went and
threw twenty bucks through the window and told Turk [the cashier], I said
“Put me out at midnight tonight, and I'll never ask you for a favor again!”
Turk shoved the money back out the window and said, “Go to Hell!”
(laughs) Well, I never tried that before, but I figured I'd give it a shot.

Tipping, thus, does not always work. The driver must learn when to tip and when
not to, how much is too little and how much is too much, and how to read the signs and
subtle messages by which she can know how to maximize her gain from the interaction.
Drivers consider the institution of tipping to be exploitative, and complain about it
constantly. However, it is drivers who keep tipping alive and important by competing
with each other in giving tips. A driver may assert angrily that a given cashier is playing
favorites with drivers who tip generously; yet that same driver is likely to behave towards
all cashiers with the implicit understanding that taking tips and giving out favors is a
universal and inherent aspect of their job, the concrete symbol of the relationship between cashiers and drivers, through the window.
Chapter 4

In the Cab: Drivers and Passengers

Drivers

Seth: Well, you've got basically like five... probably four different categories of drivers. You've got your immigrant, whom, this is the job he feels he can relate to, being freshly new in America, to make money. Then you've got your career driver, that they just do it because it's their life, they love doing it, they're gonna do it all their lives, but they don't particularly have any other interests, other than just taking care of family or paying bills or whatever... and then you've got your students, who need a flexible job to get through school, which is I guess my category, and then you've got the artists, and your musicians....

Among the present cabdrivers are to be found, as I learned from trustworthy persons, quondam greengrocers, costermongers, jewellers, clerks, broken-down gentlemen, especially turf gentlemen, carpenters, joiners, saddlers, coach-builders, grooms, stable-helpers, footmen, shopkeepers, pickpockets, swell-mobsmen, housebreakers, innkeepers, musicians, musical-instrument-makers, ostlers, some good scholars, a good number of broken-down pawnbrokers, several ex-policemen, draper’s assistants, barmen, scene-shifters, one baronet, and as my informant expressed it, “such an uncommon sight of folks that it would be uncommon hard to say what they was.” (Mayhew 1968 [1861]: 351)

As it did in Mayhew’s London, the cab trade in San Francisco draws in workers from a very wide range of social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Attractions tend to be the flexibility of hours, the ability to earn cash daily, and the ability to control one’s own pace of work. Furthermore, the ease of starting out as a cabdriver is an attraction: although the prerequisites in San Francisco (licensing fees and a week of
classes) are more stringent than in some cities, the only real barrier to becoming a cab
driver, if the companies are hiring, is a very bad driving record.

The incentives listed above make cabdriving the perfect “day job” for musicians,
writers, and students. These groups tend to treat cabdriving as an easy source of income
which they devote a minimal amount of time to, focusing their energies on other
activities that interest them more:

Mary: I’m a writer, this job is great for that, I just work two days a week
and I have all that extra time, five days, it’s great. How many jobs could
you get by like that? But its getting harder, it’s too much stress now.
Business is bad, so I have to work more days, I don’t have any time to
write....

Taoufik: ...like it’s good way for student like you or like me, it’s like, this
job is good to manage your time, when you go to school, it’s like, make
your own schedule, okay? Imagine if you work for another job, the boss
tell you it’s like you have to come that day, you have to come, if not you
get fired. Okay, over here it’s like from the day you talk to the manager ,
okay I need only two days. And the rest I will be “extra”.... And you don’t
bother anybody, nobody bother you. That’s the part of what of this job is
a benefit, that’s the thing when I take it. Why I choose this job for
temporary time.

The freedom experienced in a cab job is expressed not only as freedom from the
traditional constraints of work but as a degree of spatial and temporal flexibility best
summed up as a unique sense of mobility:

Taoufik: You don't have a boss, that's the best thing for me, it’s like, what
I choose. I used to work for restaurant and make better money than what I
am doing now, but always complain, always headache. Here there is no
boss, anytime I can stop, I get my coffee, I got my cigarette, I relax, and
the time I want to, you know, how I feel... okay? And also it's like when
you work you feel it’s like your own business, you getta make more
money and you work so harder, that's for you, for all your own benefit, not for somebody else.

**Seth:** Flexibility of hours, uh, well, money, the idea that I could make more money doing that than any other job that I could find and that offered me flexibility. My main motivation. Not wanting to have a boss per se, outside of the fact of having to follow rules and regulations, of the industry, not having a boss telling you what to do.... not having to be at work at a certain time, and not having to go home at a certain time, or, if I need to change something in the middle of the day, I go to a bookstore, or stop and eat something, anything I might need to do, I can do pretty much as I please, and still make an average, a decent amount of money. Too, you're outside, you're not sitting in a confined or enclosed space or office, for eight or nine hours... I prefer to be outside, moving around.

The same attractions are behind the large amount of immigrants in the cab trade. In San Francisco are found drivers from practically every inhabited area of the globe, the largest groups being from the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and West Africa. Lack of stringent entry requirements, the ability to set one’s own hours, and the relative freedom from scrutiny, as well as the opportunity to become swiftly acquainted with American society, are what attract immigrants to drive cabs. By and large, immigrant drivers treat cabdriving not as a lifestyle support but as a stepping stone to economic success in other realms, using savings accrued while cabdriving to buy their own businesses and property. Others, usually those who were highly educated in their home countries, drive cabs while seeking the educational credentials that would allow them to seek higher paying jobs. Thus these social-mobility-oriented immigrant drivers share the lifestyle drivers’ attitude towards cabdriving as an opportunity to focus on something else, rather than as a career in itself:
Taoufik: I like [this job] for a temporary time. Not for whole life, I wish I don't retire from this job....

On the other hand, there are a sizable number of drivers (although a minority at any time, due to driver turnover) who spend their lives in the occupation. Some of these “oldtimers” belong to a multigenerational core group of drivers whose fathers, grandfathers, or other relatives may have driven, and who thus have access to a cultural continuity and an extensive network of support not available to most entering cabdrivers. These family-connected drivers tend, naturally, to be American-born: on the other hand, a fair number of foreign-born drivers take driving as a career as well. The situation in San Francisco is thus different than that described by Raymond Russell in Los Angeles, in which a sharp difference in attitude towards cabdriving was displayed by native-born drivers, who tended to be careerists, and immigrants, who tended to focus on social and economic mobility (Russell 1984).¹

Another measure of dedication to the job is the amount of time worked per week. Some drivers work part-time, others full-time, a divide which Henslin took as reflecting that between “committed” and “uncommitted” drivers (Henslin 1967a: 147). An “uncommitted” attitude is expressed by the following driver’s criticism of the way cabdrivers are portrayed in the movie Signal 7, which had been filmed in one of the garages where we both worked:

Seth: It was depressing. For one thing, they should have used real drivers instead of actors pretending to be drivers. And just the way they did it was

¹ See also Kolsky 1998.
depressing, it was not an accurate representation. You shouldn't present these guys as “cab drivers” instead of as just someone who drives a cab. That's what bugs me so frequently is that it’s always about “the cabdriver,” like that's all there is—well there's more to me, I do other things. This is just what I do to make a living.2

Seth feels that being a cabdriver is only part of his identity, and that the term “cabdriver” reduces him, and other drivers, to only parts of themselves. His attitude of independence in relation to his job is expressed by being simply “someone who drives a cab.” In Halifax, however, Kimberly Berry encountered this same distinction made by drivers, but with a very different implication:

New drivers are initiated into the taxi community. They are instructed on work strategy and told there is a distinct culture among taxi drivers. The more experienced drivers will tell rookies that there is an important distinction between themselves, taxi drivers, and people who drive taxis. To a rookie driver this advice seems cryptic at first, but after a few months behind the wheel one rookie driver discovers that: A taxi driver has a way of life. [Some]one who drives taxi has an occupation. One [the taxi driver] is a subculture the other is a job. (Berry 1995)

According to these drivers, cabdriving is not just a job, but a distinct culture, at least for those who are “initiated.” James Henslin noted that although there is a large turnover among cabdrivers, with a large percentage of new drivers in particular quitting or being fired after a very brief tenure, nevertheless there was a constancy to the way cabdrivers spoke, dressed, and acted, indicating that an “effective process of socialization

2 At the beginning of Signal 7, a cabbie explains himself to his passenger: “I was on my way to Los Angeles to become a big actor... yeah, stopped off here to make a few bucks so I wouldn’t have to scuffle around down there and I’ve been driving a cab ever since. It seems like forever.” Although he continues to dream of becoming an actor, by the end of the movie he realizes, “I’m just a fucking cabdriver, that’s all I am” (Nilsson 1983).
of recruits into the culture must exist” (Henslin 1967a: 38). Henslin found the most important component whereby the “values, attitudes, and beliefs” of the cabdriving occupational culture were transmitted and reinforced was through what he called “before and after work groups,” the congregations of drivers who would gather outside of work to gossip, complain, and tell stories (ibid.: 20). As in Henslin’s St. Louis, interactions among cabdrivers in driver lounges, in cafes and bars, and at cabstands are the social focus of many a San Franciscan driver’s day, relieving the solitude of the job and fostering a sense of solidarity among drivers. Through these work group interactions, which in the terminology of occupational folklore are called “cultural scenes” (McCarl 1986: 72), new drivers are introduced to the significant terms of the discourse by cabdrivers about cabdriving, and are alerted to the important sets of skills, strategies, and tactics they will have to master in order to become successful drivers. The one significant difference since Henslin’s time is due to the advent of the mobile phone, by which drivers are now able to stay in touch with each other throughout the entire day, and with which new drivers can consult cabbie friends instantly for advice or directions.

The example in the previous chapter, in which the new driver was instructed on how to tip, was an example of this sort of socialization in action. It is not only new drivers who are instructed through such interaction, however. In the following example, a relatively experienced driver is reprimanded by his more cautious fellow:

**Iz:** I made this arrangement with a drug dealer. He was in my cab, he wanted to do some kind of trade, I didn’t want none of that. But I got his cell number, so when I get my phone, I can give him deals for like, quick trips to Santa Rosa, all over the place. He says he’s gonna be going all the time, and he wants a regular cab, you know, to keep it quiet.
Jay: You gotta be careful with that stuff though. Don’t get involved. I think people told me, like that was how that last driver got shot.
Iz: Uh-huh.
Jay: Shit went down, they took off, and then guys came after them and shot them. They crashed and got shot.
Iz: That’s a good point.
Jay: No matter how good a ride it is, you’re not making enough money off this guy, unless he’s paying you real good, to take the kind of risks he’s taking. I mean real good, not a hundred-fifty bucks to Santa Rosa. And there’s getting busted anyway.
Iz: No, that’s a good point. I hadn’t thought about that.
Jay: Besides, the guy wants to trade you? He doesn’t got any money!
(both laugh)

Most driver discussions, of course, are over much less underworldly topics. What this example does point to, nevertheless, is the necessity for new drivers of learning how to size up passengers and situations, an interpretive skill learned partly on the job and partly from attention to the stories told by other drivers.

Part of driver training, both in the preliminary classes and when first being shown around the garage by a manager or cashier, is composed of normative statements regarding behavior. This is backed up by statements in company newsletters, posted around garages, and sometimes repeated over the air by dispatchers: incitements to play the radio, dress well, and be nice to clients. Whether these norms are adopted, however, depends most of all on the work culture of the drivers in the company as it is communicated in work groups and through experience.

The two companies I worked at, for instance, had strong radio-playing cultures in which drivers believed that their company had the “best” radio, and that they were the “best” radio players. This despite the fact that drivers, and business, tend to float from company to company. The competitive radio competence drivers were expected to have
was displayed at each company through different norms of behavior. At the first company I worked for, drivers delighted in racing each other, cutting each other off on the street, stealing each other’s orders, even stealing each other’s place in the gas line at the garage. All of this took place in the spirit of competitive fun, and to fail consistently to get even with other drivers in these momentary games was to mark oneself as a “greenhorn,” a novice. At the second company I worked for, none of this behavior was really tolerable. Although drivers were competitive, and anxious to display their skills to one another, a certain amount of etiquette and decorum was expected by drivers of each other. Drivers were expected to be quick—on the streets and mentally—but were also expected to display a respect for each other by knowing when to back off. It was the “hotshot” driver who by racing to orders, stealing loads, and cutting in line marked himself as boorish and inexperienced, not yet fully socialized as a real cabbie. At both companies the way drivers displayed competence and company culture was shaped more by their interaction with each other than by the ideological statements issuing from the management.

The service drivers give to customers is also shaped by the norms inculcated through workplace culture. In this regard, “little old ladies” play an iconic role as the quintessentially needy customer who needs the cabdriver’s help. Although many

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3 This situation degenerated with the economy after December 2000.

4 They may even be dispatched as “LOLs,” e.g. “Kaiser Geary for an LOL.”
younger drivers detest such fares, more experienced drivers generally insist that helping
little old ladies is the mark of a real cabdriver:

**Jake:** I can’t stand this new generation of cab drivers that don’t even open
the door for, I see them let the lady look like they were gonna trip outa the
door! They don’t even help them out! And then you get these people,
when I do open the door and they can’t believe you’re opening the door,
“Oh you don’t have to get out and open the door, no no no! Most cab
drivers don’t do it anyway!” I say, “Well I have to do it, that’s the only
exercise I get....” Uh, you know these guys are really bad, they don’t open
the door, and they don’t help ladies with packages, you know?

This disregard for little old ladies is seen as part of an overall decline in the
quality of cabdrivers, due both to generational change and changes in the structure of the
industry; nevertheless, it is also a hallmark of new drivers, who have not yet learnt how to
behave as proper cabdrivers:

**Jake:** We hear it in the garage room all the time, “You should help little
old ladies,” you know? But lot of them uh, new drivers especially, they’re
all hyper and they’re hot to trot to make money, make illegal turns, make
left turns at Broadway/Stockton, and honk their horn, driving like a
maniac, you know, those are the ones that are *weeded out*. You know, they
don’t last long. But, after you’ve been driving at least two, three years, at
least two years, you know, you begin to change, if you don’t change after
that you’re beyond help. Because a lot of drivers after two years, they
start helping little old ladies.

Professional demeanor and behavior is a source of pride for experienced drivers:

**Doc:** And little old ladies, I love them. They ask me up for tea a lot of
times. “Would you like to come up and have some tea?” I say “Noo, I
have to go to work...” “Can I call you back again?” ... Oh yeah, I love em
because they’re not gonna be here too much longer, and I like to give them
the respect, everything like that. “Oh, you know, the other drivers, they
don’t even help me! What’s your name?” I says, I says, “Well, I’m a
“... And it makes me feel good, doing things like that, because other people see me doing it, they say “Well hey, there’s a good cab driver!” Instead of thinking bout, “There’s a cab driver, watch out for that cab driver!” They say “Hey, there’s a good, that’s a good cab driver.” Because a lot of people, they smile, when they see me helping with the ladies to the curb and to the door, it makes me feel good. “Hey, that was nice,” I say, “Yep, that’s professional...” and I get in my cab and take off....

“Professional” service is seen as what marks the competent cabbie off from the rabble—the cabdriver from those who just drive cabs. It is part of an awareness “real” cabbies possess of their surroundings, as well as of the meanings their behavior give off to those around them.

Seth: You know, I'm always aware of the flow of traffic around me, so I always pull over as much as possible, so I’m not blocking the street. I also get out to help the elderly people into the cab. Sometimes I pretty much pick em up and throw em into the cab! (laughs) I don’t just sit there and, you know, let them struggle to get in!

**Gender and Cabdriving**

As seems to be the case in most other cities, the San Francisco cab trade is overwhelmingly, but not completely, a male occupation. The numbers of female drivers are small though not insignificant. Berry (1997) notes that its public nature, perception of dangerousness, and association with the streets and automobility all have marked cabdriving as a masculine domain in the minds both of the public and of drivers themselves. Women who breach this masculine domain are interpreted as both morally and sexually threatening. For this reason, although women have driven cabs in many major cities for much of the Twentieth century, they are constantly encountering
reactions of surprise over their very existence from passengers, the media, and even male cabdrivers.

**Lotta:** Well, you know, I guess at night, women out there at night as drivers, people have some strange ideas about you. Why would a woman be out there at night driving a cab?

It is not unusual for the media to sensationalize the image of the female cabdriver. Norman Beattie describes the magazine cover for a straightforward article about a woman cabdriver (Ball 1999):

The cover itself is a bizarre flight of fancy – its relevance to the story is obscure, at least to me. The scene seems to be set in hell, the background lit by orange and yellow flames. A taxi (Chev Caprice) is doing an Evel Knievel jump off a cliff through the ring of an enormous biological symbol for female (cross with a circle underneath). In the foreground below the cliff, five silhouetted figures are waving spears tipped with the biological symbol for male (a circle with an arrow pointing northeast). The cover captions: “Are you talkin’ to SHE?” and “Taxi Driver: A Chicky Business.”

An aspect of the cabdriver’s image which further complicates the experiences of women drivers is its entanglement with that of another category of street worker, the prostitute. The story goes that a driver is taking a woman and her young daughter through a bad part of town in the evening. They pass a number of scantily-clad women standing on street-corners. The young girl asks her mother, “What are those ladies doing?” Her mother tells her, “They’re waiting for their children to come home from

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5 Ball’s story, Beattie’s observations, and a reproduction of the cover can be found at [www.taxi-l.org/uptown.htm](http://www.taxi-l.org/uptown.htm).
school.” The cabbie, hard-nosed and a smart-ass, smirks and says over his shoulder, “Come on, lady, why don’t you tell her the truth? They’re prostitutes!” A heavy silence settles over the cab as the mother glares at the back of the cabbie’s head. Finally the young girl asks, in a quavering voice, “Mommy, do prostitutes have children?” “Of course they do, dear,” her mother replies. “Where do you think cabdrivers come from?”

Such associations are not merely based on the character of the minority of cabdrivers who mix the two trades of the street. A cabdriver not only moves through the liminal urban space of the streets, as often as not in the dark of night, but allows strangers into his or her interior space—the cab—in exchange for money. Cabs at times are used by passengers for trysts, for affairs, by johns looking for prostitutes, or even by prostitutes performing their services. Innocent as any given driver may be of such activity, the image of the cabdriver-as-whore is a resource for discursive antagonism which may be deployed by malignant types against both male and female drivers alike.

Well, cab drivers are scum bags. Now I know you’re a scum bag. Worse. You’re a whore. A pimp and a whore under one roof.... Cabbies take the worst shit a man can take and get paid for it. Mercenary killers are higher on the ladder. So are whores when it comes to selling your ass. (Wanio 1996)

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6 This is supposedly a true story, according to the hard-nosed, smart-ass cabdriver who told it to me.


8 Townsend (2003: 53) relates that prostitutes would tell cabbies to go “Once around Hyde Park.” It should be noted that most drivers consider prostitutes undesirable fares, for a number of reasons, the most prominent being their reputation for not tipping.
Vidich, as usual, is adept at bringing out the scurrilous aspects of the driver’s reputation:

Indeed the hacks, like the common whore, relinquished their maiden names when they hit the street and began selling their souls for the dollar. The image of the common whore was an obscure and dubious achievement of the profession. (Vidich 1976: 5)

Women drivers, though, bear the brunt of this in practice:

**Lotta:** I had another one like that, once from that union bar on Harrison, the Seafarers, or something? And he wanted me to take, that was before the ‘89 earthquake, and he wanted me to take the freeway and get off there, in North Beach, and he, he started out saying, “All you female drivers are just hookers in disguise!” Oh, all this bullshit.

Oakland driver Jeanette O’Connell wrote of some of the lines she developed to deal with such attitudes:

Driving a cab can be dangerous, most men assuming that if the price is right I might suddenly turn into a prostitute. At least once a day somebody will say, usually men, “What’s a pretty girl like you doing driving a cab?” “I’m doing this job because I need to pay for things like rent, food, etc.” They drool sympathy, but don’t understand why I bother and isn’t getting married easier. “I’m driving a cab in order to get my husband through school.” They like this answer best. They understand it, accept it, and aren’t at all concerned with my welfare. (O’Connell 1975: 54)³

³ Much of O’Connell’s article recounts the aftermath of a rape and the struggle over safety issues between women drivers and recalcitrant management and union leaders. The workplace environment exposed by O’Connell is analyzed more fully by Berry (1997).
As Cynthia Boyd argues, women drivers need not only to know the strategies and tactics used by all cabdrivers, but to develop a further set of tactical responses for dealing with verbal and sexual harassment from passengers, drivers, and the general public. Both Boyd (1997) and Berry (1997) describe a number of ways that women drivers show that they can “hack it.” Berry concludes that although women drivers may adopt the masculine culture of the taxi industry, “often identifying themselves first as taxi drivers and then, as women,” women cab drivers can “adeptly navigate the contested terrain of their masculine work-culture” and achieve the level of control over themselves, their passengers, and their cab, which is essential to driving (Berry 1997). Drivers of both sexes thrive or fail depending on their ability to keep their wits about them and maintain a sense of control over the interactions within their cab.

Trackability

As an interaction between what are often complete strangers, a cab ride entails a significant amount of taken-for-granted trust on the part of both passengers and drivers. Both parties must share certain preconceptions about how the transaction is to proceed and how each side is to behave. To a large extent the ability of this transaction to be reenacted smoothly in almost all instances is dependent on the dissemination of the image of the cab, and the concept of the cab ride, in urban and media culture. Although passengers have rarely met with any explicit instructions on how to take cabs, they almost always have an idea of what to expect. For this reason, drivers can trust that most passengers will at least be capable of behaving correctly. Cab drivers in San Francisco,
as in many other cities, are distinguished by the wearing of badges, as well as by the presence on their vehicles of numerous regulated markings which indicate that they are an officially sanctioned driver of an officially sanctioned vehicle. Passengers can presume that such a person is in fact a cab driver and most likely knows how to behave as such in the cab-ride transaction.

A further element which enables the cab ride to take place is what Henslin (1968) calls “trackability.” Trackability involves the cues by which one party in the interaction is able to determine how much trust to invest in the other; it can be largely summed up as an indication of where one is coming from and where one is going. “Where one is coming from” establishes that a person has the prerequisite understandings and will play the role expected; thus the fact that a cabbie is behind the wheel of a cab is part of where she is coming from—the cab garage, a previous fare, etc. Additionally if the cab has been called for through the company, the fact that a cab shows up when requested is a further indication for the passenger that the driver can be trusted (Henslin 1968: 154). “Where one is going to,” implies, in the driver’s case, continued trackability after the transaction is completed. The cabdriver’s badge number, as well as the number of the cab, can be taken down by the passenger—and because the driver is going to remain a trackable cabdriver in the future, the customer can trust that she will act properly in the current instance, in order to avoid the future effects of customer complaints.

Regarding passengers, “trackability” involves a much more subtle and involved sort of information. The points of origin and destination tell drivers a lot about their passengers, such as their likely social and economic status, as well as past and future
activities, the passenger being, through his pickup and dropoff locations, tied into and interpreted through the driver’s socio-spatio-temporal map of the city and the movements, activities, and qualities of its inhabitants. Fares rarely appear wholly out of nowhere, since every part of the city has a character and a level of trust associated with it; if the driver is confused about where a passenger is coming from, she will make efforts to find out before establishing trust. Likewise, a fare who is evasive or vague about his destination is considered dangerous and untrustworthy (ibid.: 148). Drivers are coached to interpret frequent changes in destination as a sign that the passenger is trying to disorient the driver and/or find an optimal location in which to rob the driver.\textsuperscript{10} The importance of destination for passenger trackability is underlined in the following quote from the pamphlet \textit{Taxicab Safety Tips} put out by the United Taxicab Workers Safety Committee:

8) Beware of passengers who give vague directions, or change destinations enroute. Find out exactly where you’re going from the start. If the passenger changes destinations and you sense danger, tell him/her politely that you’ll go as far as the first destination. (UTWSC nd)

Even if the vague fare does not have ulterior motives, his lack of clarity is untrustworthy because he is not trackable; also, he is challenging the driver’s all-important control over both interior and exterior space, which is discussed next.

\textsuperscript{10} This criminal strategy can be confused, however, with the strategy of “destination vagueness,” which is
Interior and Exterior Space

1) Know the City. Learn the areas where crime is most prevalent and be extremely cautious in these areas. Familiarize yourself with the location of all police stations....
2) Turn to greet and make eye contact with your passengers when they first enter your cab. Be confident, alert, show you’re in control. Criminals target drivers who look like easy marks. (UTWSC nd)

The above quote shows the importance of two kinds of space in cabdriving: the interior space of the cab, and the exterior space of the city through which it moves. In interaction with passengers, drivers attempt to be “in control” of both kinds of space—in fact, control in one is closely related to control in the other. “Control” may be a misleading term—although the driver may be said to literally control the cab in the act of driving it, he rarely can be said to actually control the passenger, and certainly not to control the city itself. However, the term “control” is used here for two reasons: first, it is in colloquial usage, as in the above quote; and second, it pervades sociological discussions of the driver-passenger encounter. In the work of Fred Davis and James Henslin, the lack of control drivers experience over their daily trajectory gives impetus to their attempts to exert control over interactions with passengers, for instance in predicting or influencing the amount tipped. In other words, an interactional “sense of control” articulates wider issues of identity, competence, and social status. The “sense of control” or feeling of being “in control” sought after by drivers refers to a setting in which passengers follow expected norms of behavior and do not challenge drivers’ competence, performance, or status during the ride.

frequently employed by fares travelling to marginal destinations (see Chapter Six).
Cabdriving is a dangerous profession, literally, but also figuratively. Drivers make money by allowing strangers—passengers—into their vehicles and obeying their directions. This open and servile position is probably a significant factor in the low social status of cabdrivers, and poses a psychological danger to the driver’s self-esteem as well. Drivers respond to this problem by cultivating strategies for the presentation of self and for maintaining control over the passenger/driver interaction.

**Tom:** I’m naturally a shy kind of guy, but when you’re driving you get your “cabdriver mask.” You say and do things in a way you maybe wouldn’t when you’re not driving. You’re more aggressive, less self-conscious. You're a hunter, you're smart.

This “cabdriver mask” was described by Henslin:

...cabbies frequently develop a veneer of hardness, an outward crust which helps deflect painful threats to the self. This veneer manifests itself in the commonly perceived belligerency of cab drivers—the shaking fist and the cursing mouth, or the “Don't-tell-me-how-to-get-there” attitude. These are part of the cabbie's attempt to maintain control over threatening passengers and a life situation over which he actually has little control. (Henslin 1974: 70)

One use for such a presentation is in dealing with prejudiced passengers:

**Taoufik:** If you get anybody who is racist, you just have to answer back it’s like the same way, as them, like tough. Not like start a fight, but show them that you are not just going to say yes, and let them do that, say that. Show that is your cab, and they often will be quiet after that. If not, they can get other cab.

The work of maintaining a face to present to the public may require some offstage time as well:
Tom: So I’d come up with ways to get away from anger... maybe get out of the cab and walk around—or even close all the windows and scream for a little bit. This works great—I don’t think I’ve done this for a while but I used to do it—just close all the windows and scream and then open the windows and all that anger would flow out, right out the windows. Then I’d go around the corner, and someone would flag me and get in, and I’d be all smiling and happy, you know, and little did they know that there’d been a raving lunatic in that cab just a few moments ago.

The self presented by the driver is not independent of the appearance and behavior of the passengers, a different face being presented to different sectors of the riding public.

Seth: Some people... some people, they want to talk about the weather and that’s it. That’s the extent of their life.... Each and every person that gets in is in a different state, you know, they’re upset, or happy, or elated, their girlfriend just broke up with them, I don’t know, it could be anything, they’re hung over, they’re late for work, they’re thinking about their finances, you have to feel out each situation, so sometimes it’s not possible to even talk...

The shifts in driver behavior to adapt to the need to present different selves to different riding publics may be manifested temporally, since different types of passengers predominate at different periods of the day:

Jake: ... the night drivers are fast drivers, you see them drive up and down the hills to the wharf, they drive like maniacs. Really. The day drivers are the ones that drive slower. They're more calmer. They're driving the little old ladies! At night you got all these bar hoppers with young yuppie kids, Union Street types, you drive faster.

The cabdriver’s presentation of self is an important facet of the way cabbies seek to maintain control in the cab and over their interactions with customers. The driver may
use “professional,” friendly, or alternatively, insouciant, aggressive, or taciturn behavior as a way of presenting a self towards the customer (and the surrounding public); the driver may draw on cultural stereotypes of the cabdriver as wily, irascible, wise, or not-to-be-messed with, or, they may prefer to avoid being seen as a “driver,” and seek to interact with their customers on a more personalized basis. On one level these differing strategies correlate with Simmelian modes of sociability (Toiskallio 2000; Simmel 1950: 409-24). Strategies of self-presentation vary widely from driver to driver but the underlying motivation for all is the presentation of a self who is in control of both the interior space of the cab and the exterior space of the city. This control is to be trusted and is not to be challenged. Actual interaction will usually be much more relaxed than this terminology of “control” may suggest, but its importance shines through on occasions on which the driver feels it is threatened, as will be clear below when stories of violence are discussed. The cabdriver presents herself, and prefers to be treated as, an independent and knowledgeable guide hired to take one through the city—which is why many cabbies prefer not to be called “chauffeur,” which is a kind of servant.

The importance of a sense of control extends to the exterior urban space through which the cab passes. The driver asserts a certain amount of power through his control of the vehicle, being the final decision-maker concerning routes and speed, as well as having the ability to stop and refuse to take a fare further. There is nothing socially

\[11\] See below.

\[12\] Its close relationship with exterior space means that interior space-control differs from interactional “preserves” as described by Goffman (1971: 28-41).
remarkable, however, about this ability, since most fares are also competent drivers in their own right. Drivers can thus gain little prestige from the act of driving, unless

...wishing to impress on the fare that theirs is a real service requiring special talent and skill, [they] resort to darting nimbly in and out of traffic, making neatly executed U-turns and leaping smartly ahead of other cars when the traffic light changes. (Davis 1959: 160)\textsuperscript{13}

More significantly, however, the driver will demonstrate control over exterior space through asserting knowledge of the city in general and the proper route in particular. Although new drivers often learn their way by asking it of passengers, and drivers faced with multiple routes may defer to the passenger the choice of which to take, most often experienced drivers wish to hear nothing more from their passengers in terms of directions than their ultimate location. Once this is delivered, the process of getting there should be left entirely in the hands of the driver, unless the driver solicits the opinions or knowledge of the passenger. Of course, in many instances, the passenger is equally or even better aware of the best route to take; however, the driver can usually invoke a deeper knowledge of the city in general, or a more up-to-the-minute awareness of the spatiotemporal conditions of the streets and intersections through which the cab is to pass.

The sense of the driver’s control has the further benefit of making most passengers more satisfied with the service. Toufik related how when he was new and did

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Goffman (1956:30-4) on “dramatic realization.”
not know how to get somewhere, it was better to give the passenger the sense that he was deferring to their judgment, rather than to let them see that he simply didn’t know:

**Toufik:** And more and more you learn how to tell the customer you are new, and “Just show me your way,” you know? Not like this... you know, you can ask with the smart way, it’s like, “Which way you prefer,” you know? If he says, like, “Oh yeah, okay you choose, you are the driver,” I— “No, I'm not the driver, you know better than me, because you do it this way everyday, and maybe I do it once a while, so you know better than me.” Oh, they're like, “Okay! Usually I take this way, I go like this,” then you get your way without telling them you are new driver.

Now that he is more experienced, however, Toufik has less patience with passengers who try to tell him how to get around.

**Toufik:** Yeah, today even I have experience and everything, I know the city better than before but still some customers, like, surprise or shock you with the way they like to go—like last two weeks, someone, I don't know, it’s like I was going this regular way from Stanyan and Geary, they wanna go to Nineteenth and Lawton, so usually we take Stanyan down to Fell, Fell to Eighteenth or something, go up, and the guy starts screaming, when I got to Fulton and Stanyan he say, “You wanna make city tour for me?” I said why? “You should go down like Anza or something to the Park Presidio and then you cross from there!”

Then another day I took a customer, it’s like, from North Beach to the airport, he said, “Why don't take Jones down to Six?” But it was in my mind to take, like, Columbus to Montgomery and go all the way down, which is shorter, you know? Sometimes the customer, they are not right, you know? They give you a hard time, you know? They believe the end maybe sometimes, when they see the meter is less than before.\(^\text{14}\)

Worse even than those passengers who contest the route are those who try to direct the driver, without first ascertaining whether the driver in fact needs to be directed.

\(^{14}\) The second example depends very much on the time of day.
Whereas the first sort may have a valid complaint, the second sort are directly challenging the driver’s control of the cab and the city—in many cases, intentionally, as is most evident with those who are not otherwise interacting with the cabdriver:

Jake: And then, you know, it’s so crazy, the way that some of these business men, or some of these ladies, they’re talking on the cell phone all the way, like they’re talking for half an hour, or something, you’re driving them somewhere way out in the boonies, right? They’re on the phone with the stockbroker, right? They’re talking, talking, talking, talking, and “Uh driver, turn left here,” and then “Blah blah, that was twenty percent of uh, Driver, turn right” – you know, how could they be talking about the stock market and then at the one split second tell you to turn left? You know, you drive all the way across town! And you’re just about to turn left, and he says “turn left” – he’s got the time to say “turn left!”

Jake has driven a cab for thirty years (unlike Toufik, who has driven for three), and there is really no point in telling him how to get anywhere in the Bay Area, much less San Francisco. Both drivers, in any event, share similar disdain for passengers who try to direct them around; this disdain is not rooted simply in their confidence in knowing the city better than the passenger, but in their need to demonstrate control over the cab and the city during the driver/passenger interaction. There is no more effective way of telling off a cabdriver than to insinuate that he doesn’t know his way around—or worse, that he is lost. You can tell a cabbie to go to Hell; just don’t tell him how to get there.

Monetary Calculation as an Interactional Strategy

Simmel spoke of the attitudes adopted by urban individuals in their attempts to cope with the merciless impersonality of the metropolis. A variation of the blasé attitude Simmel described is based on a focus on the monetary aspect of any relationship: “it asks
for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How Much?” (Simmel 1950: 410). For Simmel, the blasé attitude reflected a mentality in which the calculating logic of the money economy has been “completely internalized” (ibid.: 412) as a replacement for more personalized, pre-urban forms of sociality which are impossible in the city. In regards to interaction in the taxicab it is best seen as a strategy adopted by drivers (and potentially by customers as well) to maintain a detachment from the interaction as well as a sense of control. The calculating approach which reduces each passenger to a “fare,” a monetary amount plus a tip, allows drivers to evaluate and judge passengers according to “how much” they profit the driver, a reckoning in which all other qualities of both the individual and the interaction are pushed to the back. Whatever happens during the ride, the exchange of money at the end quits both parties of any further obligations; for the driver, this enables a sense of control during the ride as all interaction is considered to be part of a process leading to payment. The driver attempts to select profitable passengers and to influence the amount of their tip (Davis 1959); passengers can be retroactively classified according to what amount of money the driver ended up making off them—a seven dollar fare, a twelve dollar fare, a thirty dollar fare, etc. In that sum the whole worth of the passenger to the driver—and thus in the cab interaction—is expressed. The calculating driver is freed as well from personal involvement in the vicissitudes of cab interaction, concerned only that he or she

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15 cf. Vaz (1955: 48): “For the taxi-driver, persons lose their identity as humans, and are reckoned with and evaluated by the ‘objective measurable’ interest, money.”
gets paid in the end. Some examples of this attitude at work will be seen in later parts of this chapter.

Passengers

As with other aspects of the cab industry, the experience of being a passenger has elements which show a continuity stretching back to the day of the hackney carriages, which might make it fruitful to briefly position this discussion of passengers historically. Passengers today may recognize aspects of the experience described by satirist Ned Ward, in this account of a hackney coach ride originally published in 1700:

Our weary Limbs being rather more Tir’d than Refresh’d, by the Thumps and Tosses of our ill-contriv’d Engine, as unfit to move upon a Rugged Pavement, as a Gouty Sinner is to halt o’er London-Bridge with his boots on. For my part, said I, if this be the Pleasure of Riding in a Coach, thro’ London-streets, may those that like it enjoy it, for it has so loosen’d my Joyns in so short a Passage, that I shall scarce recover my former Strength this Fortnight; and indeed, of the two, I would rather chuse to cry Mouse-Traps for a Livelyhood, than be oblig’d every day to be drag’d about Town under such uneasiness; and if the Qualities Coaches are as troublesome as this, I would not be bound to do their Penance for the Estates. (Ward 1924: 151-2)

Ward’s companion replies that he must learn the Art of “Humouring the Coaches Motion,” which he lists among the qualities of “our true French-Bred Gentlemen” (ad loc.). The modern-day rider of urban cabs may be gratified to hear from Ward’s friend that the art of being a passenger is nearly as old as, and shares the French origin of, the cab itself. What Ward shares with the modern-day cab passenger is the experience of self-imposed helplessness in which one places oneself at the mercy of an unfamiliar
driver who, although nominally providing a service, must be trusted to safely control the movement, speed, and trajectory of the vehicle through the city, the passenger often having no more than the thin thread of “trackability” on which to establish the difference between transportation and hostage-taking. To make up for the uncertainty involved in the interaction, passengers may develop ways of self-presentation as well as interactional tactics for establishing a greater amount of control over the cab-riding experience. One way this is achieved in the recounting by passengers of cab-riding experiences is through the repetition and accentuation of the uncomfortableness and reckless velocity of the vehicle, as well as the craziness and rudeness of its driver. For some passengers, this can be summed up with a reference to the fact that the driver is an immigrant—a social inferior and an outsider, unlearned in the proper ways of speaking or interacting, not to mention driving.

Despite its physical and social discomforts, the hackney coach played an important role in providing horse-drawn mobility to a much larger percentage of the populace than could afford coaches of their own. In the streets of Paris and London, this meant there was a new line of social demarcation in regards to mode of transportation: instead of the division being between the nobility and the commons, the new distinction was between those who could afford to hire coaches and those who could only walk. The hackney passenger was thus one who by their mode of transport was distinguished from the pedestrian masses, and was able by means of this to make inroads upon the status of the better classes. Although most hack passengers were prosperous, there was an air of the upstart about them, and individuals of a low social character could ape the
appearances of their betters by hiring a coach for the night. Ward paints a portrait of an encounter between the pedestrian masses and some dubious ladies (but for Ward all ladies are dubious) who have attempted to distinguish themselves from the crowd by riding in a hackney coach, as well as by holding masks over their faces:

As we were thus Rambling thro’ the Fair, a Coach overtakes us, wherein were a couple of more Tolerable Punks, whose Silken Temptations, and more Modest Deportment, gave them a Just Title to a higher Price than the White-Apron Bang-Tails, who were Sweating in the Crowd, could pretend to. An Arch Country Bumpkin having pick’d up a Frog in some of the Adjacent Ditches, peeping into the Coach, as he pass’d by, and being very much Affronted that they hid their Faces with their Masks, Adsblood, says he, you look as Ugly in those black Vizards as my Toad here; e’en get you all together, tossing it into the Coach: At which the fright’ned Lady Birds Squeak’d out open’d the Coach Doors, and leap’d out amongst the Throng to shun the loathsome Companion.

The coach driver, however, thinks the ladies are trying to run out on the fare, and thus we are provided with evidence that even in that distant time drivers were ready to deal forcefully with passengers in order to maintain control of the situation:

...the Coachman ... knowing nothing of the Matter, and seeing his Fare out of the Coach, thought they were about to bilk him, alights out of his Box, and in a great Fury seizes one of them by the Scarf, accosting them in these Words: Z--nds you B--ches, what would you bilk me? Pay me my fare, or by Gog and Magog you shall feel the smart of my Whipcord before you go a step further. The poor Harlots endeavored to satisfie their Angry Charioteer, that they were Women of more Honour than to attempt so ill an Action; telling him, as well as their Surprize would give them leave, the occasion of their Lighting, which would not convince the Cholerick Whore-Driver, who refus’d either to quit his Hold, or suffer them to go again into the Coach, till they had paid him Eighteen-pence, which he demanded as his Fare....
The passengers turn out not to have the money to pay, and are obliged to give him a scarf as collateral; the driver’s further precautions in the matter are an insight into the sort of tactics hackney drivers had to be prepared for in the Seventeenth century:

So that rather than to stand a Vapulation, one of them took Notice of his Number, and gave him her Scarf as a Pledge; notwithstanding which, he refus’d to carry them back, I suppose, for fear they might call upon some Bully or other, that might make him deliver up his Security, without any other Redemption than a Thrash’d Jacket. Thus were the unfortunate Madams dismounted of their Coach, and were forc’d to Mob it on Foot with the rest of their Sisters. (Ward 1924: 174-5)

Their failure to regain their driver’s trust results in a loss of status, as they are dumped back into the crowd of commoners.

At the higher end of the social scale, to ride a hackney was a black mark, a characteristic of the *nouveaux riches* rather than of the truly upper class. The potential embarrassment for the upwardly mobile of being seen in a hired coach is brought out in this description from Paris of the 1780s:

When a man, rich in intelligence, but poor in pocket, leaves a drawing-room where those with carriages still chatter, and crosses the courtyard, its clean flagstones flecked with foam from the bits of idle champing horses, he must slip, blushing, between the motionless wheels to where his old creaking *fiacre* or hackney coach waits out in the street, and there in its ramshackle carcase hide his shame. If the lamps of emerging gilded chariots light up his empty vehicle, no bows are exchanged; he would not dare from his ignominious depths to salute those passing ladies, with whom six minutes back he talked so freely. His coachman’s moustaches are enough to damn even a *fiacre* hired by the hour; and damn its passenger too, were he a Plato or Homer. (Mercier 1999: 168)
Although there are presumably few passengers today who suffer quite such Dostoyevskyan angst on account of their drivers’ moustaches, there remains an upper limit to the social acceptability of the taxicab, as well as a lower limit to the ranks of passengers who can afford it.

Reference is sometimes made by drivers and regulators to the existence or non-existence of a cab-riding “culture” in a given city. The owner-driver quoted below breaks ranks pretty radically with his fellow drivers by advocating an increase in the number of cabs in order to improve the cab-riding culture:

**Ted:** But so what? It’ll be better. What about all the new cabs? Well, they gotta do that, they’re trying to get to where it’s one of those cities like New York, London, the big cities of the world, where they have people in cabs rather than driving.

The same driver, speaking as a frequent passenger, outlines the financial advantages which motivate urban dwellers to use cabs:

**Ted:** You save a lot of money taking a cab, rather than driving. You know, the Triple A estimates it costs you twelve thousand dollars a year to keep a car in San Francisco, and well, I pay maybe five or six thousand in cab fare? I’m already saving the money just by doing that, just by taking cabs I make a lot of money instead of driving. But, people are stupid.¹⁶

Attempts have been made to substantiate these cab-riding cultures statistically. Based on a survey of San Franciscan registered voters in 2001 in which respondents characterized how often they took taxis, 17% of respondents could be classified as

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¹⁶ i.e., people who drive their own cars when they should be taking cabs.
frequent riders (once a week or more), 24% as occasional riders (once a month or more),
and 57% as infrequent riders (riding a few times a year or less) (Nelson/Nygaard 2001: C13-4). Surveys done in New York are not exactly comparable in terms, but indicate that
the core of frequent users is larger, and that the proportion of infrequent users amounts to
no more than a third; “Manhattan adults hail a cab an average of 100 times a year”
(Schaller 2003: 6). A core of experienced and knowledgeable regular users is essential
not only to profitability but to the sanity of the driver, who can depend on such customers
to help make the transaction smooth and pleasant for both parties.\footnote{17}

Like their drivers, motivated to maintain a sense of control, passengers deploy a
number of interactional tactics during the course of the ride. However, passengers are a
much more diverse group than drivers, and whereas the multiplicity of fronts presented
by drivers can be interpreted as ways of maintaining control, the interactional styles of
passengers are not governed by such a regular set of institutional concerns. The
interactional motivations of passengers in general are thus less accessible to insights
gained through participant observation. It is perhaps for this reason that the Simmel-
Goffman tradition in taxicab ethnography has focused on the logic of interaction as it
determines the types of actions available to passengers in taxicabs, rather than in seeking
out the discourse of passengers themselves on this issue. It is indeed questionable
whether there could be said to be an equivalent discourse of passengers on interaction in
taxicabs, since most passengers do not interact with each other as such, and conversations
on the topic outside of the cab itself are relatively infrequent and scattered.

\footnote{17 For a caveat to this, see the section on tipping below.}
Thus, enlarging on the insights of Davis (1959), Henslin constructs a chart of four interactional styles available to passengers based on the variables of whether they interact more than minimally with the driver, and whether they accept the driver as a “person,” rather than as an extension of the steering wheel; these are “full person treatment” (interaction, acceptance); “partial person treatment” (acceptance, but no interaction); “rejection of person treatment” (interaction without acceptance); and “non-person treatment” (neither interaction nor acceptance) (Henslin 1967a: 195-202).

Toiskallio delves further into the driver-passenger interaction. His scheme is based on Simmel’s metropolitan socialization strategies: intellectualization, the blasé attitude, reservedness, and individual distinction (Toiskallio 2000: 6). Based on the interplay of these strategies as adopted by drivers and passengers, Toiskallio delineates his own four-part typology: compensatory equality, the benevolent faking of equality, urban aesthetics, and ideal equality. The first two involve the passenger of either high or low status attempting to engage the driver on an equal level. The third involves driver and passenger unifying in taking the city through which they move as an object of discussion. The fourth type Toiskallio considers ideal in that it preserves distinct realms of control for both driver and passenger. The fare is the “King” and the driver is the “Captain;” thus, the passenger is accorded the proper status of privileged customer, and the driver retains unquestioned control of the vehicle (ibid.: 15-8). Some aspects of Toiskallio’s theory of “taxi-sociability” will be returned to at the end of this chapter.
Drivers have expected tips since the hackney days, as Ward crankily illustrates:

...we alighted and discharg’ed our Grumbling *Essedartus*, who stuck very close to our Backsides, and mutter’ed heavily, according to their old Custom, for t’other Six-Pence; till at last, moving us a little beyond our Patience, we gave an Angry Possitive Denial to his Unreasonable Importunities; and so parted with our Unconscionable *Carrion-Scourger*, who we found, like the rest of his Fraternity, had taken up the Miserly Immoral Rule, *viz. Never to be satisfied.*” (Ward 1924: 177)

Not all early passengers were as insensitive to the utility of a tip in smoothing interaction between cabbie and customer:

The secret of successful dealing with cabmen was whispered to me years ago by a wise man, and I have never had trouble since. “In addition to the legal fare,” said he, “give them twopence. It is not enough to corrupt them or make them harshly exorbitant with others; it is so small that you will not feel it; it shows the cabman that you wish him well, while it may, if you like, flatter you into a good opinion of yourself as a man who has generous impulses. If you give a cabman sixpence above his fare he knows you to be a fool and will probably demand a shilling; if you give him his just fare and twopence extra he recognizes a gentleman. (Lucas 1907: 22)

Fred Davis (1959: 161) first pointed out that cabdrivers distinguish between “regular cab users and non-cab users.” The first group are expected to know how to behave as passengers, by respecting the driver’s control, and most importantly, tipping; the second group are likely to err out of ignorance, unless instructed by the driver in the

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18 “the latter referred to as ‘jerks,’ ‘slobs,’ ‘yokels,’ ‘public transportation types,’ and a host of other derogatory terms” (ad loc.)
forms of propriety. The idea that those who use cabs the most are the best tippers is echoed by Henslin (1967a: 183-90) and is widespread among San Francisco drivers today. This unity is upset, however, by the experience of those who have driven in small cities. Karen (1962) and Trojan (1976) both report that their core of regulars do not tip as well as outsiders and tourists, whom Karen dubs “Transients.” In both cases it appears that much of the clientele of the small-city driver is composed of those at or below the social level of the cabdriver. Many of Karen’s passengers appear to have been domestic servants; Trojan lists his regular customers as “widows, elderly, non-drivers, working wives in one-car families, and working men who have lost their license to drive due to driving violations,” and adds that a significant amount of cab business in Eau Claire involves shuttling fares between downtown bars (Trojan 1976: 133). Unlike in large cities where a large proportion of riders are upper-middle class businesspersons and professionals, in small towns such people generally drive their own cars and leave the taxis to carless workers for whom “transportation costs [do] not represent a personalized special service but rather a basic need to be paid for at cost.” (ibid.: 134; emphasis original). As opposed to the tipping relationship, which is characteristic of large-city taxi-sociability in which the participants are often of differing social classes and rarely know each other beyond the doors of the cab, drivers and passengers in small cities are intricated in more extensive patterns of acquaintance and trust which may make the tipping relationship uncomfortable; in fact, far from receiving a tip, drivers often find
themselves subjected to requests for credit or even loans from their passengers (ibid.: 137).

Davis’ classic article, which first formulated so much of what has been taken up in subsequent treatments of the cabbie-passenger interaction, centered largely on the significance of the tip as a form of exchange appropriate to “the impersonality, the fleetingness, and the inconsequentiality of the cabdriver-fare relationship” (Davis 1974: 315). The typology of passengers as well as the battery of tactics deployed by drivers in attempting to predict or influence the tip fail, according to Davis, to remove the uncertainty at the heart of the exchange; they play an important role, however, in that they allow the driver to engage in “intellectual play” to relieve the drudgery of the job, as well as providing an illusion of control and comprehensibility to a situation in which neither is possible (Davis 1959: 164).

The institution of tipping, however, also allows the passenger, if so inclined, to develop her own tactics for asserting control over the exchange. For most, this sense of control comes through knowing that at the end of the trip, she has the choice of whether or how much she will tip, facts which the driver can only speculate at. The passenger then has the opportunity to pass judgment on the cab interaction:

**Jake:** ...and then some guys deliberately say something to make you blow the tip. You know, they’ll say “Oh, you're driving too fast,” or “You didn't go the way I want you to go, and just for that I'm gonna,” you know, they don't tip you. Or right at the last couple a blocks they decide that they didn't enjoy the ride, he says, “You're the rudest cab driver I ever had!”

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19 Edwards, Rosberg, and Hoy (1975) describe a similar situation on the Caribbean island of San Andrés, Columbia.
And sometimes by being rude, their definition of being rude is you didn't even say a word to them. Because they didn't talk to you!

The passenger exerts the same power at this point whether she tips or not; however, there are different strategies. Many big tippers seem to enjoy the surprise and thanks their largesse produces in the cabdriver, and build the suspense by never referring to the tip or to the amount until it is given; by this fact drivers can know that those who promise or mention a tip during the ride are less likely to be good tippers. These fares seek to achieve the recognition the tip would produce after the ride, during it. Having enjoyed their status as one who is going to tip, they have less incentive to actually do so when the time comes. The expression, “I’ll take care of you, driver,” is recognized by many drivers as the promise of a stiff, not a tip.

Most riders tip, and enough tip very well that it is a commonplace among drivers that a stiff will be made up for by the generosity of the next fare. Since the practice of leasing eclipsed that of driving on commission, tips have declined in their economic significance for drivers. When a percentage of the meter had to be split with the company, the tip represented a sum drivers could keep to themselves, free and clear (Davis 1959: 161; Schlosberg 1980: 50-5). Since drivers now keep anything they make over gates, gas, and the tips they themselves must pay, part of the economic attraction of tips has dissolved. Technically, there is no difference between a six dollar fare without a tip, and a five dollar fare with a dollar tip. Right?

Wrong, of course. What counts for drivers today is not the money as much as the respect the tip represents. For instance, regular riders in San Francisco know that a tip
must be at least a dollar in order to be received as such by the driver. With $6.10 on the meter, seven dollars handed to the driver is taken as “exact change,” an insult. Seven dollars and a dime is a tip. I, who I can only assure you am a perfectly rational individual, have driven away steaming mad from people who gave me ninety cents over the meter, when if they had given me ten cents more I would have been content. This is because the amount of the tip is not as much of an issue as the idea that there is a rule to be followed, the ignorance or abuse of which unbalances the entire driver-passenger relationship.

This may result in seemingly petty behavior on the part of the cabdriver who is intent on making his passenger increase the tip. Davis described a tactic used by Chicago drivers which is still used today:

Depending on the tariff and the amount handed him, the driver can fumble about in his pockets for change, or make change in such denominations as often to embarrass a fare into giving a larger tip than he had intended. The efficacy of this tactic depends naturally on the determination and staying power of the fare, qualities which many fares are averse to demonstrate, particularly when it comes to small change. (Davis 1959: 163)\(^{20}\)

As Davis notes, the embarrassment the fare experiences over such small sums is used to the driver’s advantage. The driver may either be focused on getting the money (having adopted the money-calculating form of Simmel’s intellectualization strategy, drivers are less susceptible to such embarrassment), or he may be focused on punishing

\(^{20}\) See also Vaz (1955: 53). Schlosberg (1980: 55) adds that New York night drivers often disable the light in the back seat so passengers can not count their change.
the passenger and “teaching” them to tip. One favorite way to punish the non-tipper who asks for change is to hand them back the whole dollar, apologize for not having change, and suggest that they “get themselves a cup of coffee.”

The manipulation of change to affect the tip is not engaged in solely by drivers. A common passenger technique is to tell the driver apologetically that, although you have just enough to cover the fare, you can’t tip unless the driver can change a large bill.

Jake: How many times have you had people go up the hill, and all they say is, “Oh, I'm sorry, I only got five dollars here, um, I got all big bills.” (laughs) Four- ninety on the meter, they give you five, they says, “Sorry, I got all big bills on me, except for the five.” But he could have took out the big bill and said, you got change?

Some such passengers want change; others want to avoid tipping. Either way, it is statistically improbable the number of times passengers pull out exact change—“Or can you change a fifty?”

Unlike Ward’s “Unconscionable Carrion-Scourger,” most drivers will not ask outright for the tip. Of course there are exceptions, for instance when special service was given and the lack of a tip is taken as particularly rude:

Lotta: That's another thing, the tipping business, you know, some people get you so mad when they're stingy and you know they don't have to be. Like these two yuppies that I got from the airport... the plane had already come in late, they had to make a meeting at the Fairmont, and I said just sit back and relax, don't complain or anything, I get you there. And I did all kinds of maneuvering through the freeways and streets and stuff, and I got em there, and they didn't tip me, and I said, “What gives?”

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21 Extreme poverty or living on a fixed income excuse the passenger from having to tip. Such fares are avoided, but are not usually punished for not tipping.
And they said, “We've never had such a bumpy ride in all our lives!” And I said, “But I got you here on time! I told you, just sit back, relax, and hold on, and I'll get you there!” So I cursed em out in front of the entrance of the hotel, you know, for stiffing me, and then the doorman said, “No no no, you can't do that!” I said, “Well, you don't know the whole story!”

Lotta did not receive her tip, but her passengers were publicly shamed at the entrance to the Fairmont, so her purpose was served. In most cases, however, there is somewhat of a taboo about asking for tips in so many words. To ask for a tip when none was given is degrading for the cabdriver; this is a terrible waste of an opportunity to degrade the passenger instead. Thus, on most instances when a driver openly derides a passenger for not tipping, it is made clear that a tip will not now be accepted:

Seth: I just gave some woman a lecture about tipping.

[laughs]

Seth: Well, it was from the Safeway in the Richmond, and she only went a couple blocks, and I loaded everything for her, and then she asked me if I would help her take them in, so I did. Then it was five-seventy on the meter, and she gave me six bucks! She was young, she was white, she was American, she spoke English—she had no excuse! It’s not like she didn't know...22 I just flat out told her, “What's the idea? Don't you think that when you ask somebody to help you, and they do, that you should tip them? When you go to restaurants, do you not tip your waiters? Are you crazy?” She started getting some more money out of her wallet, and I just turned away and left. I just left. I think I made an impression.

“I don’t want your money now!” Having one’s money refused can be a powerful insult. The following driver knows how to make it at once less direct and more potent:

22 “Not knowing,” on account of being foreign or otherwise outside the mainstream of local culture would excuse the passenger from the need to be taught a lesson.
**Jake:** My first fare of the day, and the lady didn’t tip me! So I had to give the money back to her, I gave her back the whole thing, she says, “What’s that, I didn’t tip you,” I said “I know!” She said, “Well that’s for the fare,” and I told her “Look, lady, you don’t know how it works. This is a free ride. You’re my first fare of the day and you didn’t tip me. That’s bad luck! If I take your money, my whole day will turn out bad. But if I don’t take your money, if I give you a free ride, then you’re not my first fare and your bad luck won’t ruin my whole day!”

Schlosberg (1980: 40) noted similar superstitions regarding the “ice-breaker,” or first fare of the day; in the above example the belief that the first fare determines the rest of the day plays the role not simply of a “superstition” held by the cabdriver, but of a way for the driver to shame his customer by contextualizing their otherwise fleeting interaction. That such beliefs should not be understood simply as aspects of a cabdriving “mentality,” but rather as resources available for the cabdriver to call on when necessary, is revealed by another driver’s reaction to the above story: “You really laid that shit on her?”

Another favored method is to throw or drop the coins:

**Lotta:** Sometimes even when you do a trip and they give you like fifty cents for the, you know, which is totally not enough, I would say, “Excuse me, you forgot something!” And then I hold the coins, and they hold out their hand, and I drop them. And would you know that they bend down and chase a rolling coin!

_Dangerous Drivers, Dangerous Fares_

Henslin noted the ability of drivers to glean information about the dangers posed as well as the profits available from passengers based on their demeanor and on their primary and secondary locations, that is, where they’re from and where they’re going
(Henslin 1967a: 155). On one level this information exposes the passengers to potential manipulation by the driver, as in the married businessman coming from a house of prostitution who could be blackmailed, or the family leaving on vacation whose house would thus be left empty for the burglar. Henslin remarks that information of this sort is not, to his knowledge, made use of by cabdrivers, who focus on advantages to be obtained over interaction within the cab but do not take advantage of information regarding the outside world. Thus passengers who are perceived as possessing a vulnerability, such as not knowing the way around or being very drunk, may be taken advantage of within the context of the cab ride—the tourist may be treated to the scenic route, and the drunk may be overcharged, or, according to Henslin, rolled (Henslin 1967a: 163-4). Henslin felt that cabdrivers usually limited such exploitations to “use taxes” levied on people using cabs for deviant purposes—the tactic being to let the passenger get themselves into a compromising situation, then to make them “pay through the nose” (ad loc.). This can be illustrated with the way a few drivers told me they deal with passengers who try to use the cab to make drug purchases: when the passenger tells the driver to “wait here, I’ll be right back,” a deposit, say ten or twenty dollars, is obtained. This is not unreasonable anytime a cab is told to wait, and is particularly sensible since people buying drugs are quite liable to spend all their money, leaving nothing with which to pay the cab. Although in most circumstances a driver would not leave with a deposit (or would at least wait until the meter had run up to the deposit

23 “The cabdriver is in an ideal situation to ‘case’ burglary prospects and I am surprised that I have never come across such a use of information” (Henslin 1967a: 155).
amount, less the tip, of course) in this case a few drivers told me that they just left as soon as the fare was out of sight. This is clearly a case of Henslin’s “use tax” on deviance, as well as a penalty levied against those who would involve the cabdriver unwillingly in illegal activities. The motivation of the driver is to regain control over the space of the cab and, if possible, to turn a dangerous situation profitable. The driver is simply putting the situation to rights: it is the drug purchasers who put themselves in jeopardy:

**Jay:** I mean, what are they gonna do? Go to the police? “Hey, I was buying drugs and my cab left with the deposit....”

Even a driver not intending to levy a use tax may leave the scene in order to retain control over the cab’s space:

**Seth:** I picked up a guy years ago in the lower Haight, like Divis or so, he says “I gotta go down to the lower Haight, help a friend of mine real quick, and then come right back here.” Oh, okay. So we went down to Haight, drove down Haight, turned down on like Webster, Buchanan, and he said “Okay, turn down here, go park down here by Waller.” And the guy got out and walked back up to Haight. And that's when I realized, *Oh, oh I see what's going on.* This is back when they had the projects back there, and there's this gang of like three big black guys that came up, and they started talking to the white guy, and I’m sitting there going, ah jeez, but he did give me a twenty, that I put up in the vizor—or no, he threw it over the seat, that's what he did, but I just left it sitting there on the seat, cause I didn't like feeling involved, you know? So the guy went up, he made his deal, I could see them there, counting out the rocks and stuff, and doing their transaction in my rearview mirror, and then the guy started walking down back to the cab. And he almost got to the cab when he’s looking down at his hand like he’s counting what he’s got, then all of a sudden he stops. Like he thought of something, so he started turning back. And then the black guys, they see him coming back, so they start walking down the street towards him, towards the cab. So I’m watching this, and one of the black guys says, “Let's all get in the cab and talk about it.” And that's when I left. Of course, right? I’m like, “Errrr! Forget it!” Left, drove away, peeled out, the guy's all “Hey, hey, you got my twenty!” So they're racing after me, down
the street, the white guy and the dealers too, they're running as fast as they can, but the thing is there's no traffic, so I decided to fuck with them. I'd like slow down, then drive ahead and then slow down to let them almost catch up, then take off again.... I did that for about three blocks, and then I just left. Like, “Bye guys, I’ve had enough!” Then I called the dispatcher, and I told him, “If the guy from the lower Haight calls back, tell him he can get his change at the Fillmore police station.” And the dispatcher’s like “What? What do you mean, what happened?” I said, “Well, I just didn't wanta wait for him while he bought his crack.” And the dispatcher’s all, “Oh, okay,” and of course I never heard back about it. But that’s what you gotta do, you can’t let these people pull that kind of stuff. “Let’s get in the cab and talk about it!” Give me a break!

The reader will note that the reassertion of control by the driver plays an important part in almost any story about unruly or violent passengers. In the above story the driver keeps control of the interior of the cab by driving away, then makes up for the ignominy of this flight by taunting his pursuers as they chase him down the street: the driver controls not only the cab but the street itself, as master of mobility. Finally he subverts any future attempt by the passenger to complain by characterizing him as a crack buyer in the dispatcher’s mind. The threat to the driver’s control is negated and he is free to continue driving through the city, safe from “feeling involved.” The issues of space and race in stories of this sort will be addressed in more detail below.

The knowledge of how to interpret passengers and situations is crucial in recognizing and avoiding danger. Naturally, the posture and demeanor of the passenger once inside the cab is one clue:

Doc: One-Twenty Kearny street, guy flagged me down. Black guy. And the minute he got in the cab I said, something’s wrong! Cause he sits, like, way in the corner against the door and the seat, you know what I'm saying....
But sensing danger after the fare is in the cab may, as in the above instance, be too late. It is better to sense the danger while the fare is still on the street, and never let danger into the cab. Tom, an owner who has been driving for twenty-five years, claims to have an “internal radar for danger” and compares cabdriving to martial arts:

**Tom:** I’ve never been taken in, though I’ve been taken. On two occasions. Both times I knew before that they were dangerous. Like this one guy, I thought about it later, I knew he was nuts, but I let him in the cab anyway. That was my opening: you’ve got to eliminate openings. Both people who attacked me attacked me when it was slow and I was angry, and both I knew ahead of time were nuts. It’s like you have a pattern of openings to discover and get rid of. The way you do it, you observe other people, you see the patterns of openings they have, then you look back at yourself.

The different “patterns of openings” which different drivers have, and which dangerous passengers may exploit, correspond to the overall driving strategies drivers employ. Two important strategies Tom distinguishes are the “Hunter” and the “Hustler:”

**Tom:** The difference between being a hustler and a hunter is, a hustler is pulling all this energy towards him, he's like, “Hey, come here, come on, here we go!” The energy is being pulled in but it’s not sifted through, it’s indiscriminate. The hunter is more particular, you're selecting, like, “Okay, you.” The hustler is letting it all in, and that's dangerous.

Greed and exhaustion play a role in getting the driver’s guard down:

**Tom:** Accidents happen when things are going really well, or when they're going really bad. Or it’s like that night when you're making two hundred dollars, and you want that two-fifteen. When you got a great night going and you want one extra ride.
The driver who is too busy hustling is attuned to money, not to the warning signals dangerous fares give off, and fails to properly screen passengers before letting them into the cab:

Tom: A friend of mine and I at the old garage used to talk about drivers, how they drove, and who would have an accident, or who something was going to happen to. We could tell from how they drive, we'd say this is going to happen to this guy, and you'd wait, and it would. It's like this guy M_______, who was a great hustler, which is different than being a hunter... This guy, he saw two kids at the bus station and he picked them up. They took him out to Potrero hill, and then they had a little gun and they shot him in the neck. He didn't even know, he was like, “Where's my fare?” and then they ran away. He felt this funny thing in his neck, he went later to the doctor to see what was bothering him, the doctor said it’s a bullet. “You're a very lucky man, a millimeter this way or that, and you'd either be dead or wish you were.”

Even wily cabdrivers can fall prey to dangerous fares who know how to find and exploit their pattern of openings. Drivers are vulnerable at stoplights, being less able to screen fares through not stopping:

Lotta: So those are the unpredictable things, and then also you wanta be careful who you pick up, yeah, somebody got in on a light, and they were drug runners! I couldn't get rid of them. I tried to shake em off, and get rid of them, they were very threatening. They wanted to make some stops on Sixth street, and then come back around, and go up Polk and let them off on Polk and O'Farrell, and all this time I was looking for a cop car, you know whenever you're looking for them they're never there.

At night cabs are occasionally ambushed by false callers, for instance by this call which was supposedly put in from a police station:

Lotta: I got ambushed on Third Street. Took a radio call, coming, you know, heading for Mariposa, and they said “Somebody get this, it’s a
police call there.” So when I looked for the address, it was two blocks
away from the police station, I thought, that's strange. And there was
nothing there but sort of what looked like abandoned buildings, and I
stopped, and these two guys with their stocking caps all over, you know,
their face, came up, and they were carrying baseball bats.... So, just when
they reached me I figured it was something fishy and stepped on the gas
and I heard this big noise... Couple blocks down the street I got out to see
if they had made a dent or something, couldn't see anything until I got to
the bridge and then I tried to look in the mirror. They had smashed the
mirror. Yeah, as I was driving off ... Yeah, they were trying to smash the
windshield, that's what they were trying to do. And then rob me, you
know.

Radio drivers have a safety net in the “Mayday” system. A driver in trouble calls
“mayday” with their location, which the dispatcher repeats for all to hear. All cabs in the
area then rush to the scene, an event which seldom fails to produce a strong impression.

**Lotta:** I got stuck in Hunter's Point one night taking a domestic home, you
know, and she said “Honey, don't stay very long after you let me out, get
out!” Well, I got approached right away by some people saying “What are
you doing here, lady, you're taking your life into your hands,” and it
scared me, and when I was trying to drive away all of a sudden I was
followed by a couple of cars... by then I got so nervous and upset I lost my
sense of direction, you know? So I called in a Mayday, and right away,
five Gotham cabs showed up, and made them go away. So then later on, I
was very picky about where I picked up. Even in the daytime, I didn't
wanta go to certain neighborhoods.

Access to a radio network of drivers moving through the city also makes it easier
for drivers to track down offenders. One radio driver had his cab stolen when he got out
to ring a doorbell: he luckily flagged down another cab from his own company and the
chase was on. With the help of the dispatcher and other drivers, within five minutes four
cabs had the stolen vehicle blocked in, and the suspect fled on foot. This resource is lost
to computer-dispatched cabs. I once was sitting on a stand with two other radio cabs
when we saw a computer cab which was clearly chasing three young men. Discovering that the cabdriver had been held up, we did our best to help her, but were unable to catch the robbers. Crucial to our failure was the fact that we were unable to communicate with her except by pulling alongside her cab; at the same time, three or four cabs from the same computer-dispatched company as the first driver were in the immediate area but were oblivious to the chase, and so unable to help.

Fare jumpers use a variety of tricks to gain the trust of cabdrivers. One tactic is to claim to know someone who drives a cab for the company—“Oh, do you know Bill? I get rides from him all the time!” The object is to set the cabdriver at ease, as with somebody who is on the inside and, being known to the company, is thus trackable and unlikely to run off without paying. Another tactic is to tell the driver to wait, leaving a bag on the backseat as a deposit. The fare never returns, and the bag is discovered to contain nothing but junk.

These ploys work because a driver who has decided that a fare is trustworthy may have so much confidence in his or her own powers of discernment as to fail to catch additional clues. Cabdriver pride has other downfalls: a revealing insight is provided by the reasons given in court by a London con man when asked why he preyed exclusively on cab drivers:

> Taxi-drivers are so flash, they think they know everything. But when they get conned they won’t tell anyone ‘cos it means a loss of face and that’s more important than the money. (Townsend 2003: 50)
In this case it is the cabbies, not the fares, who are exposed to manipulation, by their drive to display knowledgeability and to save face by never admitting to being conned.

It is true that tales of driver victimization have less currency than tales in which shady or dangerous passengers get their comeuppance, even if this is not delivered by the cabdriver:

**Lotta:** Oh, I picked this guy up at a bar in North Beach, across from that police station there, on Vallejo. And he wanted to go to Eighteenth and Mission. And I said, “Well, I have to do this real quick because I'm due in.” So then he kept on bugging me, “Oh, let's stop somewhere for a drink,” I said “No, I don't drink on the job, and ... I told you, I'm just gonna get you there, and that's it.” He said “Well, you're not nice, I don't know if I'm gonna pay you.” Right? So I thought, oh god, that's just what I need, my last trip, and have all this problem. So in the meantime I looked back and he had this big wad of money wrapped around his hand. He must have just cashed his social security check or something. So we get to Sixteenth and Mission, he said “Well, you can stop here now.” And he said “You're not gonna get paid,” so I reached back and snatched his money, and took a ten dollar bill! It was ten on the meter. He says, “You robbed me, you robbed me!” He came jumping over from the back. He took the mike out of my hand and he wrapped the cord around my neck, and so I was struggling and then finally I got a hold of the mike and I called in a Mayday, you know? In the meantime, there's this commotion on the outside, people knocking on the windows, so I released the locks and there was about a half a dozen Mexicans out there, they pulled this guy out, and beat the Bejebus out of him. You know? So I called in, I said, “Cancel the police, he's getting right now what he has coming.” And then I said “Hey amigos, he's got a lot of money in his hand there!” I hope they took that, too. I had my ten bucks, but he also scratched me....

Although Lotta is saved by Good Samaritans, she does her own part in restoring control over the cab and herself by regaining her cool—her cabdriver’s reduction of the situation to its financial aspects—in the end. The bad fare is beaten for having scratched
her and his money taken as payment to the friendly Mexicans. As for Lotta, her prime concern is that the meter is covered: “I had my ten bucks...”

Few cabdrivers are under any illusions about the dangerousness of their job, and some drivers do go to work armed. In different cities the situation is different, and San Francisco is known as a place where cabdriving is both relatively profitable and relatively safe. In these senses it is contrasted by drivers with other cities such as Oakland across the Bay, as well as with other cab metropoles:

**Wally:** DC! Those poor bastards never make any money there. There's money all around them, in Arlington, Georgetown—but no money in DC. And guys get killed there all the time. I wouldn't drive a tank with a meter in DC. Here—here you just keep the doors locked.

A passenger who had once driven a cab in Tucson told me about his first night on the job:

**Passenger:** Well, the very first night I drove, before they gave me the cab, they said “Come here,” they called me in the back, they said “Come on in the office here.” And I came in there and they said pick your weapon. And they had a little table laid out, and on it they had a baseball bat, and some sort of a metal coil, and a lug wrench, and a hammer, and like a piece of wood with a bunch of nails sticking out, and all this ugly shit and they said, “Here, you can take one of these and that can be your weapon. Cause we prefer, you know, that you guys not carry guns!” Well that was my first day on the graveyard shift, I don’t know why I didn’t just turn around and leave right then!

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The scene described above was considered extreme by every San Franciscan driver I repeated it to; nevertheless, the idea of the armed cabbie not only plays into the “Last Cowboy” image but plays a significant role in stories of revenge against dangerous fares. In these tales, weapons serve the purpose not only of correcting the balance of power between the driver and the would-be robber, but produce a table-turning surprise in which the fare learns that the cabdriver he had planned to dupe is much more powerful than previously thought—a surprise which is relished by the driver-narrator. The following story of revenge is so neatly delivered as to be the stuff of fantasy:

**Rod:** I know a driver who picked up a guy downtown going to Third Street. And the guy was all, like, “Thanks man, all these other motherfuckers won't pick up a brother.” And he's like, “Yeah, whatever, get in the cab.” And they get out to Third Street and the guy pulls a knife on him! So the driver's all, “Relax, buddy, you can have it all. Here's my big bills, here's my small bills, here's my 45!” He pulls his gun on him! And the poor guy's got a knife, right? “Um, oops!” So he gets the guy out of the car, makes him give him all his money, has him take his clothes off and put them in the cab, and just leaves him there, stark naked, in the middle of the night, on Outer Third.... The driver jumps on the freeway and he's throwing all the guy's clothes out the window, laughing. Now if he'd gone to the police about that, *he* would have been the one in trouble!

The following two stories were repeated to me by a passenger, who had heard them from a well-known driver who shall be known here as “Racer”. The stories are notable, if nothing else, for the array of weaponry deployed by the cabdriver.

1. Racer picked up a young guy from the Marina who ended up stiffing him for a fare. A few weeks later, the same guy happens to flag him again. Racer picks him up and Pretends not to recognize him until he has

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25 The driver in question, whose nickname is much cooler than “Racer,” later confirmed the stories.
the cab moving, at which point he locks the doors, turns around with a stun gun in his hand, and asks, “Remember me, Motherfucker?” He stuns the guy, and keeps stunning him, the guy is twitching and shaking, unable to do anything, and Racer keeps yelling, “Remember me, Motherfucker? Remember me, Motherfucker?”

2. Late one night Racer is taking a pimp and a hooker to Oakland. They keep changing destinations, and Racer gets the feeling they’re about to rob him. So he suddenly pulls right over and stops, and swiftly maces the pimp in the face and whacks the hooker over the head with a tire iron. Then Racer runs off down the street, yelling for the police and knocking on doors in the middle of the night. He gets back to the car, there's three police cars, blood everywhere from the woman's head, and the pimp screaming, “Why he mace me? Why he mace me?”

These stories have been perhaps been doctored a bit, perfected for the benefit not only of other cabdrivers but for those members of the public who tip well and enjoy a good story. They paint a picture of a violent, untrustworthy world in which the driver’s only defense is to be crazier and more prone to mayhem than the next person. The reader is asked to recall that this is not in fact the case; cabdriving is, rather, dependent on the possibility of mutual trust based on a minimal amount of information shared between complete strangers. What these stories relate, besides the possibilities for exploiting the Last Cowboy image in the interests of a good tip, is the importance for the driver of maintaining control over the interaction with the passenger and over the space of the cab, not only as driving is experienced, but as it is remembered and retold.

26 In this story, the fact that the fares are “a pimp and a hooker” is barely relevant to the story line: it serves the purpose, however, of characterizing the passengers in the listener’s mind as criminals from the start.
Race and Urban Space in Drivers’ Stories of Violence

Some of the stories repeated above relate not only the assertion of control by the cabdriver over the interior of the cab, but over the exterior urban space in the course of the cab’s trajectory through dangerous, racially-marked areas of the city. They thus constitute a form of “spatial stories” (de Certeau 1984: 115-30), narratives which traverse the places and zones of the city, organizing exterior space in relation to and reflection of the driver’s control over interior space, and over the retelling. In three of the above stories, the following structure can be found:

1. The passenger directs the cab into a dangerous (in these cases, African-American) part of town (Lower Haight projects, Outer Third, Oakland). Two of the stories take place at night, adding to the sense of danger.
2. The passenger engages in threatening behavior (involving the cab in a drug deal, pulling a knife, repeatedly changing destinations).
3. The driver reasserts control over the cab itself (leaving abruptly, pulling a gun, suddenly assaulting passengers).
4. In two of the stories, the driver is depicted leaving the dangerous area, and in doing so, demonstrating his dominance through mobility (taunting pursuers, throwing clothes out of the window on the freeway).
5. In two of the stories, the driver prevents recourse by the passengers by being the first to contact authorities, characterizing the passengers as criminals. In the third story, the lack of this element is explained by the fact that the driver himself would have been in trouble with the police for possessing a firearm.

In this formula, the cab’s movement through urban space plays an important role both in establishing the danger faced by the driver and in portraying his successful escape.

The pimp’s locutions at the end are meant to be humorous, and to strike a ridiculous figure. At the same time, the possibility is left open that the driver has completely misinterpreted the situation.
therefrom. The driver’s competence and self-confidence is reestablished not only with respect to the interior space of the cab but to the exterior space of the city.

Race plays a significant role in characterizing these urban spaces and the dangerous fares who go there, not only in the three stories above but in many of the others related in this chapter. I do not consider it profitable to get bogged down in the question of whether or not this constitutes an “accurate” depiction of the racial profile of would-be cab robbers. The fact is that although cab robbers come in all colors and genders, in the above stories about cab robbery they are almost invariably black and male. This is perhaps to heighten the sense of danger for the driver, as well as to rationalize the driver’s suspicions, in accordance with the role perceptions of racial (particularly black) persons and locations play in the mental geography of urban danger presumed to be shared by those by whom and to whom these stories are told. Of the drivers in the stories, two are white and one latino; the passenger who repeated the latino driver’s stories was white, and I was a white audience for all three stories.

My point is not to question the veracity of the stories themselves but to consider why elements such as the ethnicity and destination of the passengers (or persons encountered at the destination) is included or emphasized. For instance, in Lotta’s tale of being assaulted in the Mission, the ethnicity of her assailant is never mentioned—his attack on her is motivated not along racial but along gender lines—though that of her

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27 Davis (1990: 95, 132) found an “impressive coincidence” between crime statistics and drivers’ areal and temporal perceptions of danger. Neighborhood ethnicity was a factor in driver’s perceptions of dangerous places (ibid.: 108).
rescuers is. In their case their identity as “Mexicans” as well as their location on the
streetcorner of a working-class latino district situates for the (white) listener the violent,
extra-legal manner in which they come to the assistance of the (white) female cabdriver,
which itself motivates her to exclude the authorities from the denouement—this is
another space and time in which the police are neither appropriate, nor necessary.

Some of these stories I believe to be true and others I suspect to include fabricated
elements. Their significance, however, lies not in their relative degree of veracity but in
what they reveal about the significance for the driver of controlling space—both cab
interior and urban exterior—in the course of their interaction with passengers, and
particularly dangerous passengers. The role of race in these stories reflects the fact that
the driver’s experiences are made sense of and retold within the context of the larger
societal discourse on the city, in which race, space, and danger are closely interwoven.

Tales of danger play an important role in keeping drivers alert to the possibilities
they face in their work, as well as in perpetuating the last cowboy/knight errant image of
the streetwise cabbie. Actual incidents, however, are rare in relation to the overwhelming
number of trips in which passengers and drivers interact amiably. Lotta illustrates the
importance of keeping danger in perspective, both in the sense that it can’t be allowed to
interfere with the job, and in the sense that she, as an experienced and calculating driver,
can handle herself:

**Lotta:** That’s why I say I like it for most of the time that I was driving,
you know, because there was never a dull moment. And when people
said, “Aren’t you scared?” I said, you can’t be scared, driving a cab, you
can’t be doing it for years and years and years, you know, if you’re scared
in the beginning you don’t continue on and forget about it. Other than that
you keep on doing it and try to enjoy it, and you know, the scare factor has to just be out there in the background somewhere. But I mean all these three attacks that I endured didn’t do me any real harm.

“The City was a Theater and I had a Front Row Seat”

Much of the foregoing discussion has considered the cab as a setting for conflict. Drivers and passengers attempt to exert their own forms of control over the cab interaction; they may even try to cheat or confuse each other, or to defend themselves physically. These issues of control and danger are important and always present as a subtext in the taxicab interaction. However, not only are most fares not dangerous or threatening, they may be enjoyable. The potential for the cab interaction to transcend issues of control and profitability is one of the most appreciated rewards cabdriving has, according to those who do it.

According to Simmel, society is possible because of the ability of individuals to hold themselves and each other both separate from, and part of, society in the course of interaction. The extent to which interlocutors are treated in terms of their individual or their social characteristics constitutes the relatively personal or impersonal nature of the interaction. Underlying all forms of interaction is sociability, “the play-form of association,” the capacity to focus on the forms and intricacies of interaction itself, without regard to the weight and constraints of individuality and purpose; in the impersonal modern city sociability is laid bare in its purest form, as conversation between citizens who do not know each other, can have no expectation of meeting again, and have nothing to gain from the encounter except the pleasure of conversing itself. Although at
one level this pure sociability reduces human life to the “shadow body” of its instrumental techniques, it has a utopian quality as well, embodying the purely playful and non-calculating sort of interaction which Simmel equates with freedom and democracy (Simmel 1971: 127-140).  

Toiskallio describes those forms of sociability most commonly found in the taxicab as “taxi-sociability” (Toiskallio 2000: 9-10). Taken as sociability, the efforts of drivers and their passengers to assert interactional control can be seen as moves and countermoves in a game. This game may be played competitively, in which each seeks to “win” the interaction, or at any rate not to “lose.” However, the game may also be played for fun, and it is in the enjoyable, non-competitive forms of taxi-sociability that the transcendent possibilities of urban interaction, and of cabdriving and riding, shine through.

Toiskallio calls his ideal form of taxi-sociability “The King and The Captain” (ibid.: 18-9). In this form the driver and passenger do not compete for control; instead each concedes certain forms of control to the other in exchange for the comfort of a well-defined relationship. To the driver (the “Captain”) goes the competence and the control of the vehicle; to the passenger (the “King”) goes deference and control of the destination. Toiskallio credits this terminology to “experienced drivers” in Helsinki; in San Francisco I have not encountered such a relationship explicitly described. In any event, the enjoyable forms of taxi-sociability I have encountered are closer to the form

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28 Benjamin also suggests that egalitarianism springs from the playful quality of street encounters: “...is there not perhaps at work here an intoxicated assimilation, superposition, equalization that in the streets of
Toiskallio describes as second-best, his term for which is “Cityzens in the City Scene” (ibid.: 16-8). In this form, both driver and passenger join together as “cityzens” to experience and comment on the city around them, the ride thus becoming a shared experience.

To enjoy such forms of sociability, drivers need to “turn off,” if only temporarily, their focus on monetary calculability. Instead, drivers can focus on the opportunities for learning their city and society which the job offers:

**Tom:** Your primary goal can be money or your primary goal can be experience. If your primary goal is experience you won’t make as much money. And vice versa. When I first started, I just wanted to see people, like the city was a theater and I had a front row seat. I picked up prostitutes, pimps, heroin junkies. And I knew they were doing all that, I was just wondering, “Who are these people?” I wanted to see who all these people were. And everyone [who drives a cab] gets all these people, whether you’re focused on money or what—but you don’t always focus on them, if you’re too busy thinking about the money, about where your next fare is, about where you’re going. Unless you just stop, sit down and talk with a guy for half an hour—I’ve down that a couple times. Just a couple. See who these people are who are in your cab all day! Stop driving and just sit and talk. Or go out to eat with them.

Passengers as well can take advantage of the cab ride to engage in the play of sociability. On a trip through South of Market and along the Wharf, an experienced passenger told me of the types of cabbies he’d had, their personalities, and his ways of interacting with them:

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this city proves to carry more weight than the will to social accreditation?” (Benjamin 1999: 418).
Passenger: Oh, the different cab drivers I’ve had—I've had all kinds of cabdrivers... I had a seventy-five year old Indian driver with a turban who was turning up the dance channel really loud, and he was turning the interior lights into strobe lights, the cab was like being in a disco... I had this guy who was apparently just so high on meth or something that he was turning the corners on two wheels and cutting off all the other cars and driving like a maniac.... I had some guy the other day that I just sat and jived conspiracy theory with—though I don't go in for that stuff, but it was neat to just sit and chat, you know—but it’s strange, people feel comfortable talking to a cabdriver, you know, you're there, you feel like you should talk to them, it’s comfortable, and you don't expect to get the same guy back again twice, so you feel like you can say whatever. You know, I’ve taken hundreds of cabs in this city and I don’t ever remember getting the same driver more than once.

The cab ride can be taken as an opportunity to learn. Another passenger, who I tried to interview on a trip from Noe Valley to the airport, commandeered the interview and ended up getting me to talk all about the cab industry, as well as how and why I was studying it. He confessed:

Passenger: Well, I always try to use the time in the cab, I always try to ask the cabdrivers lots of questions, it seems like a good use of the time in the cab, and I can learn a lot about the profession and about their experiences, which can be pretty interesting.

Perhaps the instrumentality of this approach invalidates it as Simmel’s pure sociability: on the other hand, the opportunity to learn can be seen as not simply a use of time but as a way to grow as an individual, and as a way both parties to the interaction can live the moment more fully, reflexively:

Seth: Plus another, how do I put this, another motivating factor in this job is being able to do what you’re doing to me right now, which is interview people. Like if there’s a certain line of thought I want to talk about, about
human activity, or psychology or whatever, I can bring a line of questioning to usually bombard each passenger as they get in! (laughs)

[Oh yeah? Like what?]

**Seth:** Oh, well just anything about, you know, different philosophies, just general human behavior. Why things are, why people behave the way they do.... so I have all that opportunity too, I mean there’s a wealth of people, of different people from different walks of life getting in this vehicle, and I have a captive audience basically for ten or fifteen minutes. So, that’s another one of my motivations for doing this job.

The opportunities for experience and learning which taxi-sociability offers is a crucial element in making the job desirable. At the beginning of this chapter I described “careerist” versus “lifestyle” cabbies as examples of greater and lesser dedication to the job, respectively. These terms are used differently by San Francisco driver George Roth, who writes that “there is a saying in the taxi industry that cab driving ‘is not a job, but a lifestyle’” (Roth 2002). Roth is referring not to whether drivers work full or part time, but to what they focus on in the course of driving: the monetary aspect of the job, or the opportunities cabdriving makes possible, as a “lifestyle.” Their unusual access to the spectrum of social life in the city, their position as watchers, interpreters, fleeting interlocutors and above all urban travelers makes them in a sense modern-day successors of the *flaneur*. Cabdrivers, of course, are not *flaneurs*: they move through the city much more quickly, and they are paid for their endeavors. However, like the flaneur, the cabbie can enjoy the city for its fleeting images, its movement, its splendor, its spleen and its ideal: much of this enjoyment is experienced not through the windows but within the cab itself as the game of sociability. This points to another, more liberatory strategy—not noted by Davis, Henslin, or even Toiskallio—made use of by cabdrivers in the drive to
exert control over the kinetic unpredictability of their occupation:

**Seth:** Well, I find that... if I stay focused or try to remember these lines of interest, and then bring them closer to the relationship to myself and my passengers, then I get more out of the day, I get more than just their money when I drop them off ... there’s something else going on there and there’s more energy involved.... So in a sense the job can take on a different level of meaning... You say to somebody, well, I drive a cab, they have an automatic assumption about what the possibilities are. But there’s a lot more possible than just that. Because it’d be kind of awful just to do a job for ten hours, just for the money, and have nothing else involved.
Chapter 5

Waiting Games

Playing the stands

As noted before, the cab business started at stands. It was by “standing” (waiting) in innyards and at strategic locations throughout the proto-industrial city that the early hackneys and fiacres achieved their recognizability as coaches-for-hire. Historically, attempts to control and supervise the activities of cabs have focused as a matter of convenience on cabstands, since they are an easily monitored focal point which cabs rely upon for producing business and which they return to often. In some instances, such as in 19th century Paris, cabs were assigned to specific stands towards which they always had to be heading when they were empty (whether they always did this is another matter) (Papayanis 1993: 34). Today, as well, the Taxi Detail of the SFPD inspects cabs standing on lines more often than it bothers hunting down their more elusive brethren who cruise the streets.

Like playing the streets, playing the stands involves an estimation of where the business is likely to be and an idea of the shape and direction of the flows and breaks in transportation of people through the city. Compared to cruising, however, this is a much more static image. Thus stands are historically found in the centers of shopping districts and at major centers of embarkation. The first stand in San Francisco was on the east side of Portsmouth Square on Montgomery Street, in what is today Chinatown but which
was then the waterfront and the center of comings and goings in the city (Kirby 2001). Today stands at the train station, the Transbay Depot, the Ferry Building, and at Pier 35 when the tour ships dock are modern examples of this sort of placement. Another example, the airport, will be considered separately.

An interesting fact that Santee points out is that individual stands have their own particular rules of etiquette, even their own “mini-culture” (Santee 1989: 95). He gives as an example the differing treatment of drivers who fall asleep in line: on some stands the driver behind will honk to wake them up when the line is moving; on other stands, however, cabs will simply pull around sleeping drivers, taking their spot in line.¹ There are spatial and practical concerns as well; at the W Hotel on Howard, for instance, there is a backwards stand: empty cabs pull into the front of the line and then back up until they are at the end, where they become “first up.” Any driver who wants to play this or any other stand must first learn the local rules of behavior and etiquette which make the stand work, what Santee calls a “ritual and decorum that may have taken years to evolve” (ad loc.). Radio cabs are the most frequent offenders of this order, as they use stands occasionally for other purposes, such as a location to wait at for radio calls or a place to leave the cab while they eat, shop, or use the restrooms. Pulling in and out, out of rhythm with the stand’s internal movement, radio drivers can disrupt the order of stands and create resentment and jealousy from the regular stand players (Henslin 1967a: 76).²

¹ Santee calls this practice “grave robbing” (Santee 1989: 96).

² In Hazard’s day this behavior would not have been tolerated. Stands were then controlled by thuggish groups of drivers known as “buckers.” He defines a “closed line” as “a hack stand held down by a bunch
Some stands servicing public places or large buildings are regulated by the city, such as the stands at Pier 39, “under the awning” at California and Kearny, or at California and Drumm. Once these were closed stands controlled by specific companies which held the contract to serve them, usually the old Yellow cab which controlled almost all the stands in town. Today there are few company stands, and these can be classified as official and unofficial stands. Official stands are radio stands, locations recognized by the company as being “first up” in a given area. Few of these exist today as companies have switched in general to mobile dispatch. Unofficial stands come about when a company receives a large number of calls (or a reasonable number of very valuable calls) at a given location, and drivers start to “sandbag” the location, in order to be “bingo” when the order comes. These sandbagging locations become unofficial stands when, during slow periods, multiple drivers collect there, socializing or resting, and using the point as a base from which to check in for surrounding radio calls. Unlike drivers at official stands, these drivers are given no precedence by the dispatcher, who may even discourage them from checking in, since dispatchers are sometimes annoyed when drivers they know to be stationary check in for hotly contested radio calls.

When most drivers think of “playing the stands,” however, they think primarily of another kind of stand, the hotel stand. There is a strategy, of course:

**Ben:** Playing the hotels is riskier [than the streets]. You gotta cruise along, looking for one with one cab or with no cabs in it, and wait there five minutes and see if it moves. But it’s risky cause even if it’s moving

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of good fighters who beat up any driver who dares to get a call in that immediate neighborhood.”(Hazard 1930: 75)
you see the guy ahead of you get an airport, and the guy behind you gets an airport, and you get the guy going two blocks.

Seasoned stand players know how many check-outs a given hotel has on a given day, and when they will be checking out. This information is attained by making friends with the hotel personnel, usually the doorman.

[So when you work hotel lines, how do you know how to pick em?]

**Lotta:** Well, I would just go around and have a look, how many cabs there were anywhere, and knowing which hotel had lots of check-outs that morning. I hated going to the Hilton because of the riff-raff you would get, the locals...

[The walk-ups?]

**Lotta:** The walk-ups. Yeah. But I would go there, and go to the Sheraton Palace, and go up on Nob Hill. Fairmont mostly, because it seemed like every other hotel up there was always hit and miss, but I liked the Ritz. You could spend some time there, but you also get really great fares out of there, and I did the doorman a favor once...

A driver who sticks around and becomes familiar at a given stand may gain the friendship and goodwill of the doorman, but usually this is more swiftly achieved by means of a gratuity. Drivers hoping for a good fare may walk up to the doorman and ask to change a bill, then only take part of the change back—this is the method preferred by Lobas (1991). I have also seen the first driver in line simply sitting against the hood of his cab in view of the doorman, flipping a wad of cash around in his hand as if counting it—this is a sure way of getting a doorman’s attention.

Not all doormen expect or even accept tips, especially at the better hotels:
Lotta: Smiling Jack—he's retired, the doorman from the Mark [Hopkins]—once scooped me off the street for this fare, and it was some enormous fare, we went, where did we go... down, all the way, some dot-com place, Milpitas, or some way out there. Tried to give him something, he wouldn't take it. Wouldn't take it. Jack would never take it, he felt insulted that I was trying to give him something. And I said “Well, it was such a good—” “Nevermind! Go away! Don't ever try this again!” (laughs) So I said I hope I'm not now on your black, on your bad list or something. He said no, don't worry about it.

Unfortunately this sort of doorman is the exception rather than the norm:

Lotta: But, you know, others, even there's doormen at the Fairmont who try to squeeze you for money. They're not supposed to.

[Yeah? I always thought that they were okay.]

Lotta: I said this out loud—one guy, and it was a meter and a half trip, and he [the doorman] was saying something to me [asking for a tip], and I say real loud, “You know you guys are not supposed to ask for any money from the cab drivers!”—and I could see he was embarrassed. He was a new guy, I said, “You're never gonna last here if you keep this up. Where did you come from, the Holiday Inn?” There's this one [doorman] there, he came from the Holiday Inn, and he always had his hands out, when he was at the Holiday Inn, but he knows better now at the [Fairmont]... he would do stuff like that, pull me out of line, and say well, I want you to take care of this lady, she doesn't want any of these no-name cabdrivers. Yeah, there was the good and the bad and the ugly. (laughs)

In the above segment the driver not only reports chastising a doorman who asked for a tip at a hotel where she did not expect to have to pay one, but admits also to having gone along with being “pulled out of line” at another hotel where such behavior was the norm.

The amount expected by doormen for rides to the airport (the standard “good ride”) goes up as the economy goes down, in other words with the number of drivers who
are willing to pay for the privilege of taking fares. Whereas, during the dot-com boom, a reasonable doorman’s tip for an airport was five or as low as two dollars, after the economy soured and airport traffic became much scarcer there were rumors that some doormen were asking as much as eight dollars, and this out of a fare that rarely nets the driver more than forty dollars. I asked one driver if he’d heard about the eight-dollar airport:

**Ivan:** Eight dollars! Eight dollars for airport is history, they pay twelve from the Handlery now!

This cuts into the radio business as doormen at smaller hotels which call for cabs instead of having stands come to expect tips from drivers:

**Quong San:** You know what the doorman at the Majestic asked me? It was a airport and he asked, “How much you gonna pay me?”—I said, “What, I didn't call you, you called me!” It was a radio call! Now little chance for airport from there—sometimes it’s an El Dorado picking up, sometimes Gotham.

Radio players do not like to tip doormen, partly because they may already be beholden to the dispatcher, and partly because they consider themselves better cabbies, more skillful and self-reliant than hotel players, and thus less dependent on the favoritism of mere gatekeepers. In the above segment the doorman responds to this by calling other companies with less of a radio culture, whose drivers are more likely to tip. Doormen may also resort to trickery to get rid of a driver who won’t tip:

**Jake:** I don't do it [tip doormen] as a rule. I had a radio call—did I tell you the one at the Pan Pacific? I had a radio call there, he called
Sutter/Mason, I bingoed it, Pan Pacific, I come down Mason street, pulled into the hotel, the doorman, the guy that has this bald head, he looks like Mr. Clean, he come up to me, “Oh Ulysses Cab, pull over to the left here, you got a airport coming out, they requested a Ulysses at 2:15. You got about eight minutes.” Okay, I pull over and just sat there. And then he walked away, he must have went off duty, then the black guy, the Nigerian doorman comes over to me and says, “Yeah, they’ll be out pretty soon,” and then he goes, “You are gonna do the right thing, aren't you?” And I say what are you talking about? He says put it in the trunk—you know, he wants this [rubs fingers together to signify money] and I say, “I'm sorry, I don't do that stuff, I'm not one of those guys that do that.” You know? And he goes, “Oh, okay, that's cool, don't worry about it.” He walked away, and as he was walking away there's people coming out with luggage, right? Right away he grabbed their luggage and walked towards me, and then loaded me up, and like a dummy, loaded me up and then he says “Take these people to 601 Brannan!” And that wasn't my airport! He fucked me! See? Next time I'll know what to do, I say “Hey hey, wait a minute, I'm waiting for the people at 2:15 here, who asked for Ulysses, are you the people?” You know? He fucked me...

By asking the driver to “leave it in the trunk,” the doorman was referring to a surreptitious way of leaving a tip:

[He said put it in the trunk, like you're supposed to leave it in there?]

Jake: Well, you know how [the doorman will] open the trunk and then while they're loading you, kinda, put it in there yourself, so while he's putting the luggage in he can pick it up, see? But you know, its full of shit.

Tipping the doorman ahead of time is only advisable if you know how good of a fare you’re getting, and can thus leave the appropriate amount. Drivers who have not made a previous arrangement with the doorman but who feel they might have occasion to tip will have money ready, sometimes in different amounts stashed in different pockets,
ready to slip to the doorman in gratitude, or rather as a sign that future favors will also be appreciated.

Depending on the management culture and the physical layout of the hotel, a doorman may have more or fewer opportunities to manipulate groups of cab and limo drivers who seek his favor. One particularly egregious downtown hotel will serve as an example. The cab stand in front takes up an entire city block, minus a bus lane at the back; cabs line up here normally, with those at the front of the line supposedly first up. However, at the back of the line, up against the bus stop, and directly across the hotel drive-loop from the doorman, a few cabs sit, often with their hazards on, not moving with the line. These are the doorman’s cronies, who, pretending to have advance orders or personal calls coming up, are waiting for him to dispense the plum fares too good for the schmucks in the regular line. However, even these favored cabbies have to contend with another level in the hierarchy: limousine drivers. Limousines can not legally pick up at hotels, or anywhere else, without advance calls; that is, they cannot stand or ply for hire. The limousines in San Francisco, however, do not make do with the telephone business they are legally limited to, but actively solicit at hotels and popular tourist areas. The illegality of their standing at hotels increases their dependency on the doorman for fares; the fact that they charge more per ride makes them capable of offering larger tips as well. Limousines are thus preferred by certain doormen, such as at this hotel. At this hotel the doorman keeps a few limos inside the turn-around; since he often has too many limos waiting at his beck and call he keeps the overflow double-parked across the street. The doorman thus has two groups of limos and two groups of cabs to dispense fares to, and
chooses among these groups based upon the ride’s profitability for himself and the driver chosen.

The doorman pushes each customer towards the car he has chosen by portraying it as a special deal for the customer. Most doormen who promise customers “a good driver” or “a safe driver” have little regard for the actual driving competence of these individuals. Most notoriously, some doormen offer limousines instead of cabs, because “they’re the same price,” despite the fact that limos, which charge by the head, can cost substantially more. I witnessed this myself, as I stopped briefly at the hotel in question one time to make change. As I exited the hotel, the doorman was telling some passengers going to the airport that they could have a swanky limousine for the same price as a smelly old cab. As I passed by, I told the customers, “That’s a good deal! It’s only thirty dollars for a cab!” The people nodded happily while the doorman and the limo driver glared, the driver especially unhappy because he now had to actually take these people for the same price as a cab (minus the doorman’s hefty tip), much less than he had been hoping to charge them. I smiled and walked out to the cab line where I got in my cab and drove off, since after all I’m a radio driver and I don’t play that friggin hotel.

Hotel patrons who are offered “special service” or a “better cab” by the doorman little tend to understand the full setting of the exchange they are part of. You come out of a hotel, the doorman grabs your luggage, and you have to tip him for that—more perhaps if you accept his offer of a “better cab,” or even a limo for the “same price as a cab.” Then he takes you and your luggage out to the curb and nods to the first cab waiting in line to pull forward. This gesture means more to the doorman and the cabbies than to the
hotel patron—that luggage held in either hand is a sign of the doorman’s authority, the power he holds by virtue of controlling the dispensation of patrons from the hotel to the cabs. Holding the luggage, he is holding his symbols of power, and the drivers in line respond appropriately.

Playing the Airport

What every driver is hoping to snag off the stands, off the radio, or best of all as a street hail, is a trip to the airport. Currently running at thirty to forty dollars plus a five to ten dollar tip, the airport trip (or “airport”) represents in a twenty minute trip the income that could be made from a busy hour taking shorts in the city. And with any luck, the airport will be “moving”—i.e., flights will be landing and passengers will be needing cabs right back to the city, or further afield.

A driver headed out to the airport will have a good idea of how it is moving well before she or he arrives. On the causeway past Candlestick Park, the freeway’s two sides are level with each other on a straightaway and it is easy to see the oncoming traffic. The southbound driver simply gets into the left lane and counts the northbound cabs. Every full cab counts toward a moving airport, and every empty cab implies a driver who judged that it was not. Summing up the number of northbound cabs and their relative fullness, the driver has a good idea of whether, after dropping on the top deck, to swoop around and “check out” the airport lot.

In San Francisco, the airport cab dispatching system currently consists of three overflow lots and a series of stands across from the airline terminals. The driver enters a
special gate and takes a special yellow taxi ticket before going through a tunnel to where the first two overflow lots are. Here, sometimes with the aid of a starter or of other cabbies, she finds the end of the line. The cabs line up in these lots in parallel rows which always empty out from right to left, so if cabs are leaving from the front of the lot it is easy to see where the end is. The movement of cabs in the second and third lots are controlled by a starter who sometimes has an assistant at the third lot with a whistle; cabs are summoned to move ahead with a system of loud beeps from an overhead speaker. For each short beep five cabs proceed to the first lot; a long, sustained beep means either “all go” or “all stop.” After passing through the second overflow lot the drivers turn in their tickets and pay a fee before proceeding to the first and final lot. When they reach the front of this they are issued a new ticket and head out for the airline stands, where more starters whistle and wave them along until they finally pick up. On the way out of the airport with their fare, drivers must stop in front of one last window to hand in their ticket unless they are taking a “short” trip, in which case their ticket is time-stamped and returned to them. From that point the holder of a short ticket has thirty minutes to make it back to the airport, in which case he shows his time-stamped ticket to the starter at the head of the second lot, who sends him to the front of the first lot.

The short ticket system is essential to prevent drivers who may have put in an hour or more of waiting time at the airport from receiving nothing more than a five dollar trip to Millbrae or Brisbane. There are some longer trips which can be squeezed in under the wire, however, and every driver has a fair sense of the geographic area over which they can make a short from the airport. Thus, any location South of Market is easily
made with a short if traffic is normal, as is the entire southern half of the city (with the exception of the Crocker Amazon district—take my word, it’s impossible). Daring drivers will attempt to cross Market on airport shorts, some venturing as far as the Nob Hill hotels. I once had some passengers tell me how a crazed driver had sped them all the way to the Richmond at over ninety miles an hour, trying to make his airport short!

Making long shorts from the airport is not only profitable, it allows the driver to exercise skill in getting around efficiently and has the added bonus of screwing the system. As this driver crows:

**Ivan:** Just the other day I made four shorts from the airport, all downtown, forty bucks apiece. And with the last one downtown, two hundred bucks in two hours!

Playing the airport is not always so profitable: it is in fact the biggest gamble out of any of the ways to “play” cabdriving, at least legally. Although all drivers dream of when there is an “open lot”—meaning no cabs—or a “drive through”—no stopping—on occasion the wait at the airport may stretch from one to over three hours. For this reason skilled airport players rely not only on their observations of how the airport is moving at a given time (since it may stop altogether at any minute), nor even on general knowledge about what times of day it typically moves:

**Ben:** Well, you asked me about the airport, what you do is you call them up in the morning before you go to work, or even the day before, I think they have the schedules over there... call them up at night and they give you the schedules for the next day.... I did it myself on the computer.... I'm gonna start going down to that computer shop there, the internet café, across the street from the Hilton. You can park your car there in line at the Hilton and run in there, spend ten, fifteen minutes getting that stuff off the computer.
There are times, nevertheless, when the airport is just plain slow. The airport at these times attracts certain breeds of cabdrivers—those who want to take a break and grab lunch from the snack truck, those too tired or lazy to return to the fray, those willing to invest a large amount of time hoping for an especially good trip. For this reason the airport is also a premier spot for drivers to socialize with their friends and for new drivers to learn the ropes, customs, and terminology from the older hands.

On a warm summer afternoon in the second lot, there is a flurry of activity although the cabs aren’t moving. Drivers sit in ones and twos around the edge of the lot, smoking or eating sandwiches from the take-out truck or which they brought from home. Larger groups coalesce to talk animatedly or around the hood of a cab where a game of tonk is in session. Other drivers sit in their cabs reading or listening to music. One driver chats with the starter while another throws bread to the pigeons.

It is not unusual for airports to develop distinct cab subcultures. Vidich (1976) writes acerbically of New York’s “airport rats,” and Townsend (2003: 99-102) devotes several pages to the idiosyncrasies of Heathrow cabbies. In San Francisco the inveterate airport player is considered less aggressive and resourceful than those who play the city, and experienced drivers are frequently heard to state that they “never stay at the airport” (or if encountered in the airport lot, that “this is the first time since God knows how long”)

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3 Tonk, a rummy-like game, fills the closest equivalent in San Francisco to the role craps played in Henslin’s St. Louis (Henslin: 1967b). Dedicated airport tonk players will pull their cabs out of line rather than be distracted by the need to actually go pick up passengers.

4 For a colorful description of the airport cab lot in Atlanta, see Dyer 2002.
that they’ve stopped there). Certainly the airport is more attractive to drivers from the small, independent companies which do not have radio or computer dispatch to speak of. R. A. Davis conducted his own survey and reported that whereas cabs “without viable radios” made up only 26% of the San Francisco cab fleet, they accounted for 63% of cabs sitting at the airport (Davis 1990: 79). That this fits with the popular view of airport players among their fellow drivers is illustrated in the following driver’s response when I showed him Davis’ statistics:

Seth: You mean he actually sat there and counted them? I coulda just told you that it was those kinds of drivers at the airport. He could have asked any cab driver, they would have just told him!

The amount of time which must be invested to get a trip from the airport leads some drivers to seek ways to either avoid the wait or to make the trip more profitable. The airport police like to remind drivers that, as some of the first San Franciscans tourists see, they play a role of “ambassadors” for the city. Nevertheless, it is clear that not all drivers play this role equally well, to the detriment not only of the city but of their fellow drivers:

Jake: I was waiting at the Miyako and there was these ladies there with luggage, waiting for the Super Shuttle. It was like four ladies, so I asked them, I said “How come you’re gonna take the Super Shuttle for sixty dollars when you can all get in a cab to SFO for just thirty-two from here?” And they said they already got a cab from the airport to their hotel and the guy charged them seventy dollars!

The driver who finds cheating tourists beneath himself may not always find it so distasteful to cheat other cab drivers by stealing ahead in line at the airport. The simplest,
boldest method is to “jump the lot,” that is, upon entering, to just follow the lead cars through and hope that no one notices that it is not your turn to go ahead. Another method is to fake a short by trading tickets with a friend who has a better time-stamp. Some drivers, unable to jump the whole lot, will find ways to move up one or two spaces at a time by driving around drivers who are asleep or who are taking too long to return to their cabs: since luck still prevails at the head of the line, however, these drivers may only be cheating themselves:

Jake: And at the airport's the same way, the guys always honking.... you step out of the cab or go take a pee or something, and the cabs haven’t really moved. So what happens, like one cab will just move up one car lane. And there's still sixty cabs in front, right? Nobody's going nowhere, and you went to take a piss, the guy behind you would just pull around you just to be in front of you. I said hey, I don't complain about it because a lot of time they're the one that gets screwed. I say hey, the guys going a short, right? Mine is going to San Jose. I say, if you didn't cut me off that fare would have been yours, the San Jose would have been yours. I woulda had the shit fare—why did you cut me off? It's your fault!

The best way to jump the lot—and one which doesn’t work anymore—is to call the airport starters on the phone and request your own cab at the terminal:

Jay: Me, Bob, and Tim would all pull in here at the back of the lines where we could still leave easy, you know? Then one of us would walk over to the first lot and drop a quarter in the pay phone. “Yes, can we have three Viking cabs at United in five minutes?” By the time we got back to our cabs they’d be sending us on up to United, and when we got there of course there was nobody waiting for us but nobody cared up there. “Huh? Well, they said three Vikings for United, we don’t know why there’s nobody here!” Then [the starter]’d just load us up with whoever came along and we were gone!
The caricature of airport players as conniving, slow-moving, or inexperienced makes these drivers the butt of not a few humorous stories, when drivers tell tales of other crazy drivers. Two (almost certainly apocryphal) stories will illustrate: the first of an airport driver who is too inexperienced, the second of one who is too inveterate a hustler. In the first story the driver is a brand new immigrant, fresh off the boat from Peru, or Lithuania, or some other such distant locale.\footnote{I was told this story by two immigrant drivers from Tunisia.} He gets a job driving a cab, but doesn’t know his way around. So what does he do? He goes and sits at the airport, of course! After waiting for hours, he gets his fare, a pleasant couple, and as he takes them onto the freeway he learns to his chagrin that they want to go downtown. Unfortunately the poor driver does not know where downtown is. But he gets a bright idea: he pulls over to the side of the freeway, gets out of the cab, and starts peering around into the distance, looking for the downtown skyscrapers. He still can’t see where they are, so he climbs up on the hood of the cab, looking all around with his hands shielding his eyes. No luck. Finally he climbs on the roof of the cab, still staring wildly off into the distance for any sign of downtown: in desperation he tries jumping up and down on the roof of the cab, trying to get a glimpse of tall distant buildings. His passengers, sitting inside the pummeled cab while their driver maniacally jumps up and down above their heads, decide he must be a madman and take off running down the side of the freeway, trying to hail another cab, more worried about their lives than their luggage, which is still in the first cab’s trunk.
The second story is told of an independent driver who was driving his own cab twenty-four hours a day, sleeping only at the airport between loads. As he was taking a businessman from the airport to the Hilton one time, he simply fell dead asleep on the freeway. Luckily the cab coasted over to the side and the passenger was able to leap over the seat and brake the cab. Try as he might, however, he could not wake up his sleeping cabdriver. Eventually he had to pull the sleeping cabbie into the front passenger seat, where he left him snoring. The passenger then drove himself to the Hilton and left the cab there, with the driver still sound asleep in the front!

As noted in Chapter Four, many drivers make a distinction between “good drivers”—themselves—and “bad drivers.” This distinction plays an important role in the construction of a driver identity based on competence and know-how. The drivers in the stories above are marked as “bad drivers,” in the first case for lack of experience, in the second case for losing control of the cab and having to be saved by the passenger. In both cases the ability of the “good driver” to tell these stories and laugh at them counteracts the specific anxieties the stories illustrate, and which all drivers are exposed to. In both stories the “bad drivers” are airport players; and not surprisingly, because of the uncertainty and lack of control experienced by drivers who wait at the airport.
Chapter 6
Playing the Streets

*He Who Cruises Never Loses*

Although, as has been noted, cabs started on stands and have returned to them throughout their history, they are at their most visible while cruising the streets on the prowl for fares, and it is in this activity—along with the passenger’s parallel action of hailing such a cab—that cabs are most prominent in the public imagination. Playing the streets involves a greater subtlety of understanding of the flows of people through the city than does sitting on a hotel line or stand. Certainly cabbies who play the streets have a higher opinion of themselves than they do of their relatively stationary coworkers, as expressed in the Australian cabdriver slogan, “He who cruises never loses, he who ranks [stands] never banks.”

Cruising through the city is when the driver’s skill and interpretive strategies come into play. A cab driver drifting down the center lane of a three-lane one-way street through Nob Hill, for instance, is probably paying close attention to all the following items:

1. First of all, whether her cab is in such a relation to the neighboring vehicles that she can move quickly and safely to the curb in either direction if hailed—this is best if no other car is close behind her in any of the three lanes;
2. The speed of the traffic ahead of and behind her, and whether she needs to adjust her speed to keep an optimal position in the road;
3. Whether her view of the edge of the street is unobstructed and unbroken for as many blocks ahead as possible, especially upcoming intersections, hotels, cafes, or other places hailers are more likely to be;

4. Whether there are other cabs ahead of her on the street, whether they are empty, whether they have blindspots where they can’t see hailers, how fast they are going, how free or hemmed in they are by surrounding traffic; how responsive the cabdrivers ahead are to her moves;

5. Whether there are other cabs behind her, whether they are empty, whether they are overtaking her or falling behind, whether they have the jump on a stretch of the side of the street which she is blocked from; how responsive the cabdrivers behind are to her moves;

6. The body language of people on the street, coming out of doorways, standing at bus stops, etc.; whether people seem to be scanning the traffic for cabs or busses, or in the midst of deciding how to get somewhere;

7. The same things of people glimpsed coming down sidestreets towards the main street;

8. Watching out for late hailers—keeping likely hailers in view while and even after passing them if they don’t seem to have noticed her, if there is room to stop suddenly and if cabs behind her are full or can’t easily get to the late hailer;

9. If a radio cab, listening for the dispatcher calling orders in the vicinity, while also keeping track of what other cabs have checked in recently in the immediate area and where they are likely to have gotten to now.

This may, of course, be supplemented by such preoccupations as listening to music, chatting on a cell phone, or lighting a cigarette.

Cabs which are cruising for fares and cabs which are concentrating on radio calls will move somewhat differently. Cabs looking for flags will focus on the sides of the streets, while those listening for radio calls will focus on the potential for quick alteration

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1 It is good to have full cabs ahead of you, since people who hail them thus make themselves visible sooner than they would otherwise.
of direction, in particular the freedom to suddenly swerve down cross-streets. Thus, for instance, cabs looking for street hails may stop at intersections in the side lanes, since fares coming from either side will take the first cab they come to. Some cabs listening for radio calls may choose to stop in the center lane (assuming as above there are three codirectional lanes), back at least half a car length from the crosswalk, so that if a radio call comes in down the cross-street in either direction, the driver can turn either way.² Most radio-dispatched cabs, of course, play both the radio and the streets at the same time, and so the distinction made above is a bit idealized. Playing the radio is discussed in a later section; the remainder of this section will focus strictly on cruising for fares without a radio.

Recognition and Interpretation

The success of cruising for fares relies on a certain understanding between drivers and passengers, as well as certain communicative norms which allow them to interact smoothly. For one thing, passengers must recognize cabs as cabs, and cabbies must recognize potential fares as such as well. Cabs are identifiable by virtue of tradition, by frequent reproduction in movies and literature, etc., and since the early 20th century by being brightly and eye-catchingly colored so as to be easily distinguishable from regular cars. The most common cab color, yellow, was the innovation of John D. Hertz, the early taxicab pioneer today memorialized in the name of Hertz Rent-a-Car, who picked yellow

² The reader should keep in mind that turning either direction from the center lane requires split-second timing with the traffic light and a careful eye for pedestrians, and should be left to professionals. On
based on a University of Chicago study which claimed that it was the most visible color from a distance (Gilbert and Samuels 1982: 42). Today cabs are usually easily distinguished from other vehicles not only by their color schemes and wording on the side but by the presence of a top-light and often an advertising fin.

Passengers must make cabbies aware that they want a ride, and for this purpose the most common method of hailing a cab, that of holding one’s arm stiffly up and out into the street, must have developed and spread along with the practice of plying for hire itself. This gesture is almost universally understood, at least in the United States, and even those who have never hailed a cab before have no trouble making use of it. The only problem is that some people use this gesture appropriate to cabs for catching the attention of busses: this causes cabs to pull into the bus stop, to the annoyance of the approaching bus driver.

There are competing ways to signal the desire for a cab, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses:

1. A variety of waves are used—they have the advantage that motion attracts attention; however, people wave at a variety of things, so misunderstanding is a problem here. The standard street hail described above is less ambivalent.
2. People who use more motion, such as waving both arms and jumping up and down, run the risk of being dismissed by the driver as potentially drunk, agitated, or unruly, and thus not worth picking up.
3. Much subtler motions are sometimes used by the experienced cab rider, such as slight nods of the head or the raising of a single finger. These require first making eye contact with the driver, and so are

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only practicable in situations where the driver and the passenger are in close proximity and the driver is moving fairly slowly.

4. It is not uncommon for people to whistle for a cab; this is a skill popularly associated with cab hailing, the successful execution of which seems invariably to be highly pleasurable to the one who has just done it—indeed, fares who have whistled me down will often comment on how and when they learned to whistle for cabs, and how it is the best way to hail cabs. It is not, however, the best way to hail cabs, since a loud whistle reverberates, making it difficult for drivers to tell from what direction it is coming. It is also ambivalent, since people whistle at a number of things, such as their friends or their dogs. In some neighborhoods, lookouts whistle to signal the approach of police. Thus a whistle is not a clear sign to a cabbie; upon hearing a whistle, many drivers will usually look around, and if they do not see anyone who clearly needs a cab, they will drive on. A whistle thus needs to be accompanied by a more clear-cut gesture.

5. The best verbal way of hailing a cab is simply to shout “Taxi!” It is not at all ambivalent and it is easy for the driver to tell in which direction the hailer is standing.

Upon seeing a potential fare, drivers will evaluate them based on a number of factors. The more superficial of these include body language, dress, and for some drivers, ethnicity and gender. Of these body language is in my mind the most important, for it indicates the fare’s state of mind, which is more immediately relevant to their desirability as passengers than any estimate of their character based on more static or reductive categorization, such as race.

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3 This does not apply to hotel doormen, who are very accomplished at producing distinct whistles, so much so that cabbies who frequent their stands may recognize which hotel the whistle is coming from, even from blocks away.

4 “A person on the corner or curbside raises his or her hand and calls out “Taxi!” Anything more than this is suspect. Sometimes people blurt out something incomprehensible or disrespectful; I usually just pass them by. I usually ignore whistlers too, as that’s the way you call a dog, not another human being” (Santee 1989: 114).
More subtle criteria for evaluating prospective passengers relate to their desirability as passengers and as a fare—in other words, 1) how pleasant or at least minimally stressful it would be to have them as passengers in the cab; 2) how profitable the trip is likely to be; and 3) how the trip is likely to fit in to the driver’s plan for his or her overall day.

Fred Davis (1959) claimed that the cabdrivers he studied, those of Chicago, employed “an extensive typology of cab users, the attributes imputed to each type having a certain predictive value, particularly as regards tipping” (Davis 1959: 162). The types Davis lists are the Sport, the Blowhard, the Businessman, the Lady Shopper, and Live Ones (ibid.: 162-3). Following Davis’ lead, some other ethnographers of the taxicab have delineated similar passenger typologies. Thus D. L. Stannard, for instance, gives the following types according to San Francisco cabbies circa 1971: the Businessman, the Shopper, the Tourist, the Working Stiff, and the No Go (Stannard 1971: 45).

While the cabdrivers with whom I worked could probably easily fill in a description for each of the above terms, explaining the relevance of each type to tipping behavior and overall desirability, such explicit categorization using “argot terms” (as Stannard calls them) is not attested by my seven years of experience as a San Francisco cab driver. Drivers do, however, evaluate street hails according to a set of pertinent criteria. James Henslin is thus closer to my experience when he qualifies his passenger typology (the elements of which he has the taste not to capitalize) by noting that what drivers are attuned to in judging passengers includes such variables as their apparent level of prosperity, their likeliness to tip, their level of sobriety, and most importantly, where
they seem to be coming from and where they seem to be going to (Henslin 1967a: 176-7). In other words, passengers coming out of bars are judged differently than those coming out of hotels; people who make no show of needing a cab beyond standing on corners with luggage will always get the attention of cabbies, who may often go so far as to pull up and ask if they need a ride to the airport. On the other hand, no one standing at Sixth and Jessie, in front of a transient hotel, will ever catch a cab—not if the entire fleet were to pass them empty.

**Race and Destination**

The destination a driver infers to a prospective passenger—infers, since it is illegal to refuse a fare once they have *told* you where they are going—may have much to do with the much reported reluctance of cabdrivers to accept black passengers. Although there is no shortage of racist drivers as well as many who employ a simplistic rubric in order to exclude criminals and would-be robbers from their cabs (this is anyway the rationale which such drivers offer), the fact is that the job selects against anyone who passes up a fare with good money. Green is the only color that matters to the skilled driver. A black businessman will catch a cab easier at California and Montgomery than will a white college student standing next to him. When both the black man and the white man are businessmen, then racism may rear its ugly head; but cabdrivers have no monopoly on this. Significantly, however, even the rational choices of non-racist drivers may end up reinforcing the structural violences of urban racial geography.
Some drivers assume that blacks do not have enough money for a long fare, and that they will therefore be a short run. Some drivers claim that black passengers do not tip well.\(^5\) To avoid being filtered out by the cabdriver’s screening system, black cab riders may adopt hailing strategies to redirect the drivers’ attentions to more pertinent matters than race. One black passenger told me that he always flags cabs with a dollar bill in his hand:

**Passenger:** They see that *green* and they stop. That stops them!

Another young black male passenger related the frustration he experienced trying to get a cab on Market Street:

**Passenger:** None of the other cabbies would stop for me. I’m like waving my arms—“Hey, cabbie!” It’s like I gotta be jumping up and down, out there, just for them to see me! I got to jump in front of their cab, or I’m invisible!

Unfortunately this way of getting the attention of cabbies—who might more easily choose to ignore him if he was not assertive—could backfire, since hailers who appear agitated, energetically waving arms, jumping, or shouting for a cab, may be dismissed as drunk or unruly. This passenger thus runs the risk of getting caught in a vicious circle whenever he hails a cab.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Santee, who is black, offers some possible reasons for this, including “deep cultural roots and generations of enforced deprivation” (Santee 1989: 188).

But what many drivers claim is that black fares will take them to bad (that is, black) neighborhoods, where they may be robbed or assaulted, or less sensational, simply be too far from the next fare. Thus it is not necessarily the fare they distrust, but the presumed destination. Henslin notes this (1968: 148-9), admitting to having been scared by a black passenger until he discovered that his destination was a middle-class black neighborhood.

Stannard notes a defense which black passengers have developed against cabdrivers suspicious of their destinations, which he calls “destination vagueness.” Realizing that drivers may not like their destinations, some passengers employ roundabout means of avoiding telling the driver the ultimate destination until the trip is already underway, or even until the destination is reached. Stannard gives an example from his own experience:

Black Fare: “Go straight out Turk Street, I’ll tell you when to turn.”

After he gave me several directions to turn right or left, we wound up at a well-known bar in the middle of the Fillmore. The black fare could have told me to take him to the “X” Club, but he chose to be vague (Stannard 1971: 68).

Stannard notes that destination vagueness “usually results in heightening the cabbie’s level of anxiety” by reducing his or her control over the cab and its trajectory (ad loc.). I was coached from early on never to take a fare without a clear destination, and

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7 cf. Hazard (1930: 210): “People hiring a cab to go to that neighborhood give the address after they are in the cab so the driver won’t kick her into second and step on the gas and beat it.”
any time I encountered “destination vagueness” I pulled over to the side and stopped the meter until the passenger came up with a destination. The fares I experienced this with were not all or even primarily black—a good many were white, latino, or of other ethnic groups. In almost all cases, however, their destination was in a poorer neighborhood likely to arouse suspicion or distrust in a cabdriver.8

My intent here is not to claim that cabdrivers are never racist; however, the criteria by which they evaluate fares may disproportionately exclude blacks even when race is not taken into account. Also, the actions taken by blacks in response to this exclusion may result in reinforcing other criteria for exclusion cabdrivers use. The assumptions drivers make about black hailers in these circumstances may not be just or correct but they are based on concerns built into the nature of the occupation. The individual cabdriver, of course, will inevitably bring his or her own preconceptions into play. In the segment below a white driver combines a clearly racist attitude with a complaint about the practice of destination vagueness:

**Doc:** And blacks—you never know about these fucking assholes. They don't tip.... They have no concept. Or else they get into cabs, they say take me down to uh, you know, you know. I say I don't know, and then I have to argue with the motherfucker.

The factors which scare cabdrivers away from minority neighborhoods—their crime, their lack of business, and their peripheral situation—are the very factors by which

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8 The aberrant cases had to do with drunk yuppie kids, whose ambition was to direct the cabbie around town as if he were their chauffeur.
spatial inequalities in the city are perpetuated. By these factors and related ones—such as limited access to transportation, investment, and education—the mobility, both spatial and social, of people who live in these neighborhoods is sharply curtailed. The decisions made by cabdrivers as they try to build a safe, profitable trajectory for themselves out of those offered to them by the potential passengers they encounter have the capacity to reinforce or alleviate these inequalities through what choices drivers make and which passengers are accepted. Thus, for good or ill, the relation between marginalized groups and the urban order which restricts their mobility is reenacted in each encounter between cab and potential customer.\(^9\)

**Finding the Fares**

Fred Davis (1959: 159) writes that:

> In a large city like Chicago the hiring of a cab by a passenger may be conceived of in much the same way as the random collision of particles in an atomic field.

James Henslin (1967a: 190) has pointed out that Davis’ description exaggerates the randomness and unpredictability of the interactions of drivers and passengers, due in part to the coincidence of the “routines of daily life” of drivers and passengers, thus drawing the two together more often than would be the case if both their trajectories through the city were completely random. Besides the fact that drivers and passengers

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\(^9\) An enlightened discussion of how this led to the fragmented New York City cab market is found in Gordon 1983.
both settle into routines of daily movement, cab drivers actively seek to anticipate the movements of their prospective passengers, if not as individuals then as a group. Although Davis’ “random collision of particles” adequately describes the intersection of any given cab driver with any given cab passenger, the movement of passengers and drivers is not truly random but follows the fairly predictable circadian rhythms and patterns of movement of the city. Thus although they are subject ultimately to the reign of chance in their search for fares, drivers can nevertheless increase their odds of finding passengers by drawing on their experiences, and through the constant attention to the flows and ebbs of the city inculcated by the vicissitudes of their work.

**Seth:** Well, Post and Sutter, lower Nob Hill is good, because I'm just gonna drive up and down, down Post to Taylor, come up Taylor to Sutter, back up Sutter to Hyde or Polk, and then come back up down Post—just go around in circles on that street, because as I was sitting there this morning... there were like four people flagging cabs right at that corner...

Often the more obvious streets may already have a number of cabs on them, so competition for fares can be fierce if there are more cabs than customers. Some drivers react to this by switching to sidestreets:

**Jay:** All those drivers are going up and down the same streets, but if you just go over one to the next street over, you can get a fare there too, because people are on their way to—like Union, for instance, all the cabs are going up and down, but go down Filbert and you’ll get the people before they even get to Union to flag a cab there!

Other drivers insist that it is always better to stay on the main hailing streets, since they are continuously generating business:
Taoufik: Stay in the middle, that's where the business is. You can get something on either side there, too... It's like on busy street, like Polk, you never know, if there's like three cabs in front of you, still, the people come out of the store just then, they make up their minds they want a cab just then, it's like, they're gonna pick you.

Seth: ...and they come down the hill to Sutter and then throw their arm up—so its not like they're walking up Sutter, so you never know when they’re gonna be there, if one minute there could be nobody on Sutter, looking for a cab and then they all come down the hill, down Taylor, down Leavenworth, down Jones, to Sutter because they know that's where the cabs are. And then they—so there could be 3 or 4 people wanting a cab within, like, a couple seconds.

Drivers may attribute their success not to such mundane analysis but to a paranormal awareness:

Tom: There’s also psychic stuff. I don’t do this often because you probably shouldn’t do it for the pursuit of money, but I’ll close my eyes and think, Where’s the fare? where’s the fare?—over there. Then I’d drive over there and there’d be one. I’m not wholly comfortable with it, but I know it does work (laughs). You imagine someone out there in the city, his mind vibrations are saying “I need a cab, I need a cab to the airport” and if you can hear that you wouldn’t need a radio. You could train yourself to hear that. I’ve heard a lot of drivers talk about that.

My feeling is that the awareness this driver is speaking of is better explained as the experience of being attuned, physically and mentally, to the spatiotemporal movement of the city. Such an interpretation, at least, would support my thesis.

Although the best way to play the streets is to keep moving, when business is slow it sometimes pays to sit in some location where business is often generated:
Seth: Today my strategy will be not to rest, to sit in any one place in particular, but, or if I do to sit in a strategic spot where there's lots of people.

[Like what?]

Seth: Like California/Polk, or maybe Union/Buchanan.

[You ever try sitting there before?]

Seth: Yeah, I do. California/Polk there's like, a little white zone there by the bagel shop, and you know its either I can get a radio call or somebody walks up to me and hires me.

There is the potential problem that prospective fares will not recognize a parked cab as one that is available for hire:

Seth: The strange thing about sitting still at California and Polk is that people will walk to the corner, stand in front of you, and then when a cab is driving by they'll jump out in front of it while I'm sitting here waiting for them. They don't even come up and inquire, as to if I'm available. For some reason it seems it looks as if I'm waiting for something else.

Non-recognition and Miscommunication

Strangely enough, passengers, especially those who do not regularly take cabs, may not recognize cabs as available if they are sitting still, as in the above example, or if the cabs are travelling in the opposite direction from that in which they wish to go. One weekend when the entire city was disrupted by a massive anti-war protest, I was trolling the bus lines looking for stranded fares. There was no shortage of such people: as I cruised along the N Judah line in the early Sunset there were more than twice the number of people waiting at each stop than could fit on the metro train. I was puzzled by the fact
that although train after train went by filled to bursting and so not even stopping for the people waiting at the stops, nevertheless nobody hailed my cab as I passed. I was travelling outbound, in the direction opposite to the busses: after travelling several blocks past hordes of people, I decided to turn around and give them all another chance. As soon as I had turned around, I was mobbed by about twenty passengers at the first stop I passed; and after I had chosen some passengers (the ones who seem most polite and not pushy are best in such a situation, as they’ll be the best fares and will probably tip well), at each subsequent bus-stop that we passed the same mob scene recurred. I was forced to retreat to a side street to avoid the people who would surround my cab at each corner, regardless of the fact that I already had a passenger.

Thus, despite a long urban tradition of street hailing and cruising, the driver’s attempt to communicate availability to the passenger occasionally breaks down. A Florida cabbie reports a common experience:

A man waves at me from an intersection and I pull in alongside him. He leans in and clings to my door. Not sure if I am a mirage, he slurs, “Are you a taxi?” Despite the fact that the word “TAXI” appears no less than six times on my vehicle, the question does not strike me as unusual (Suib 2003).

Another annoyance drivers report is passengers who hesitate to hail a cab until they are certain it is empty. This perhaps has to do with the passenger’s desire to project confidence and competence in performing the maneuver of an urban street hail—the fear of un成功fully hailing a cab is dealt with by only hailing those which one is sure are empty. This despite the fact that drivers are completely comfortable simply not stopping
for people when they are full—they see no faux pas here. In any event drivers are
annoyed by late hailers because they are dangerous: slamming on the brakes to stop in
time may cause an accident, and drivers do not have the time to give late hailers the
amount of scrutiny which they like to give people before they let them into the cab.

Seth: I was driving down California and there was this guy standing out
on the edge of the street, I saw him from blocks away—he was just
looking into the traffic, I figured he was looking for a cab. So I drive up
to him, and I look at him, and he looks at me and he just stands there with
his hands at his sides, so I figure, oh, he doesn’t want a cab—and then,
just as I’m passing him he flings his hand up, way up, and I slam on the
brakes, so I stop just five or ten feet past him. And I wait, and wait, and I
think, where is this guy? So I look back and he’s still standing there,
looking in the opposite direction for a cab—he didn’t even see me pull
over and stop. So I’m not going to back up on California, so I just leave—
drive down the street, turn the corner, turn the other corner, and then I
think, I wonder if that guy is still standing there on California? So I go
around the block and there he is, staring into traffic. So I drive up
alongside him again and we make eye contact, and I think he’s gotta
recognize me from a minute ago, but he makes no movement. No
movement whatsoever, so I think, oh, maybe he was just waving to a
friend or something, I only thought he was waving for a cab. So I drive by
him, and then, just then, whoosh! He throws his arm up right when I pass
him! So I slam on the brakes again, and again he’s just standing there
looking away from me, doesn’t even look to see if I stopped! So now I’m
getting pissed off and I think, you know, I’m gonna get even with this guy.
So I drive all the way around the block again, and when I get back this
guy’s still standing there—God knows how many other cabs he’s done
this to, I can’t be the only one—so I pull up in front of him and just stop. I
just stop and without doing anything he walks right up and tries to get in
the cab. But I’ve got all the doors locked. So I’m waving to him, like,
“Come on, get in,” and he’s pulling at the door, trying the door and it
won’t open. So I look at him like, “What’s the matter? Are you gonna get
in or not? The door’s open!” So he’s getting more frustrated, cause [the
cab] is a van and he’s not sure if he’s opening [the door] right, and I just
go like, “Hey, I don’t have time for this crap, I’m leaving!” And I drive
off. I just leave him there, and this time he looked after me! (laughs) That
was pretty funny.
The reader is asked to pardon the length of the above segment on account of the light it sheds on the frustration experienced when the expected communication between drivers and passengers breaks down, as well as on how a driver might occasionally exact revenge on such occasions.

Norms of Behavior

As stated above, for the interaction of cabbies and those who hail them to be successful, some set of understandings and ways of communicating must be in operation. There tend also to be more or less accepted norms of behavior which help the transaction run more smoothly: these seem to undergo transformations, however, as the respect in which drivers and hailers hold each other varies with supply and demand.

Pedestrians who are not interested in cabs sometimes misunderstand the intention of the direct eye contact which passing cab drivers make with them. In other contexts, such eye contact has very different meanings. Between drivers and those who do want cabs, however, there can be a contractual element to this exchange of glances. Drivers may be faithful to the first passenger who hailed them, turning down closer or better loads until the correct fare is loaded; passengers may also wait for the first cab they hailed to pick them up, even as three others they had not seen swarm them. In such instances Davis’ randomly colliding particles develop an almost instantaneous faithfulness, which is not so much a faithfulness to each other as to a voluntary moral order, to an ethic of behavior that mitigates Simmel’s impersonal metropolis.
Similarly, among cabdrivers, it is generally the custom, as long as business is
good, not to cut each other off, and not to race for street hails: two cabs in such a
situation could cruise on quite friendly terms side by side down the street, never needing
to enunciate the understanding that the cab on the left owned all hails on the left, and the
cab on the right all those on the right.

It is when business is sour that this cooperation evaporates. When business is
slow, competition is fierce, and the same drivers who may have genteelly waved a fare to
another driver who had the right of way, may now, as often as not, derive satisfaction and
and a sense of professional skillfulness from being the first to see a fare, or the first to
take advantage of the caprice of traffic flows to pull a U-turn, jet ahead, or swerve
suddenly to get the fare.

Driving downtown on Mission one afternoon, on two subsequent blocks, I barely
missed a flag because another cab swooped in from one way or another. Then some
businessmen flagged me, and I thought, these guys are mine for sure, but as the light
turned red, a Bloom’s Cab going the other way made a U-turn on Mission and swooped
in front. The guys I thought would wait for me had already turned away, looking up
Second for cabs with the green: the U-turner pulled up and beeped and they were
surprised, aha! And as soon as they had turned around another cab stopped behind them
on Second. They laughed as they tried to figure out which one to take. They ended up
waving the disappointed U-turner off and taking the last cab they had hailed, just as his
light turned red and I drove by glaring, forgotten. It is not just the surplus of cabs, of
course, which erodes the customer’s feeling, upon hailing a cab, that that one and no
other is “his” cab: equally, it is the competition, the way drivers race and cut each other off, which releases the hailer from a sense of having to act in accordance with such norms.

I am reminded, though, of an observation Henslin made of cab company management objectives: that by keeping cabdrivers in a condition of impoverishment and uncertainty, they assured themselves of an easily managed pool of labor of “a fawning, self-ingratiating type which is grateful for every ‘favor’ it receives” (Henslin 1974: 77). When business cycles into a slump, the dissolution of fair-weather norms among cabdrivers and hailers illustrates another way in which Schlosberg’s atomization process pits drivers against each other.
Chapter 7

Playing the Radio

Basics of Radio Procedure

Although well-known buildings or locations may be called by name, for most orders downtown or in the busier neighborhoods radio designation is by cross streets. The cross streets are 1) naturally, the street the order is on; and 2) that street from which a driver would have to be coming in order to be on the correct side of the street to pick up the fare. The correct “cross street” is thus not to be confused with the closest crossing street. This method, when used by a competent dispatcher, allows drivers to know whether to turn right or left at the appropriate intersection without stopping to look at the street numbers, based on their knowledge of “odds and evens.” Since, in San Francisco, the majority of streets follow a fairly simple rule as to which side is odd and which side is even, drivers with any amount of experience will understand that if an order is called “Hayes/Divisadero” and the address is revealed as “1318 Hayes,” they should turn west on Hayes from Divisadero to reach the order because all even numbers on Hayes (as on all east/west streets north of Market) are on the north side.
Figure 2: Cross-Street Dispatch Method

In the above figure (Figure 2), a typical four-way intersection in which both streets are two-way, all addresses on the street sides highlighted are dispatched as “California/Steiner.” This would include an address on California at the corner of Pierce, if it were on the even-numbered, or north, side. Similarly, an address on the southwest corner of the intersection of California and Steiner (actually a gas station) would not be dispatched as “California/Steiner” but as “California/Pierce.” Although contradictory to many people’s common usage, and an occasional source of miscommunication between drivers and passengers, this method of assigning cross-streets is highly efficient and has the advantage that for any given address in the city, there is only one correct cross-street.
Drivers also check in with their location by cross-streets. This is properly the intersection they are either in or are about to drive through. If a driver is in the very intersection called by the dispatcher, he or she checks in as “bingo:”

**Dispatcher:** Geary/Hyde....
**Driver:** Cab Twenty-seven, bingo Geary/Hyde.
**Dispatcher:** We have a bingo.... Twenty-seven, 855 Geary....
**Driver:** 855 Geary.\(^2\)

More commonly, there is no “bingo” driver, so the dispatcher has to evaluate a number of bids:

**Dispatcher:** Pine/Van Ness....
**Driver 1:** Thirty-two, Sutter/Larkin....
**Driver 2:** Nine-seven-eight, Pine/Polk...
**Driver 3:** Ninety-one, Pine/Taylor...
**Dispatcher:** Nine-seven-eight, I’ve got you, and the Sutter, and who else?...
**Driver 3:** Ninety-one, Pine/Taylor...
**Dispatcher:** Ninety-one, check. Nine-seven-eight, the Towers for Stevens...
**Driver 2:** Towers, Stevens.

Every driver has to be verbally acknowledged—“recognized” or “checked”—by the dispatcher in order to know that their bid has been heard. In the above example, the dispatcher did not hear Driver 3 the first time he checked in. Before dispatching an order,

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1 In this chapter hypothetical, as opposed to reported, radio discourse is distinguished by italics.

2 This study follows a modified form of the convention used for representing radio discourse used in Henslin (1967a). (...) indicates a pause in the ongoing speech of the dispatcher; (....) indicates an implicit pause while the dispatcher or driver stops transmitting to listen for a response. Cross streets are separated by a slash (/) to distinguish them from other street name combinations. Longer ellipses stand for unheard statements, as by drivers whom only the dispatcher can hear.
the dispatcher will usually ask a question like “who else?” in case there are other drivers bidding who have not been heard. The example also includes the two most common ways in which drivers are “checked:” by cab number ("Nine-seven-eight, I’ve got you") and by street ("and the Sutter"). The driver who gets the fare repeats the address back to the dispatcher, so that the dispatcher knows that the order was understood correctly. The example furthermore includes samples of ways that the dispatcher can subtly communicate to drivers their relative standing in relation to the order, thus:

_Dispatcher:_ Nine-seven-eight, I’ve got you, and....

Being checked by number as one who is “got” is encouraging, as it communicates to the driver that he or she is most likely in relatively good standing for the call: the orders are after all dispatched by cab number, not location ("Nine-seven-eight, the Towers for Stevens"). Compare this with

_Dispatcher:_ ....and the Sutter,...

The dispatcher may not have heard the number of the cab on Sutter, and may just be checking it by location to be expedient. However, the driver is aware that if he or she was the closest cab to the call, the dispatcher would ask for their cab number:

_Dispatcher:_ Sutter/Larkin, what’s your number?
as the dispatcher can’t give out the order without a number to assign it to. Thus a driver who is checked by location will be slightly less encouraged than one who is checked by number.

_Dispatcher_: Ninety-one, check.

“Check” simply means “you are read,” with in this context a further implication that “your location is not competitive.” It can be delivered quite straightforwardly, but if emphasis is placed on the “check,” the meaning becomes “stop wasting my time by checking in so far away.” Another way to put this, without or without sarcasm, would be “Ninety-one is clear.”

The dispatcher could also have checked the drivers differently in the above example. Taking the same original check-ins, we could just as well have:

_Dispatcher_: Pine/Van Ness...
_Driver 1_: Thirty-two, Sutter/Larkin....
_Driver 2_: Nine-seven-eight, Pine/Polk...
_Driver 3_: Ninety-one, Pine/Taylor...
_Dispatcher_: I’ve got nine-seven-eight a block away, who’s bingo?....
....nine seven eight, the Towers for Stevens...
_Driver_: The Towers for Stevens.

By “exposing the location” of the lead driver, the dispatcher can stop any cabs further away from checking in at all, thus saving time and potential aggravation. This also saves time for the drivers as well: for example, if in the first example the dispatcher had exposed the location of cab 978, cab 91 would not have had to have come in again,
since it would not have mattered whether he had been read by the dispatcher. He would have known that he was “clear,” that is, out of the running for the order.

To be the driver whose location is exposed can be encouraging, since you know that your location is the standard by which the dispatcher is judging all competing bids. However, other drivers may take advantage of knowing the lead cab’s location to “stretch:” to lie about their location in hopes of improving their chances of getting the order. Stretching as a problem waxes and wanes with competition over orders: when business is good it is not a problem, but when things are slow it is rampant enough that any drivers empty within range of a radio call are likely to “check out” the driver who received the order by driving by the address—if the dispatched driver is not the first there, it is presumed that he or she was stretching, and the order is reassigned.

When the dispatcher has more calls than she can dispatch, she will try to push some of them to encourage drivers to check in. Drivers evaluate fares in these circumstances according to three all-important criteria: 1) where it is going (i.e., how profitable it will be and where it will leave the driver); 2) how close it is (how much time will be consumed before the meter is running); and 3) how likely the fare is to actually be at the address and still wanting a cab when the driver shows up. Although they have little control over the second criterion, dispatchers play on the first and third criteria in enticing drivers to take particular calls.

Most commonly, dispatchers can distinguish particular calls from others by adding information over the air such as:
**Dispatcher**: Outer Third, Inner Sunset, at the UC, Twenty-Six and Diamond, who’ll ride the Potrero Hill?....

Attentive drivers will immediately begin to wonder on hearing this what is special about the order on Potrero Hill—most likely it is either a regular or a callback, whom the dispatcher is trying to help out, or it is a good fare such as an airport, with which the dispatcher is trying to reward drivers who listen to and help her out on the radio.

Equivalent expressions are: “Potrero Hill, somebody go....,” “Anyone for the Potrero Hill?....,” and slightly less directly, “Potrero Hill, en route....” The dispatcher who uses these phrases can plant ideas in drivers’ heads without in fact making any promises about where the fare is actually going. Of course, a dispatcher who repeatedly entices drivers into taking calls “en route” which don’t turn out to be worthwhile trips will have increasing difficulty getting drivers to take such calls.

The dispatcher may also push orders by exposing their destinations, provided of course that she knows these. “It’s going,” “going south,” or “with wings” are all ways to distinguish airport rides. “Coming downtown” is also a desirable quality for distant neighborhood calls, such as those in the Excelsior, Visitacion Valley, or Parkside. The downside to exposing a good destination is that the dispatcher may find too many drivers checking in where there had been too few a minute before:

**Dispatcher**: Gotta outer Third/LaSalle, going to the airport...... I should never have told you it was going to the airport, now I got the whole fleet checking in and I’ll never be able to hear anybody!
Dispatchers can reassure drivers as to the trackability of an order by divulging that the caller is a “regular rider,” or has “called back.” Both of these traits encourage drivers to trust that the fare will still be good when they get there, so the trip to pick it up will not have been a waste of time. Furthermore, the loyalty of some regular customers inspires a reciprocal loyalty among some cabdrivers, who will go out of their way to serve a regular rider even when business is good, reasoning that this rider will continue to be a source of income when business turns sour.

A few dispatchers make use of somewhat more underhanded tactics in getting drivers to take orders off the radio. When dispatchers are rattling off the same sequence of cross-streets over and over, radio drivers quickly get a sense of what orders are fresh and which ones are old and thus more likely to result in no-goes. A driver will not ride an old call, and may not even check in for one in his immediate neighborhood if street business is more easily had. At one company I worked for, however, the dispatchers were notorious for shifting the cross streets of old orders to make them more enticing for unaware cab drivers. Thus, a dispatcher calling “Green and Laguna” for several minutes with no takers may suddenly change it to “Green and Octavia” simply for the purpose of tricking drivers who had come to ignore the Green/Laguna call (having heard it on the air for too long) but who would check right in without thinking for a fresh call on Green and Octavia.

The basics of radio procedure are not too difficult, but their correct application is a more involved thing. To be good at the radio drivers must learn the timing of when to come in as well as what aspects of procedure are best invoked on what occasions. Even
more significantly in the long run, drivers must learn how to interpret the dispatcher and
the other drivers over the radio, and by corollary, gain a sense of what information they
themselves give out to others through their check-ins. The bulk of radio technique is
acquired through experience—learning by doing.

Learning the Radio

**Tom:** I didn’t play the radio when I was new—it was probably two years
before I learned. It just sounded like some guy babbling on with all these
addresses, and I didn't know where any of them were.

Tom’s confession is not an uncommon one. Many cabdrivers, not just
immigrants, have enough trouble learning the ropes of driving in the city, dealing with
passengers, and learning their way around when they first start the job. They look upon
the radio as an additional cause of stress and aggravation, a daunting, incomprehensible
jumble of unspoken rules and dog-eat-dog behavior. Santee uses an apt analogy:

> It is almost like getting onto and out of a dance floor in the heat of a
Virginia reel: it takes a good deal of grace, poise, timing, and rhythm to do
it right. (Santee 1989: 87)

The amount of radio business a company has, and the existence of a core of
drivers skilled at radio use, has a profound effect on the profitability of radio play. At
different companies radio procedure and the radio culture of drivers may differ.

**Dave:** I wasn't making as much money at El Dorado Taxi...

[Do you think it was cause you were new over there, or...?]
Dave: No, I think its because they actually train all their drivers to use the radio.

[(laughs)]

Dave: As opposed to just putting you out there and you know, sink or swim, learn to use it if you want. Get yelled at either way, whether you learn it or not, and you know….

Dave is actually complaining about the fact that El Dorado Taxi trains its drivers to use the radio, as this causes too much competition on the air. It is actually far more common for companies to simply throw new drivers out on the street with minimal training: “sink or swim, learn to use it if you want.” At times of year when new hires are common, such as late winter, dispatchers are frequently heard to complain, “Who trained this guy anyway? Is this your first day? Why don’t they train these guys?” The fact is that it is the dispatchers themselves who for the most part train new drivers to use the radio. Often this involves patiently explaining proper procedure and terminology over the air. In the next selection the new driver of cab 334 has called “bingo” for an order, but was beaten to the address by 855. Cab 855 picked up the passenger, and when 334 complained about this to the dispatcher, the dispatcher patiently explained the meaning of “bingo:”

Dispatcher: Thirty-four, yes..
334:.................
Dispatcher: 855 is right, when you call a bingo, the order is open.
334:.................
Dispatcher: That's just the way the game is played, it's no big thing. We'll get you another.
334:............
Dispatcher: Thirty-four, please calm down. We do it that way for everyone. We'll get you another.
New drivers sometimes come with preconceptions about radio procedure, such as use of the term “copy” instead of repeating an address, or of “ten-four” instead of “check.” It is up to the dispatcher to straighten them out:

**Dispatcher:** Uh, we don't do the copy thing here, so what you do is you say, “One sixteen, I'll let you know”, okay? and you let me know Vallejo and Taylor.... Right, okay, we got that out of the way, alright who else (laughs)....

Dispatchers may also apply negative sanction and ridicule to instruct drivers on proper procedure and behavior. A driver who fails to follow proper radio procedure may be threatened with being ignored:

**Dispatcher:** Whoever wants over, do it in the right way, and I'll acknowledge you....

In the following instance the driver is being chided for stretching:

**Dispatcher:** 988, you checked in at 22 and Church ten minutes ago.... 988:.............
**Dispatcher:** I know, but you're telling me it took you ten minutes to go three blocks?

Besides letting the driver know he has been caught, the dispatcher is letting all the other drivers on the radio know that 988 was stretching. The driver of cab 988 can expect extra scrutiny from other drivers for the rest of the day, as well as some taunting, neither particularly nasty nor especially good-spirited, when he turns in to the garage at the end of his shift.
Henslin has pointed out that social control by dispatchers through sarcasm, censure, and threats is a significant socialization tool for new drivers. Although separated from each other most of the day, most drivers are focused on the radio and hear almost everything the dispatcher says. Thus although no one but the dispatcher hears any given driver, all the drivers hear what the dispatcher says, and so his or her censure or ridicule of a driver takes place in front of their peers (Henslin 1974: 72-3).

Dispatchers do not only teach with sarcasm, but may also take new drivers who are having difficulty under their wing. In the following instance, the dispatcher was trying to ride a new driver to a fare, but she was not responding, being uncertain of procedure. Other drivers, sensing her hesitancy, started jumping on the order with offers to ride in her stead. The dispatcher responded:

**Dispatcher:** .... No, guys, no.... back off.... this is a new driver, let her have it, let her have a fare, she's having a hard time....

Some dispatchers feel it is part of their job to train new drivers:

**Dispatcher:** ... I used to hang around the garage all the time and tell drivers how to check in on the radio and shit like that? And you know, I was almost like a school, you know, teaching some of these, some of these guys [drivers], and they liked it. Yeah. But you know, none of these guys [dispatchers] do it anymore. Show em how to use the radio.

The dispatcher may feel that his or her job of properly socializing a given driver may never end, as in the following example:
**Dispatcher**: You know, please, don't yell into the mike, you yell into the mike and you've been doing it for thirty years, and ya can't understand you...

One driver expressed an opposing viewpoint:

**Doc**: Well, I told him [the dispatcher], I told him, to give the order I says listen I been doing this for 25 years, you can't change the way I work, you have to learn my way. I say, we all work different.

**Skills of Dispatching**

**Dispatcher**³: I walked up to the manager and I said uh, Andrew—Andrew T_____ was the manager then—and I just say Andrew I'd like to give a crack at dispatching. And then he gave me a crack at it. I said, I'm a native San Franciscan, I know the city inside out. And people used to test me....⁴

Taxicab radio dispatchers are skilled professionals. Besides long experience with the geography and street system of the city involved, dispatching requires a smooth temper, clear diction, and an exceptional capacity for holding several cab numbers and street numbers in one’s memory at once while calculating relative distances and speeds among the cabs checking in. On top of this, skilled dispatchers keep their drivers busy, make sure that regular passengers are served on time, and find ways to compensate for drivers who meet with misfortunes such as no-goes and no-pays by sending these drivers

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³ This chapter relies in part on interviews with three dispatchers and two order takers. Although all individuals mentioned in the text are given pseudonyms, including some dispatchers, quotes from office personnel are attributed solely by work role instead of by pseudonym. This is an added measure to protect the identity of interviewees who worked in the dispatch office.

⁴ Most dispatchers do not walk into the job this easily. See Chapter Two.
to more profitable orders. Despite many complaints about the use and abuse of power by dispatchers, most drivers acknowledge the professionalism of dispatchers:

Seth: These dispatchers, they'll argue with you one minute and completely forget the next. They don't hold any grudges.  

Arguments between drivers and dispatchers are focused on momentary conflicts, which are swiftly subsumed in the flow of general cooperation necessary for dispatching to work. As stated before, these conflicts occur within the context of, and are made possible by the pretext of cooperation among the players involved; however, these conflicts consistently reoccur as expressions of the relations of power among drivers and between drivers and dispatchers. These relations of power, as well as the skills involved in dispatching, will be the subject matter of this chapter.

Like drivers, dispatchers may take pride in their job, adopting an overtly “professional” demeanor or striving to optimize and display their own skill, as an order taker reports:

Order Taker: Some dispatchers never help order takers with the phone, or even the cashier when the cashier is covering both posts and he’s busy. Other dispatchers do both, like Haroon, who likes to do all the things at once—answer phones, dispatch cabs—he'll be in the middle of dispatching and he'll still beat you [the order taker] to the button. He likes to do that. Then he's taking the order “You're at 451 3rd Ave, ma’am?” and dispatching at the same time “Ninety-five check, Fifty-six at 8th and Howard, where are you Six-three-three?.......1050 Sutter, ring the bell...........Six-oh got the 855 Folsom.........” He’s doing eight things at once, and he looks at you like, “Ha ha, I beat you to it!” He loves that!

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5 cf. Santee (1989: 25) “Practically speaking, you need the dispatcher and he needs you too much to let a grudge go on for long. Usually every day starts with a clean slate.”
Dispatchers may also take pride in the speed with which they can dispatch orders, sometimes before the caller can put down the phone:

**Dispatcher:** Sometimes they're on the phone still. “The cab's in front already? that’s impossible!” Don't tell me that, it’s not impossible, the order taker’s right next to me and he’s saying “609 Sutter?” and before he's finished saying Sutter, I've already called “Sutter/Mason.” And Boom! Bingo! There's a bingo there.

Dispatchers have to be able to recognize where an address is on a given street instantly, to be able to call the order by the correct cross-streets. This involves knowing the intricacies of the street numbering system as well as which side of any street is odd and which is even:

**Dispatcher:** You deduct, you use mathematics. You deduct so many blocks for the back street from the last block, right, over here's thirty-three hundred block, and the next block is thirty-four hundred. You deduct numbers, like the Richmond is the same way—42nd avenue, 4126 Balboa, is 42nd Avenue but if its 4127 you say 43rd avenue—you add one. And all the alphabet streets you know, that's easy. Out Third street there's two sets of alphabet streets, the Sunset you got alphabet streets.

This dispatcher insisted that successful dispatching depends not only on the skill of the dispatcher but of the drivers he or she is working with. There must be a strong

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6 One of Lynch’s interviewees was a Boston taxicab dispatcher whose knowledge of the city Lynch characterized as “dense and abstract” because it “related house numbers to uses along block after block, yet could not describe those buildings in any concrete sense” (Lynch 1960: 88).
radio culture, in the sense of a core of drivers who know how to deal with the radio and uphold proper procedure:

[How do you do it? How do you keep track if you've got all these orders going off. five orders, twenty drivers checking in, how is that even possible?... Is there a trick?]

**Dispatcher:** It has to, like I said it has to be all good drivers checking in. It only takes one driver to fuck up the whole thing. If you get five drivers checking in real good, and then depending on the orders, which orders are old, which orders are new... and some brain, you must have the knack, and some brain in you.... (laughs)

In the segment below, a dispatcher expostulates in front of the garage after his shift on the volume of calls given out and the need for greater cooperation from drivers:

**Dispatcher:** ...we have 2000 calls on a Friday night. Now I can handle 2000 calls all by myself, without any order taker to answer the phones. It's like this—[mimes answering the phone] “1199 Taylor”—you check in Cal/Mason, you're checking in at where you are [gestures to drivers gathered around attentively] and I give you the call. That's... 20 seconds. 3 calls a minute, 180 calls an hour. That's, well, that's more than 2000 a shift. On a Friday night. But you can't get any drivers to take calls on Friday night. I don't think I hear any of you guys on the radio after 3 o'clock on a Friday.

Another dispatcher gave a very different estimate of the number of calls dispatched per minute:

[How many orders do you think you could dispatch in a minute?]

**Dispatcher:** In a minute? I would say, maybe... twenty? That's with good drivers. Good drivers, and good driver relations, they're all checking in the right way, and nobody asks over.
It is difficult to evaluate these numbers, since what is being discussed is not the average number of calls dispatched per minute, but how many can be dispatched when conditions are right. My feeling is that both estimates (3 and 20) are wide of the mark, but they do illustrate the disparity in speeds of different dispatchers as well as the differing expectations they have of their own performance. Both expect the active cooperation of drivers.

A skillful, speedy dispatcher is essential during busy periods of the day when orders come in the fastest, for instance at night, as the following driver relates:

**Bill:** I can’t stress enough how important it is to have a good dispatcher to making money at night. Sometimes, like, the second night dispatcher to come on is very slow, or not up to speed, and at the most important time when bars get out, at two, you know? The dispatcher’s gotta be up to speed, be able to speed up, keep up with it, call numbers of orders, dispatch numbers of cabs at once, or else drivers, all that business is lost to them.... You can make sixty bucks an hour if the dispatch is working right, when the bars are getting out. Otherwise it’s difficult, you gotta be lucky. One of the other dispatchers is just lazy, he doesn't answer phones, he’s too busy playing with himself or something, so even though it's busy at 2 o’clock in the morning, the radio is dead because he's not answering the phones.

The skills of dispatching include knowing how to juggle a number of calls and drivers, and how to assign both to each other efficiently while new calls and new drivers keep coming in:

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7 When business is good, radio cabs expect 4 or 5 calls per hour. In a fleet of about 100 cabs, the first dispatcher’s figure would give 1.8 calls per cab per hour. If dispatch is as slow as he says it is, it is no wonder drivers seek other ways of finding fares. The second dispatcher’s figure would have each driver answering 12 calls an hour, which is preposterous. Something in the vicinity of 7 calls dispatched a minute is most plausible.
Dispatcher: Like I'll say, well, sometimes I'll say “Geary and Taylor, Geary and Hyde, Geary and Polk,” and then I'll have an order at Sutter and Jones. And then three drivers, four drivers will check in, but I only got three orders that I've called, but it just happens that that fourth driver was at Sutter and Jones, I'd say “the one at Sutter and Jones, put your brakes on, you get 801 Sutter.” And I didn't even call that order. And then I'll say “29, you get the Geary Club, 98, you get the 1015 Geary.” See?

The dispatcher who works quickly can keep control of the radio, by giving more or fewer drivers the chance to check in as he or she sees fit:

Dispatcher: They know how, just like Danny [a dispatcher], Danny does that! They all know Danny is fair... He'll call an order, “Vallejo/Polk...” nobody answers... quiet.... “Vallejo/Polk...” then you say, “95, en route” – then he'll say, “Ah, 95 check, who's the other one?” Then he says, then he won't come back to you, he'll just say “61, get 2155 Polk.” And then he will ignore you, then he knows you were en route, see? That's all that's said, you don't even have to check. You just back off. But then uh, if nobody checks in, he will automatically say, “95, 2155 Polk.” Boom. And that was just the second call!  

This may involve anticipating the thoughts of drivers as they evaluate calls and their chances for checking in:

Dispatcher: The secret is giving out the order before any other driver could really decide, “Should I check in for that, I'm eight blocks away...?” Or, uh, you know, one guy will think about checking in, “uh uh uh, I'm at Sutter and, and and...” [laughs] and by the time he spits it all out Danny

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8 “En route” means the driver has a fare heading towards the location called, in this case “Vallejo/Polk.” Cabs with passengers have lower priority than cabs without when bidding for orders—the “second call” of an order is technically a bit early for an en route check-in. The dispatcher could dismiss the en-route driver by acknowledging him as such over the air: “95 I have en route, who else?” Because the dispatcher does not check 95 as “en route” over the air, other drivers assume 95 is close, and so are less likely to check in. If another driver does check in, they are almost certainly higher priority (if empty), so once again the dispatcher does not have to reveal their location. In both scenarios the dispatcher is limiting the amount of driver input over the radio, as well as the information available to them.
will already throw the order out, and then he'll come back and say to that
guy that's stuttering, “uh 86, uh check.” [laughs]

Since drivers don’t know who else is checking in for an order unless they hear the
dispatcher check that person over the air, dispatchers can control the number of drivers
checking in by the number of drivers they recognize over the air. Thus more check-ins
may be encouraged by checking fewer drivers, or fewer check-ins encouraged by
checking more drivers. A dispatcher may even check fictitious drivers in order to keep
distant ones from checking in at all:

Dispatcher: Sometimes I just want to eliminate a lot of drivers from
checking in so far away... like I'll call Turk and Masonic, right, and then
the guy checking in at Pine and Van Ness, and I say, “Pine and Van Ness,
check, I got a Pine and Baker! Anybody closer?” I'll make up that
[driver], Pine and Baker. And then sure enough, somebody will come in
at Anza/Masonic or you know, MacAllister and Masonic or something,
you know?.... or sometimes I'll say, “The man sleeping at Jackson and
Front, I read, who else.... Jackson and Davis!” Especially on a Sunday
morning when its slow I'll do that.

Dispatchers compete for prestige and for the best shifts, which results in a
competitive work environment:

Dispatcher: All the dispatchers are always jealous of each other, I find
that, you know, Danny doesn't like Rich, or they're always arguing....
When I first came to Ulysses I used to hear rumors that dispatchers don't
like each other, cause they always try to outdo each other.

Typically this is manifested harmlessly in joking games and comparisons of skill.
One dispatcher relates his contests with another dispatcher who was also working as
cashier:
Dispatcher: Well you know, he's a dispatcher too and... when I was dispatching he'd always go like this, shake his head, I say “What's the matter, what’s the matter?” He says “Oh, you miscalled it.” I say “Oh, you sure? I'll bet you five hundred dollars”—so that he would shut up.... And he’s shaking his head, he says, like “No, no,” I say “Well, where is it? Tell me where Vandewater is,” he says “It’s Mason and Taylor and Greenwich—not Greenwich and Taylor, its uh, Chestnut and Mason.” That’s Water street, and I say “Well, you're thinking of Water Street, not Vandewater.”

Dispatchers have to stay alert, because not only other dispatchers but drivers will try to stump them by calling in at fictitious intersections or on streets that don’t go through:

Jake: I caught Wally a couple weeks ago, he calls Washington and Steiner. And I says “Ulysses 97, I'm at Washington and Pierce” and he said, “Washington and Pierce I read, who's bingo?” and gave me the order! And he never even knew that Washington and Pierce was in the middle of the park [i.e. doesn’t exist]!

Some drivers will check in with small alleys for their cross-streets, to test the dispatcher’s knowledge:

Dispatcher: A lot of dispatchers don't like that, like Mick, “I don't know where that is, you better tell me the exact location”—I said, that is the exact location, it’s not my fault if you don't know the alleys. They don't want you to check in like that, but I don't mind you checking in like that—I don't mind you checking in on the alley, it makes it more fun. I say, “Well, this guy’s got you beat cause he's got the alley!”

Dispatchers have little patience for colleagues who have poor style or control over the radio:
Dispatcher: I can think of an example—Brian the other day, on Friday, he called Sacramento/Jones, he checked a man at Clay and Jones [a block away]! All he had to do was say “Clay and Jones I read, who's bingo?” and then boom, you put the order out. But he sitting waiting, saying “Sac/Jones,” he says “Clay/Jones I read, who else? Oh, the one at Cal/Jones I read, who else? Who's the one at Green and Jones, checking in?!” Now why would he check a guy at Green and Jones [seven blocks away]? When he's already got a guy at Clay and Jones! And then in the meantime while he's saying “who's the one at Green and Jones, then the cabs are moving and he says now, “Who's the bingo now at Sac and Jones?” That means those two guys that he initially checked are both racing for the order! If it was me dispatching, I would have said, “Clay/Jones, who's bingo?” Boom, give it out!

A good dispatcher is speedy and makes the best use of this speed to keep control over the number of check-ins to ensure that orders are gotten out quickly. Similarly, swiftness of decision-making is to be backed up with summary judgment on drivers who contest the dispatcher’s choices. The dispatcher may also rely on his privileged status as the only one who can hear all the locations drivers check in with—this not only gives him an advantage in having more information than drivers, but gives him authority as the one who can make the most informed decisions concerning orders and locations. The dispatcher quoted above concludes his example with an illustration of how to resolve conflicts with an appeal to the dispatcher’s knowledge of drivers’ locations—and the sequence in which this knowledge is gathered through proper radio procedure—as the deciding basis for all disputes.

Dispatcher: And if the guy at Cal/Jones wants to contest it, I say, “Hey, what about me?” I say “I read the Clay/Jones first. He gets it automatically, cause by the time I could be checking him, see, you’re at Cal/Jones and I go back to him, he'll say ‘I'm a bingo.’” That's how fast it is. You're going too slow!
Dispatch Technology

**Dispatcher:** Oh, that’s the old switchboard. Yeah. They still had those when I was starting dispatching.

Dispatching technology is undergoing a process of computerization. In some cases this involves what is known as computerized dispatch, which is discussed in a later chapter. Even radio dispatch, however, increasingly involves the use of computers. Along with the changes in technology come changes in the everyday practice of dispatching:

**Dispatcher:** Yeah. I miss the old dispatch system where I could listen to the drivers talk, and at the same time answer the phone and the customer would say “Where's my cab?” and I'd say, “Uh, Ulysses 86, how long?” and then they’d say “86, I'm two minutes away!” and then I would say to the customer, “You hear that? He said he's two minutes away.” The customer could even hear the driver checking in.

Previous forms of the technology required different skills and allowed for different possibilities in the method of dispatch. The dispatcher below recalls how he could easily answer orders and almost simultaneously call them over the radio using an old dispatch system:

**Dispatcher:** It was on the same line, I pulled a switch, see? and then I popped the switch and then all you could hear was the driver. But when I wanta answer the phone, late at night when I'm the only one answering the phone, doing both? Answering, “Ulysses Cab! 609 Sutter? Check, thank you!” Boom, hop over, “Sutter/Mason” boom, “Ulysses Cab, Canterbury, thank you!” Boom. “Sutter/Taylor?” I'd just hold a switch, back and forth, pulled it back and forth. “Saint Francis Hospital, Geary Club, thank you! Geary/Leavenworth...” Geary Club, Geary/Leavenworth, Boom! Bingo!
That's how fast I used to do it.

Orders were taken down manually on a sheet which was used by both the order taker and the dispatcher:

**Dispatcher:** ...how does the order sheet look like? Well back in the days it used to be like a waybill, looked the same thing like this [picks up my waybill], we write down the address like this “3661 Folsom, 910 Geary, Prospect,” you know? When the order taker will be on this side, and I'll be on this side, right? And then she'll be writing like that. And as she's writing I'll just say “Cortland/Folsom....”

[So you just look over to what she's doing and you call that...]

**Dispatcher:** Yeah, and I go like this, and it'll be on a slant like this, and then she'll write down, and I say “Cortland/Folsom,” and then nobody answers I say “Geary/Larkin, Cortland and Folsom,” and then I say “Coso and Precita, Prospect? Ellis and Leavenworth?” You know, and I'll say “Park Merced, Hernandez? Or uh, Upper Market, Hernandez?”

As the dispatcher read off the what the order taker put down on one side of the sheet he filled in boxes on his side to indicate which cab the order was assigned to:

**Dispatcher:** She writes this down, right here, like this, but the only thing she won't put down is right here [indicates trip destination column] “to,” airport, unless she likes you or something, she'll go “xx” that means airport, right? But usually they just write down one address on this side only, and then over here, will be a slot here for the cab number. So I just say, “Ulysses 291, get 3661 Folsom” and I just put down 91!

Shorthand codes allowed the order taker to let the dispatcher know where calls were going, and thus which ones were potentially valuable. Other codes besides “xx” for airport included “OAK” for Oakland Airport, “dtn” for downtown, and shorthand codes for various neighborhoods, such as “Miss” for the Mission.
With changes in dispatch technology, different possibilities arise in the practice of dispatch while others disappear. As order takers and dispatchers now type into the computer the time and addresses of the orders that come in, as well as the numbers of the cabs they are assigned to and the time of dispatch, advances and call-backs are more smoothly handled, and the trackability of both drivers and passengers is greatly improved. However, the more involved process is slower than in the old days:

**Dispatcher:** Actually with the computers now, I don't think the computer, but even Danny says the computer's not as fast as the way we used to do it. Cause it takes you, you have to enter the shit in. With the old switchboard, you just say, “Sutter/Mason? Thank you. Canterbury?” Boom!

The greater ease with which data are handled and presented with computers can give adept dispatchers even greater control over the flow of dispatch:

**Order Taker:** There’s a screen for the orders that I’m taking, and there’s a screen in front of the dispatcher that are the orders he’s calling right now. There’s also a screen in the middle—between us, with advance calls. Advances pop over to the dispatch screen 5 minutes before they’re due in downtown and 10 minutes before in the neighborhoods. Now, a skilled dispatcher, like Haroon, looks at both screens! While he’s calling the ones on his screen he looks over to see what’s coming up, to take care of no-gos, ride drivers if he senses there’s no one close, and so on....

Not all dispatchers are equally successful at adapting to the new technology:

**Order Taker:** Rich, on the other hand, he has trouble entering the cab numbers on the correct lines for orders. He has trouble going from one line to the other on the screen, you know, so if he calls the orders all at once he has to stop and go back to the line the order was on to enter the number. So that’s why he likes to call orders one at a time, instead of in a string, like a really skilled dispatcher.
Relations of Power

The dispatcher’s job is to take in and dispense information crucial to the success of every radio-playing cabdriver. Their position at the chokepoint, the break in the flow of information, the intercession between customer and driver gives them immense power over those at either end of this flow. Callers, for instance, are at the mercy of the dispatcher: those who offend the dispatcher or seem to be untrustworthy may not be sent a cab.¹⁹ Drivers count on the dispatcher to dispense orders; this may be done fairly or unfairly, competently or incompetently. In any event, dispatchers are in control of the actual information—who wants a ride, where they are, and often where they are going—which drivers are constantly trying to come at through the indirect means at their disposal.

Order Taker: If people who called couldn’t tell the dispatcher¹⁰ where they were going—that would change things. That would change the way the whole industry is structured. If he couldn’t ask where they were going... then he wouldn’t know!

Besides controlling the flow of information, dispatchers are also in a special position to glean information from the radio. Many early radio systems were “open” or “non-filtered,” meaning that everyone on the radio, drivers and dispatchers alike, could hear everyone else (Berry 1995; Santee 1989: 85). With the inception of “closed” or

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¹⁹ The ways that callers are evaluated and treated by order takers and dispatchers is a fascinating topic which it is simply impossible to go into here. For a discussion of how the dispatcher communicates trust or distrust of a fare to drivers, see Henslin 1968.

¹⁰ He forgets to mention “or the order taker.” Order takers also fall under suspicion for selling loads, or, if they are drivers, for simply going and taking them when they get back behind the wheel.
“filtered” radios, only the dispatcher became privy to all that was said over the air. This eliminated the ability of the drivers to communicate with each other over the radio without the mediation of the dispatcher, a practice which had formerly given the radio more of a democratic feel:

The [closed] radios prevent drivers from engaging in social chatter, such as arranging where to meet for coffee or joking with and teasing each other. Situations such as getting lost or running out of gas would have provoked considerable comment from other drivers. It also increases tension and anxiety for drivers when difficult situations arise. (Berry 1995)

Berry observes that “the gulf between drivers and dispatchers increased when brokers improved on their radio technology” (ad loc.). The fact that only the dispatcher can hear all that goes on over the air gives the dispatcher a vast advantage over the drivers in terms of comprehending the who, where, and what of minute-to-minute radio activity. The strategies drivers use to interpret what information they do have and to counter the dispatcher’s control will be covered in later in this chapter. In the meantime, it is important to note that dispatchers themselves actively interpret and analyze the actions and statements of drivers. As Henslin puts it,

It is interesting that the dispatcher, who is spatially separated from the driver so as to have no visual contact with him whatsoever, is able to 'see' much of his behavior in detail through interactional cues such as timing of reaction and tonal inflections. (Henslin 1967a: 83)

The dispatcher’s ability to ‘see’ the movements of the drivers, as well as to get into their minds, reading their positions, their motivations, and their trajectories, is of
great significance for understanding the interactions of drivers and dispatchers over the radio.

The spatial configuration of the cab garage and office itself may play a role in giving the dispatcher more power, particularly if the dispatcher can in fact see drivers when they check out and in, since this is when tips are passed through the window. Two of the companies which this study draws on have office arrangements in which the cashier and the dispatcher are together in one room; in the two other companies these positions are separated spatially. This causes a difference in the amount of influence dispatchers can exert over drivers’ tipping behavior by their mere presence during a crucial transaction:

**Doc:** Gotham dispatcher doesn't make that much [compared to Ulysses]. You know why? Because the drivers and the dispatchers don't see each other, when they're paying their gates and gas. Here it’s different. You're giving the guy eye contact. You know, “Doc put five,” fuck you.

Although the dispatcher controls the flow of information over the radio and is thus in a position of power *vis-a-vis* most drivers, at companies with a high proportion of owner-drivers the power of the dispatcher is compromised. Whereas the common driver may view the dispatcher as the most proximate equivalent the job has to a boss or supervisor, to the owner-drivers the dispatcher is an employee, and many of them treat him as such. Some owners are happy to have a professional, competent dispatcher; others demand special treatment on account of their status as owners. The following quote by a medallion holder—discussing the relative merits of two dispatchers—indicates that there can be somewhat of a grey area between the two positions:
Quong San: I don't like Wally—he calls one call at a time, it’s too slow! Haroon is much better because I check in in the Parkside and he says “I'll remember you” and he does. That's very good! Sometimes if he doesn’t have a call, he calls me on the phone and says “Sorry, I don't have a good ride for you.” I say oh, working with you is a joy enough, I don't need a good ride.

Not all owners are so appreciative; some are more demanding, like the ones the following driver is speaking of:

Lotta: Yeah, well, he thinks that because he’s an owner he can get away with it, you know, and that’s—I think when we’re out there on the streets we should all be equal. I mean the owners already get lower gates, and a big fat check on top of it every month, they shouldn’t have any more favors done. You’re getting all the little leftovers. Anything they don’t want.

It is difficult for dispatchers, many of whom do not hold medallions, to stand against pressure from owners who are in a sense their employers, and who may exert some influence over the term or nature of their employment. A story that was repeated to me several times was of Chris, widely respected as one of the most skilled and consistently fair dispatchers at the company. Chris called an order which was checked in for by a medallion holder driving his own cab and a new driver in a spare. Spare cabs are recognizable by their call numbers, which are in the 2000 series, such as 2111, 2238, 2492, etc. Chris gave the call to the new driver, who was closest. The owner, however, drove by the fare and seeing that the spare driver was loading luggage—hence
presumably going to the airport—complained to the dispatcher, asking why he’d given
the plum fare to some new guy instead of an experienced hand. The dispatcher, annoyed,
answered, “I don’t go by number, I go by location.”

This is a highly charged statement. The difference in status between the new
driver and the owner-driver is evident to any cabdriver listening to the radio from the
difference between the cab numbers by which the dispatcher checks them. Cab drivers
are aware of what cabs in their fleet are in what sort of condition, which cabs are given
out to just anybody, and which cabs are reserved for owners. To be driving a spare is as
often as not a mark of low status. For Chris to juxtapose cab number with cab location
was to say that this pecking order was irrelevant to dispatch, and that all that mattered to
him was where you were, not who you were. Although Chris was underlining the rules
by which taxi dispatch is supposed to, and often does, work, to so clearly dismiss the
other set of rules by which taxi dispatch also works was a dangerous and in fact
subversive move. Certainly he was just trying to reinforce his authority as dispatcher;
nevertheless, he had messed with the wrong owner, and was removed from his profitable
evening shift and switched to a less desirable one.\(^{11}\)

**Order Taker:** Zap, for instance, Zap used to never sell, he was one of the
dispatchers who was never selling airports, but he started! He changed too,
why? Because of the pressure.

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\(^{11}\) The details of the story as told to me were not consistent across versions, but I have tried to set down the
essence of the tale as I recall it. Another dispatcher asserted that the story as I had it was blown out of
proportion. If so, it clearly had caught the imagination of the drivers who repeated it and this is almost
certainly because of the power relations it illustrates between significant players: dispatcher, owner-driver,
spare driver. Stories of office personnel who were punished for being honest had wide currency, and this
was not the only example.
Another form of pressure is related to dispatchers’ income. In San Francisco, as in many places, dispatchers, unusually for workers of such skill and workplace authority, are paid minimum wage. Dispatchers do not generally starve on this account however, because their wages are supplemented by tips.\footnote{It would have been bad form for me to ask my informants how much they made. A radio dispatcher told radio host Marty Nemko that he made 100K per year (Nemko, email communication, 8/4/2003). Apparently dispatchers do not do as well in all jurisdictions as they do in San Francisco: cf. Santee (who worked in Oakland) “...they are probably working for a lot less money than you are, so give them some slack” (1989: 91).} Drivers are socialized early to tip the office personnel (see above), and thus a dispatcher can count on making a good living simply by keeping drivers happy. There is more money to be made, however, if extra tips are rewarded with special consideration:

**Order Taker:** Cause after all, ten dollars an airport, [the dispatcher] can make five hundred dollars a day doing this, even though, because they don’t like his dispatching, regular [meaning honest] drivers don’t really tip him as much... I mean the regular dispatchers, perfectly honest, can make two hundred fifty dollars a day—that’s without selling any airports, they can make maybe two hundred fifty, three hundred dollars with minimum wage. But the crookedest guys, they can make five hundred a day. Two hundred fifty, that’s good, you know.

The susceptibility of dispatchers to pressure is increased by the fact that they are paid minimum wage, it being assumed by the companies that the bulk of their income will be in the form of tips from the drivers. Thus it is built-in to the job of dispatching that dispatchers will find it profitable to treat some drivers more favorably than others, and that dispatchers will seek to optimize the gratuities they receive from drivers.
Dispatcher: Yeah, they're paid minimum wages, and they expect that everybody, the drivers will tip the dispatchers, that's how they make money..... It’s been minimum wage since the beginning of dispatching. It’s always been minimum wages. I mean, to get your tires fixed, you gotta tip the mechanic.

That dispatchers are paid minimum wages and are expected to make their money in the form of tips from drivers is part of a widespread phenomenon with deep historical roots in the cab industry, by which as many costs as possible are passed on to those whose labor powers the industry: the drivers. The drivers, in turn, rely on the customer for tips to supplement the metered rate. Across the industry, city governments, companies, police, airport authorities, all play the same game: profit is siphoned up, and costs are filtered down. To return to the subject of dispatchers: this displacement of responsibility for their income onto the drivers they are supposed to be providing a service to encourages them to use optimally the power they have over the flow of information, which is centralized, channeled through their hands by the dispatch technology.

Throwing and Selling

Dispatchers are constantly making decisions which affect the livelihood of the drivers they work with. Situations arise in which the dispatcher finds him or herself with leeway over which driver to assign to which order:

Dispatcher: If two orders come in at the same time, let's say three orders come in, and they're all in the Marina. You just call “Deep Marina.” That's how you see who checks in. And if you happen to have three guys check in, and there's only three orders, you say, “86 check, 100 check, 56,
who else?... Nobody else?” You just give em out, all three of em. And it doesn't make no difference in which order, either. If one happens to be the airport, then I would probably give it to the one that I would—well, depends on who it is.

It is not uncommon for dispatchers to “sell” or “throw” orders to particular drivers, in violation of radio procedure. “Throwing” an order means giving an order to a specific driver of the dispatcher’s choice, without giving other drivers a chance to bid for the order or even realize that an order was just thrown. The dispatcher may do this out of favoritism or for monetary reward, but just as commonly may do it to help out a driver who has been having a bad day, or to reward one who went out of his or her way to help a disabled passenger or a regular rider.

Dispatcher: Yeah, I do that too, I do that with guys that are sharp on the radio, that, I base it mostly on drivers that are sharp. That check in en route, en route, en route, en route, en route. That way I can just keep em rolling, without, you know....

One way for a dispatcher to throw an order is to make it sound like he’s calling a driver back who was already given the call:

Dispatcher: Like, uh, sometimes you'll hear the dispatcher say, “What happened to that order on Broderick street?” You know, and if you weren't paying attention, you would think he had a Broderick order earlier, you might have been out of the cab... and then [the dispatcher]’ll come back... and say “the number was 112, apartment 2.” And make it sound like, you know....

[“Are you gonna go back?”]

Dispatcher: Yeah, “Are you gonna go back, how long, where are you now?”
In the following example the dispatcher is trying to throw such an order but other drivers start checking in before the intended recipient catches on:

**Dispatcher**: 1202 over....
**1202**: Ulysses 1202.
**Dispatcher**: What about that 3042 Jackson?
**1202**: You didn’t give it to me....
**Dispatcher**: [Hearing other drivers checking in] Okay, who’s close? .... Jack/Divis, check.... (etc.)

The dispatcher can avoid interference from other drivers checking in for such a call by using various levels of subtlety:

**Dispatcher**: Yeah, but what happens is, sometimes they won't do it all at once like that, they'll just say “it was 142 apartment 3” and then a couple seconds later or maybe, you know, thirty seconds later, he'll say, “86, are you sure you're on Irving street?” See? Then they don't know who's who! And sometimes they don't even use your cab number, they just use your name—“Are you sure you're on Irving street, Bob?” (laughs)

Giving an order out without saying the cab’s number over the air frees that driver from the threat of observation by his or her fellows as he or she drives to the location of the fare.

“Selling” orders is done for monetary gain, and usually involves either an understanding with a driver that a certain amount of good orders will be thrown their way, or giving the preferred driver the address of a desirable order in a manner that bypasses the radio. In the old days this was usually done by somehow slipping a piece of paper with the address written on it to the driver before he or she left the garage; today
the preferred method is for the driver and dispatcher to communicate by cell phone.

Advance orders going to the airport or out of town are the most common orders sold.

Dispatchers themselves disagree about to what extent selling orders is acceptable.

Criticism I heard was mostly about how sloppily it was done:

**Dispatcher:** Some of them don't know how to sell orders, but they're doing it, some of them just point blank do it!

Such poor style may be attributed to lack of dispatching experience, improper training, or overt favoritism:

**Dispatcher:** ...these guys that you've got right here in the office, they're all cabdrivers, they didn't learn from the old guys, I guess. And they're all greedy! I heard, there's a rumor that Wally's charging ten bucks! For an airport! Or you hear some guys that he's treating all the Arabs real good.... Then you hear some guys say, oh they're treating all the white guys real good....

The same dispatcher complains, however, about the suspicion surrounding the job and the lack of clear or consistent training, or laying of ground rules:

**Dispatcher:** I mean everybody in there, they say, “you sell airports” and shit like that ... everybody in there is doing that. If you set down rules, you gotta set down the rules for everybody or you just don't have a set of rules! Nobody tells me anything when I go in there!

There are in fact clearcut, overt rules regulating the behavior of dispatchers, but they are not uniformly enforced. Office personnel have to negotiate their own path, discovering what actions, whether overtly legitimate or covertly illegitimate, will provoke penalties according to other rules which may carry more force for not being written or
openly acknowledged. This results in an ambiguous work discourse, in which players are unwilling to commit to either the official set of norms or to acknowledge the existence of other rules of behavior:

**Order Taker:** I'm not saying they sell orders, I'm not saying they don't.

Often the complaint voiced is not that orders are sold, but that it is done excessively, to an extent that drivers get riled up, and business becomes difficult:

**Dispatcher:** But the secret of doing it is, when you're dispatching, you don't make it, you don't make every driver individual, into a individual thing. You just keep it straight, as straight as you can, and give the order out. That way they don't suspect nothing.

The key to successful dispatching is to get into the drivers’ minds and keep them all happy:

**Dispatcher:** You know. I had drivers crisscrossing, like that [crisscrosses hands], going to, he [first driver] thinks I gave him an airport, and this guy [second driver] thinks I gave him an airport, ah-ah-ah, they're both looking at each other, saying “Ah, you got screwed,” and he's going to get an airport, and this guy's going to get an airport. And this guy's happy, but the only thing that this guy that got the airport doesn't know is that this guy's going over here to go to Sacramento! Or San Jose! But he's already happy cause he got an airport! You gotta do it real smooth, and... you know.

In most large companies, dispatchers are under constant surveillance. The management, the police, or even the FCC may monitor their broadcasts. This is done not just to prevent the selling of orders, but to assure that an attempt is made to service all requests for cabs by the public. At some companies the dispatch is recorded, and the
dispatcher may be under video surveillance by the company to discourage the selling of orders by cell phone or other methods. Despite this, dispatchers do manage to sell calls; just how many are sold can not really be known, which does not reduce the level of suspicion and bitter murmurings by drivers.

**Said:** He just called Sutter/Leav for a van, but the funny thing is it was already loaded by 906—he had all the bags loaded, knew the address and the room number... the bastard. He called him, he got it over the phone.

Since they have to call the address over the air, the dispatcher prevents other drivers from getting the call by telling the preferred driver the time and address of the order to be sold. The driver waits in front of the order for the call to come over the air, and then calls a “bingo.”

**Doc:** That's what the world's all about now, is this communication bit, and even these fucking guys [the dispatchers], they call you! Hey listen, be over here at ten o'clock, or eleven o'clock, at this address, and flip your thing [your meter]... I know all the tricks! I mean oh this guy, Second Avenue, oh oh the guy has a bingo at 371 Second Avenue. Give me a fucking break, you're telling him to be there!

Sometimes dispatchers will call such pre-sold orders over the air, to give them to the bingo; at other times the orders never go over the air, but are simply picked up by the chosen driver. To call an order over the air that goes to an instant bingo can spark the suspicion of listening drivers; the best answer I could get as to why sold orders would be called over the air at all was that variation was essential in escaping detection:

[Why would they call the order? Why would they tell the person to be in front and then call it?]
Dispatcher: Sometimes they do that. There's different ways of doing it. That's just one of the ways of doing it, that's all. It's not why, it's just one of the ways.

They’re not required to do it because it might be on tape or whatever...?

Dispatcher: You don't want to do it, every order like that. That'll be too suspicious, so they try to spread it around and do different ways.

That drivers are highly attentive to the dispatcher’s activities and are readily suspicious is a factor dispatchers must be prepared to deal with. One way of dismissing suspicious drivers is to take advantage of the physical separation of dispatchers from drivers, and pretend not to have heard them:

Vince: I wish they would just not give out orders over the air if they're gonna throw them to people. Like, just shut the door on it. None of this getting them bingo and then calling it like it was a radio order, getting other drivers all tangled up in it. Like this guy 331—I've lost 3 orders to him because he was magically bingo. And you never hear this guy on the radio. I actually said that on the radio, “331 only checks in when he's bingo.”13 Then suddenly Wally couldn't hear me the rest of the day.

“Not being able to hear” a given driver all day—in other words, ignoring their check-ins—is a punitive tactic by dispatchers previously documented by Henslin (1967a: 51). Sometimes, as mentioned above, this is applied to drivers who don’t follow procedure:

Dispatcher: You don't check in right the hell with you.

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13 A driver who never checks in for calls except when he is bingo falls under suspicion for being a phone player rather than an honest radio player.
At other times, however, it has more to do with who tips and who doesn’t:

**Lotta:** ...you know of course when you put in a lot of money as a tip, then you expect to be heard right away when you check in. And there's all this favoritism, between who puts in the most money in tips and you know, they try to make those people happy. And often ignore somebody else, say “Oh, I didn't hear you.”

So lots of times with [one dispatcher] I had to finally yell and say, “I'm a bingo!” You know? “Why don't you respond?”—“Don’t you yell at me, blah blah blah”...

Another incident of not being heard is related by an owner who, by virtue of holding his own medallion, is freer to talk back to the dispatcher:

**Jake:** One time Wally... I says, “I checked in ten times, man, how come you don't hear me?” You know? He says “That order's gone,” I say “I been checking in ten times out in the Sunset,” you know, and I said “Bullshit!” So he says, “Watch your language, 34!” I say, “How come you heard me that time? I said 'Bullshit' one time, and you heard me?” [laughs] Check in ten times, you don't hear me, and then I say bullshit, you hear me. Then he says, he has to get his jollies by saying, “Watch your language on the air, 34.” Then I said, “Fuck you!” I did! I said fuck you, he didn't say nothing after that.

In his conflict with an owner, the dispatcher is unable to make threats, and can only fall back on his role as enforcer of radio protocol. Nevertheless, he has no power over the owner, who can and does say what he wants into the mike.

Many drivers accept the ability of dispatchers to throw orders over the air to be an inherent part of radio dispatch, perhaps even an essential one; they may still criticize the way it is done, however, and invoke the need for greater fairness:
**Doc:** It'd be alright if they mixed it up a bit every now and then, everybody would get a little bit here and there. You know what I'm saying? But [this dispatcher] does it all with the same guys all the time. Sure, I've had somebody throw me stuff every once in a while. You know, boom. But I don't wanta take something outa somebody else's mouth, you know what I'm saying? Because.... give that guy one too! Down the line, or maybe he got one before he gave one to me, you know what I'm saying?  

Another driver reports his experiences and frustrations with a dispatcher who allegedly sells orders:

**Vince:** One time I was at Green and Hyde and he called Green and Hyde, I called bingo and he didn't respond. There was just silence. Then he calls “Geary/Hyde” and I'm, like, sure he had called Green and Hyde. But I just let it go, pull off. Then a few minutes later, “Green and Hyde!” and somebody’s bingo. I screwed up his little game. He was like, “You're not supposed to be bingo there!” That was what first turned me on to Wally. He puts a good front on it, but....

Even as a fellow cab driver, it is difficult for me to assess whether Vince’s suspicions in this case are well-founded or are just a product of too-ready suspicion. Throughout the day, drivers are constantly analyzing and interpreting their experiences with the radio, trying to rationalize unusual or uncertain instances (such as the one above) and to get inside the mind of the dispatcher. The motivation to find an explanation for possibly haphazard occurrences, coupled with the uncertainty and unknowability caused by the limited channel of communication available to the driver over the radio, results in

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14 At the cab cooperative in Tel Aviv studied by Asaf Darr, long rides were fairly distributed among all drivers by means of a formal mechanism called the “X-list” (Darr 1999: 294-7). An SF driver who had previously dispatched in a small North Bay town described similar informal methods of distributing good fares equitably. The speed and complexity of dispatching in San Francisco would make such mechanisms impracticable; but some dispatchers do their best to spread things around.
a tendency of drivers to impute difficult to explain instances to presumably known factors such as the corruption of the dispatcher. Whether or not a driver is correct in his or her suspicions in a given instance may never be discovered. Furthermore, even if the driver is entirely mistaken in thinking the dispatcher corrupt, their suspicions and their readiness to voice them are an expression of the tense relations of power between drivers and dispatchers, no less than when the dispatcher is in fact abusing his or her position.

**Catching the Dispatcher**

Dispatchers do not control every aspect of dispatch, and can sometimes be caught and chastised by drivers or management. Some reported examples of dispatchers getting caught selling orders, and of what resulted, will illustrate the relations of power involved and the interests at stake.

On one occasion, a dispatcher was foolhardy enough to sell an order right across the street from a radio stand. A Ulysses cab pulled up to an address which had never been called over the air and started loading luggage in full view of four or five drivers from the same company. One of these drivers lost no time in heading across the street and asking the passengers point blank if they had called the company for a cab (as opposed to having made a personal arrangement with the driver), which they answered affirmatively. The drivers on the radio stand then complained to the management that the dispatcher had sold the order. However, before the management had time to take action, the news of the event had spread through the company, and the dispatcher was able to concoct a cover story with the help of some owner-drivers.
On another occasion some drivers sitting at the same radio stand (stands have always been the hotbeds of driver discontent) decided to sting a dispatcher whom they suspected of selling airports. One driver had his girlfriend call in an airport order, due in one half hour, from an address in the Early Richmond which they knew to be empty. When the order was due, another driver drove past the order, and observed a Ulysses cab parked outside the address, waiting for the call, which had not yet gone out over the air. They now felt they had definitive proof with which to hold the dispatcher accountable; however, once again loose lips were the undoing of the drivers, and it was the ringleaders of the sting operation who found themselves called in to the dispatch office. Accommodations were reached, however, and a few of the drivers who had been involved in the sting were later allegedly observed receiving preferential treatment by the same dispatcher.

The third example involves a stubborn driver who stumbled across an airport being sold:

**Mohammed:** [Maher] saw [Madre] sitting somewhere, he said, “Why are you sitting here?” He said, “I'm waiting for an airport coming up.” So Maher said, “Well I got an airport too,” and so he sat there on the opposite side of the street from the other guy. And then the lady came out, she came out on the side Maher was on, and walked up to his cab, he said, “Hey!” He ran out and said “Here, this is your cab!” So Madre comes across the street as he's loading her, he says “Hey, that's my personal!” Maher says, “Well, it can't be your personal because she didn't know who you are! This wasn't a radio call, it didn't go out over the radio, this lady says she called our company,” cause he asked her about it, this lady didn't [call the other driver personally]... “You don't have any right to contest this load, cause I got it.” See, he asked the lady about it, and she said that she just called and made an appointment for a cab with Ulysses, she didn't make any personal arrangements with anybody! So he told her first of all, how this is unsafe for her for them to be selling orders, because then the
company's not responsible if anything happens... it pissed her off, and she called the manager, then Maher himself went in and told [the manager] about it, and [the manager] looked it up, and this was a verified call that there'd been some funny business. So that's the first thing, what Wally was suspended for.

Wally was not in fact the dispatcher who was working that day. He had, however, been working the day the order came in, and had cleverly managed to sell the advance call on a day he did not work (to avoid suspicion), while keeping the current dispatcher in the dark about the order:

**Dispatcher:** You know about that one that Maher found, that 114 Broderick? Well, we looked it up on the computer, and it says that order was taken at 9:30 yesterday morning, and it said 114 Broderick at 9:30 due the next day, but over here it says destination downtown! They changed it! And then also, then over here on the right is says “CA,” that means cancelled. But he gave the order out anyway!

[But the dispatcher went and called it though, the next day?]

**Dispatcher:** No, he didn't call it, he never called it. Wally gave it to Madre.

Wally was also reportedly overheard by the manager in the office restroom giving out orders over his cell phone. He was suspended from dispatch for one week, and put back on the window. Although he did not ultimately lose his position as dispatcher, he lost a significant amount of face in the eyes of the drivers and other dispatchers:

**Seth:** I saw Wally on the window, and he looked pale and weak—I'm not kidding. His whole energy was changed... The thing is, every driver who comes to that window knows, they know the whole thing.... Everytime they look at him, interact with him, you know? He knows exactly what they're thinking!
The episode had further effects on the actions of other dispatchers:

**Seth:** You'd never believe what I saw on Friday—I was extra waiting to get out and Chris [the dispatcher] comes out of the office and calls out this Middle-Eastern guy's name, I can’t remember it, he’s a new guy—and tells him, “I can't take this tip, it’s too much money!” And I look and he was handing the guy back a $50 bill! He said, “You don't make enough, and I can't help you out enough, for you to give me this much money!” .... So the way news at Ulysses works, I'm sure it’s made ripples.... So I’m there thinking, what is this, the twilight zone? First Wally gets suspended, and then Chris doesn’t take tips! All around Ulysses he made a pretty big statement there.

[He made sure he made it public?]

**Seth:** Public, that’s a good word for it. This’ll go around, that Chris doesn't accept tips, and it’ll make Chris look very good.¹⁵

Chris is not to be envied his task of balancing the pressure put on him by drivers seeking favorable treatment with the surveillance he is under by many of the same drivers, suspicious and ready to invoke the rules against him. Dispatchers have different skill levels, may be more or less able to keep control of dispatch or navigate successfully through the shoals of driver suspicion, and may choose to what extent they will risk profiting from their privileged access to the flow of information. Drivers’ suspicion of dispatchers is not solely dependent on the actual existence of corrupt dispatchers, but is largely a reflection of the power exerted by the dispatcher over drivers by occupying a centralized control over the dispensation of information vital to economic success. In

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¹⁵ Of course Chris accepts tips—he needs to to make a living—he is, though, publicly marking out a boundary to what kinds of favoritism can be expected from him.
other words, dispatchers will always be suspected of abusing power simply because their exercise of it is in crucial ways hidden from those who depend on them.

This atmosphere of suspicion, however, can have the effect of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, since dispatchers who do not abuse their power have little chance of completely escaping suspicion. Drivers exert, in fact, a collective power over the dispatcher by their cumulative ability to suck him down, willingly or not, into the morass of opacity and suspicion composed of each incremental act of tipping, not tipping, rewarding, suspecting, arguing, deferring, clawing, and watching over the not-so-petty significance of each and every petty quarrel. In any event, the dispatchers find themselves caught between two standards of behavior, an explicit one invoking fairness and transparency, and an implicit one, the sum of a myriad of little pressures and suspicions encountered day after day. There are penalties for transgressing both standards, and dispatchers must find their own way between the two. For drivers, the task is to interpret and react, to hear what only the dispatcher hears and know, somehow, what only he knows, through assiduous attention to the limited channels of information open to them. It is to these preoccupations of the driver that we now turn.
*Listening to the Radio*

For drivers in radio companies, the radio is more than a medium of communication with the dispatcher. It is a whole field of information, spatially and temporally ordered, by which the driver can feel the pulse of the city itself. By listening to the radio, drivers can infer what other drivers are doing, how business is in various parts of town, how things are moving in general. In a mundane fashion this involves the use of the radio as bulletin board for broadcasting momentarily pertinent news to other drivers: avoid the intersection of Pine and Gough because there’s a bad accident; avoid the freeway because there’s a slowdown at Hospital curve; there’s pickups (people wanting cabs) at the train station; watch your speed around Thirty-fifth and Fulton because there’s a motorcycle cop parked behind a truck. In a less explicit fashion the radio is an object of scrutiny, interpretation, and manipulation, a communicative space which organizes the other, urban space in which drivers move and react. Much of the work culture and identity of radio drivers is focused on radio interaction and interpretation. Work identity in this sense involves the feeling and display of competence in terms of knowing how to interpret and manage the flows of the city, how to compete (and cooperate) with other drivers, and how to successfully negotiate the differential power relationship with the dispatcher.
Evaluating Calls

How drivers learn to know the streets and flows of the city, and how they learn the radio, has been discussed above and in earlier chapters, so here this topic will be limited to a few examples pertaining to interpretation of radio calls. As noted earlier, some drivers claim to be able to know where a call is going just by where and when it is called. Such interpretation involves familiarity with the spatiotemporal sense of the flows of the city, and is the product of experience coupled with a certain amount of imagination. It is a way of knowing that falls between science and intuition, insofar as it is a loose feeling for statistical probability built up insensibly through the repetition of experiences subjected to subsequent scrutiny and comparison. I know, for instance, that if I pick up a fare at Kaiser hospital around four in the afternoon, I have a good chance of getting a ride right to the vicinity of my garage, where I have to turn in by five. This I know from experience as well as from a sense of who comes out of the hospital at that time and where they live.

Drivers with such a sense of timing may also be attuned to the unusual, to orders that sound out of place (literally) for the time of day they are called:

Al: He was calling that Sac and Franklin, and I was like, no, you don’t call that! I never heard that order before, you know, at this time, you see? You see? It’s not normal, not at that time of day. So I was thinking, “Where’s that going? Why are they calling a cab?”

Al’s ability to listen to and interpret the radio netted him a trip to the airport in the above instance. Of course he could not have known where the trip was going, but he did
have a sense that it was going somewhere special, out of step with the other orders in the area.

Choosing a radio call involves not merely having an idea of where people in that area might be going but of how likely they are to be there when the cab arrives.

[You think that maybe if you hear like a call, two calls in uh in the Richmond, and one’s like 5\(^{th}\) and Geary and one’s 5\(^{th}\) and Balboa...]

Dave: Okay, well that’s... you would probably take the 5\(^{th}\) and Balboa, if you’re given a choice.

[Why?]

Dave: Cause there’re more businesses on Geary.... and there are more cabs drivin up and down.... someone is more apt to hail a cab, the first one that drives by, rather than wait for the one they called, from a business, than their home.

This gets back to Henslin’s (1974) concept of trackability—people who call from their homes can be traced and remembered by cab companies, and so are more easily penalized if they should hail a passing cab or, even worse, call more than one company at a time. People calling from businesses they may never return to are free from this sort of penalty, and thus the suspicion of the cabdriver comes to fall on the location where no-gos frequently occur. Although radio calls on known business streets, such as Geary, are avoided for this reason, a certain amount of learning has to be done the hard way:

Dave: Oh, how do I determine whether or not they’ll be there. Experience... you know, places like uh, USF or the hospital calls, or uh grocery stores, there’s no pattern to what the intersection is, so you just have to go there one by one and get your no-gos.

[laughs]
Dave: That’s how you learn!

**Competing with other Drivers**

Knowing whether or not a call is desirable is only half the story. To get the call, a driver must compete with whatever other driver also wants the order. Properly, radio calls go to the driver who checks in the closest, and a large part of evaluating your chances for a call involves listening for how many other drivers are checking in, and where they are. By listening to the pauses in the dispatcher’s speech, as he or she listens for drivers checking in, an experienced driver may get an idea of whether an order is being contested or not. This is valuable information, since an uncontested order will go to the only driver checking in, regardless of how far away they are.

Sometimes this information can be heard rather than merely inferred, such as when a dispatcher leaves the mike keyed while listening for check-ins:

Dave: Oh, you can hear, though, that high-pitched, what is it, a whine, or a—you can tell if his mike is open.

If the dispatcher’s mike is open, other drivers’ check-ins will be broadcast over the radio. If just the “high-pitched whine” is heard, no other drivers are checking in, leaving the order free for the attentive listener.

When competition for orders is tight, drivers may be tempted to “stretch,” that is, lie about their location so as to be assigned the order. Stretching successfully takes skill. Other drivers quickly take note of novices who claim repeatedly to be bingo or a block
away from calls, or who always check in on one of the two cross-streets of an order.
Once a driver has stretched and successfully been given an order, it is necessary to make
it to the location of the call unseen or unnoticed by other drivers who had bid for the call.
Furthermore, if other drivers are suspicious that stretching occurred and they are close to
the order called, they may “check it out” by driving past the order to see whether the
assigned cab has arrived yet. Thus, although stretching relieves a driver from the
necessity of being the closest cab to an order, it does not relieve them from the necessity
of being the first one to arrive. To stretch successfully, a driver must judge the location
of an order and figure as best they can the location of other drivers and how likely they
are to check out the order.

To take an example: cabs which take fares out to the Richmond district usually
return empty along Geary Boulevard, trolling for fares on their way back to downtown.
While this is not universally true (some drivers do “play” the Richmond), nevertheless it
can be assumed that almost all cabs which check in for an order in the Deep or Middle
Richmond are headed east. This is important to the prospective stretcher. If the
dispatcher calls an order on Twenty-fifth Avenue and checks driver X on Fifteenth
Avenue, it is safe for driver Y (on, say, Ninth Avenue) to stretch past driver X because
driver X will probably consider it too much trouble to turn around and drive back out into
the Richmond to check out the order. On the other hand, if the dispatcher checks driver
X on Thirty-fifth Avenue, driver Y should not stretch for the order, because the order is
in the direction that driver X is already travelling on his or her way downtown, and so he
or she will be likely to swing by and check it out simply for good measure.
Stretchers have to be careful as well not to let the dispatcher realize what they are doing. This may be difficult because skilled dispatchers will remember where a given cab has last checked in, and if they have taken an order recently, the dispatcher may know where the order was going and so have an idea of where the driver should now be. It is impossible for the dispatcher to function if he or she cannot trust that the locations drivers give are at least close to the truth; thus a driver whom the dispatcher believes to be a stretcher may as well give up the radio and go sit at a hotel stand, since the dispatcher may choose not to hear him, or may add a number of blocks onto his distance every time he checks in, in order to counterbalance the effect of stretching.

Drivers who suspect others of stretching are quick to share this information with other drivers they meet or talk to in the course of the day:

**Dispatcher** (over radio): 1211, where are you?... and 1211 I have, who else Twenty Eureka?...
**Dave** (offmike, to me): If that’s A____ [in 1211], that guy stretches like a motherfucker.

**Seth:** Anytime you hear that guy 510 checking in, just go and take it. He stretches like a motherfucker.

Henslin (1967a: 72) refers to this punitive stealing of orders as “scooping.” Although the term is not used in San Francisco, the action is frequent. “Scooping” in this way is not thought of as stealing, since it is simply a way of rectifying the dispatch error caused by the stretcher giving an inaccurate location. Scooping stretchers requires the ability to tell when other drivers are stretching; one way stretchers betray themselves is by checking in late, since they must listen first to hear who else is checking in:
Tai: I was at Greenwich and Van Ness and he call Wharf for a van. I check in and he almost give it to me but then 306, he check in Francisco/Columbus. I think, he just three block away, so how come he did not check in first time? The dispatcher give him the order, but I was suspicious, you know, so I drive over there and there's no cab there, nobody. So I took that load and five minutes later, I hear him [306] calling over, how come his fare is gone?

Stretching and scooping may snowball into tense rivalries between drivers:

Al: The other day 66 was—all day he was fucking me, anytime I checked in for an order I would hear him check in closer than me, and he’d get the call! So I heard him get an order on Webster and I went and took it. I didn't check in or nothing. I pulled in front and took it and when he came by, he didn't do nothing. He never said anything about it. He knew what I was doing, and he knew he was doing it to me all day!

Aware drivers note the locations and trajectories of other cabs they see on the streets or hear over the radio. Sometimes the only way to deal with a stretcher is to stretch in return:

Taoufik: Me and 779 both got off like Seventh Street offramp and he went up Seventh, so I turned on Harrison and went up Ninth. I got like all the lights, bam bam bam, up to Market, okay, and the dispatcher calls Fulton/Gough. I hear 779 check in, it’s like, at Hayes and Van Ness, and I know that bastard’s not there! Because I got all the lights so he can't be ahead of me, and also there's no way you can get the green at MacAllister [from 7th], okay, so I check in like “Hayes/Franklin” and he goes and checks in like “Hayes/Gough!”16 And it’s like I go ahead and I'm, “Okay, I'm bingo!” I'm five blocks away and I call bingo—so I get there and later he comes along, and he says, “you just got here!” and I say, “So what! Don't try that with me anymore, I knew where you were!”

16 This must be incorrect. Taoufik was checking in on Hayes, and his competitor was probably checking in on MacAllister. Thus 779's check-ins should read “Mac/Van Ness” and “Mac/Gough.” Hayes/Franklin is two blocks away from the order, and MacAllister/Gough is one block away, but Hayes/Gough is three blocks away, so would not be a productive stretch.
Interpreting the Dispatcher

**Seth**: I try to listen as closely as I can. To hear the nuances, behind what's being said. Because you could, sometimes I've gotten things, because of that….

Depending on their experience and their personal predilections, drivers develop an array of interpretive strategies for maximizing the amount of information they can infer out of the limited communication channel of the radio. One simple tactic is to listen closely, in the hopes that one will hear details that may escape other drivers who aren’t paying as close attention:

**Seth**: Like I'll hear a word, or the order taker, I'll hear the order taker taking it, and I'll hear a part of a street name, and I'll realize, oh, maybe nobody else heard that. So I'll start to act towards that, and wait for it to be called, you know.

Since the order taker is sitting next to the dispatcher answering the phones, occasional snippets of upcoming orders can be heard in the background while the dispatcher is broadcasting, as in the following example:

**Dispatcher**: Ulysses, Haight Ashbury, Downey....
**Order Taker** [in background of dispatcher]: Marshall Hale?
**Dispatcher**: 672, Where are you? Uh...... uh......... 74, where are you? .... Alright, 74 I have, and the Hayes and Stanyan check, who else? [continues]

A driver in the vicinity of the VA Hospital (Marshal Hale), upon hearing the above, might well choose to drive over there and bingo the upcoming call. Of course, if
one driver hears it, others may as well, and the first one to the address may even be the target of suspicion by the losing drivers who impute their own failure to get the call to the selling of orders by cell phone:

**Rick:** You know when you hear the order taker in the background taking new orders, and if you're anywhere close you hurry over there. So one time I heard Wally taking it, and I went to sit in front, and here comes Al along. And instead of assuming I had done the same thing he did, you know, heard it over the radio, he goes like this [mimes talking on a phone]. He thinks everybody's crooked!

Some drivers claim to have more honed abilities to recognize the destination of a radio call from the tone or inflection of the dispatcher, or through some other mode of conscious or unconscious implication.

**Seth:** Some of the dispatchers, you can know it's an airport by the way they dispatch it. Nothing, there's no code word, there's no, it's just an inflection. You know, just when they call the street, when they call the cross street, you have a feeling about it.

[It shows through their voice?]

**Seth:** Somehow, yeah. I don't know, it's not something like you can explain, it's just sort of something you hear...

Dispatchers may give away, intentionally or not, the fact that a particular order is different, through their vocal intonations or by other added cues. Interpreting this involves not only the ability to interpret the radio in general but a familiarity with the dispatching style of the particular dispatcher:

**Dave:** Oh and sometimes by a change in the inflection of their voice, I've been able to tell that they know it's something different, or ...
[Like they’re thinking to themselves, ‘Oh... I wonder who’s gonna get this one?’]

**Dave:** Yeah right, they know that’s a good ride, or after they say it, they’ll say something that they don’t usually say, like ‘come on,’ or you know, ‘who wants it,’ or if he says something that he normally doesn’t say—and you have to be used to that dispatcher to recognize it....

Some drivers claim to have this sense developed to an extraordinary degree, as Cham does in this after-work conversation between drivers turning in at the garage:

**Cham:** You got lucky, the other day, you got an Oakland airport that time.

**Rick:** How’d you know it was an Oakland airport?

**Cham:** I just know, the way he said it. Don’t you know, they tell you where it’s going, even if they don’t say it. It’s just the way they say it.

**Rick:** That’s still pretty specific, though—to know that it’s going to *Oakland* airport.

**Cham:** Nah.

Drivers may interpret calls by drawing on a number of types of knowledge—the spatiotemporal fit of the call itself, the unintentional inflections and style of the dispatcher—including a sense of the motivations behind the dispatcher’s timing and pattern of dispatch:

**Kim:** Like with this dispatcher, the night dispatcher, if he says “en route” on the second call, you know it’s good. Or with Zap, when he calls an order and the second time he doesn’t call it, you know you got to jump on it right away. The other day he called Grove/Ashbury, and the second time he didn’t call it, he was calling Masonic. I was at Fell/Stanyan, checking in. He’s all, “are you checking in for the Masonic,” but I said
no, I want the Grove/Ashbury. He didn’t want to give it to me, but I was there. That went to the airport.

It might be instructive for us to wonder why the dispatcher might call an order once and then stop calling it, especially if this particular order is a desirable fare going to the airport. As was stated before, all requests for cabs taken over the phones are supposed to be called over the air. However, if the dispatcher has called the order once and no drivers have checked in, she has fulfilled her technical obligation, and may then choose to hold the order in reserve. Holding an order in reserve like this makes it easier to throw, as the dispatcher has already tested the waters, as it were, and knows that since nobody checked in for the first call, it is quite possible that nobody will notice the order being subsequently thrown: after all, dispatchers in fact have the prerogative of assigning unclaimed orders to whomever they wish. It should be remembered that dispatchers’ motivations in throwing orders are not always Machiavellian; sometimes they may be motivated by a desire to increase the fairness of the game rather than vice versa. In any event, the driver quoted above has figured out the dispatcher’s strategy and knows how to find the airport the dispatcher is trying to hide, by recognizing his very attempts to hide it.17

Al: I pick [the dispatcher’s] brain sometimes, like if he gives me a call, and I’m not sure I want it, I call back something like “Is that a street or is that a building?” and he says, you know, “Okay, Al, why don't you let somebody else go get it if you don't want it!”—And that lets you know what he's thinking, see? You see whether he wanted you to get it, or you

17 A dispatcher I interviewed challenged this interpretation, not because it was implausible, but because he didn’t think the dispatcher in question (Zap) had that “pattern.”
see what he thinks about the order. So I just say, “Okay, okay, I’ll get it,” and I get it! You see? They think you’re dumb but you’re really being smart. You gotta be smart. He doesn't know I'm picking his brain when I do that.

The above driver sets up apparent misunderstandings and momentary confrontations with the dispatcher over the radio as a way to glean further information about orders from the dispatcher’s reactions. Al is one of the most intelligent and skilled drivers I know; in the above statement, however, he is approaching the point past which his interpretations become so elaborate as to be implausible.

Ultimately, the attempt to squeeze meaning out of the narrow channel of communication made available by radio dispatch proves frustrating to many drivers.

**Cham**: The worst thing is when he’s fucking you. You check in five blocks away, and he gives it to the guy who’s six. And he thinks you don’t know. He gets a good feeling that he’s fucking you and you don’t know it, but anytime he gives it to the guy who’s six blocks and you’re five blocks he’s taking the money right out of your hand. And what are you going to do? You go there and you beat the guy, or you see him half a block away. What are you going to do?

Attuned to real or imagined manipulations by dispatchers, drivers may feel overwhelmed by the uncertainty and multiple possible interpretations available to them, and may be uncertain about what action to take in response. No matter how developed their skill at interpreting the radio, they cannot truly challenge the dispatcher’s control over the flow of information, and thus their relation of dependency upon the dispatcher remains unchanged.
Resistance and Avoidance

**Tom:** Sometimes I turn the radio off, drive around like that. I don't like hearing it all the time. It's distracting. Of course if you're really tuned in to making money, you don't turn it off.

Not a few drivers choose to avoid the radio altogether, or at least to take extended breaks from it, relying instead on hotel stands, the airport, or street hails for their income. Some drivers report that listening to the radio too much gives them a headache.

Drivers angry at the dispatcher have another way to vent their frustration: sabotage. Drivers may click their mikes repeatedly, scream or jabber into the mike in a disguised voice, or play music directly into the mike. Noise of this sort makes it difficult for the dispatcher to hear other drivers checking in, or sometimes to dispatch at all. This crude, unintelligent tactic is known as “keying the mike,” and is strangely enough a fairly widespread phenomenon in the radio cab world, having been documented also by Henslin (1967a) in St. Louis and by Berry (1995) in Halifax. The noise and difficulty of dispatching while somebody is keying the mike naturally get on the dispatchers’ nerves, sometimes resulting in angry or exasperated outbursts such as the following:

**Dispatcher:** I don't understand this, somebody gets on and asks a question about a bank, and we have some creature out there who starts clicking his mike like crazy. I don't know what's the psychology behind that—do you know, Ulysses? I'm scared of this guy, I'm afraid he's gonna do something horrible!

Dispatchers faced with a mike-keyer may be forced to stop dispatching completely, often filling the dead air by calling the keyer names, threatening them with losing their jobs, or inviting them to come on down to the garage and encounter the
dispatcher face to face. These threats are harmless as long as the dispatcher has no way of telling which driver out of a hundred or so is keying the mike. Furthermore, since the cab radios only transmit in one direction at a time, the individual keying the mike cannot hear the dispatcher as long as he continues keying the mike. On occasions like this a pathetic irony is enacted, as the dispatcher chews out the mike-keyer, who can’t hear him; and as the mike-keyer continues to harrass the dispatcher with a strategy that hurts no one so much as his fellow drivers, who are dependent for their income on the radio continuing to function.

A more subtle way to counter dependency on the dispatcher is to develop other lines and networks of communication, supplementing or supplanting the radio.

Royce: I don't know if I'd even drive a cab if I didn't have a cell phone. I'd probably just give up driving. Cause I wouldn't want to have to deal with that damn radio all day.

Royce is not talking about buying advance orders from the dispatcher—well, not wholly—but about using a cell phone and a stack of business cards to develop a personal clientele, and thus reduce one’s dependency on the radio. A driver with a black book full of personal regulars and a datebook full of pre-scheduled pick-ups has little need or incentive to play the game of the radio—in fact such a driver has to some extent eliminated much of the chance and unpredictability of the job. Even drivers with a large number of personals, however, may rely on the radio to fill up the gaps when they have no advances.
Using Alternative Technologies to Supplement the Radio

For the most part there are three types of technology used by drivers to supplement the information available to them from the radio and to counteract the dispatcher’s control over this information. These are police scanners, walky-talkies, and cell phones.

Scanners are used by individual cab drivers working alone. Some drivers are secretive about having scanners; others are more open about it. The difference in attitude probably has much to do with the way in which the driver uses his or her scanner. A driver may tune a scanner in such a way as to be able to hear the check-ins of the other drivers in the fleet. She can thus hear the locations of other drivers relative to orders, and may thus take the opportunity to stretch for an order, and be more certain of getting away with it. Less dishonestly, a driver with a scanner may listen for orders for which no other drivers check in on the first call, so as to be able to check in for these orders further away than a driver without a scanner might feel comfortable doing, as one scanner user reported:

**Bull:** If you're sitting at Cal/Presidio and you hear them calling “Deep Marina” and you hear nobody checking in, then you can check in and get it. That gives you a leg up, a certain advantage. But it’s perfectly legal.

The knowledge the scanner gives the driver leads, however, to the slightly unusual behavior of frequently being the only driver to check in, a pattern which skillful dispatchers, who are not likely to approve this challenge to their control, might pick up on:
**Seth:** Danny is on to Bull's scanner, how he checks in too far away when nobody else checks in. That's what a good dispatcher Danny is, [when Bull checks in] he says, “Oh, you....” Then he calls it again.

By recalling the order the dispatcher gives other drivers another chance to check in, defusing Bull’s advantage.

Drivers who work for companies with poor radios may use scanners to tune into the frequencies of companies with busy radios, and lie in wait in remote neighborhoods to steal radio calls by pretending to be the cab which was ordered. Dispatchers try to prevent this by not giving out addresses right away to drivers who are riding calls any great distance. Instead they will ask the driver to go to the intersection first and then “come back” to ask for the full address:

*Dispatcher:* Twenty-first Avenue, Parkside....
*395:* Ulysses Ninety-five, Saint Mary's....
*Dispatcher:* Ninety-five I got, who else?.... Ninety-Five, let me know at Twenty-first and Taraval....
*395:* Twenty-one/Taraval, check.

[later]
*395:* Ulysses Ninety-five, riding ready on Taraval....
*Dispatcher:* Ninety-five is riding ready... Ninety-five, 1806 Taraval....
*395:* 1806 Taraval.

Since the full order is not exposed until the dispatched driver is close by, it is more difficult for anyone scanning for orders to steal the load.

Walky-talkies and cell phones, unlike scanners, are used to share information. Drivers may use these to call up and converse with cabbie friends of theirs around town, keeping tabs on where the business is hot and where it is slow, what intersections to
avoid, whether the airport lot is moving, etc. Drivers with these technologies can
supplement the sense of city-wide business that they get from listening to the radio. They
can also pool their resources to gain an advantage vis-a-vis the dispatcher and other
drivers when it comes to contesting radio calls.

**Taoufik:** And also like Gotham after that has had some nasty driver,
working together, you know like, make like community... yeah together
they make like a talky-walky, you know and he bid on order but he's far
away from that order and figure out is an airport, of course he gotta call
his friend and like “Okay, go and pick it up,” or sometimes, he leave that
order, go to the airport and then come back, and then pick up a customer.

Taoufik is referring to a) drivers switching and trading calls to make stretching
more effective, and b) a driver who is on the way to a call, hears another one he believes
is an airport, and manages to pick up the second call and take it to the airport before
proceeding on his first assigned call. These drivers can do this because they work at a
non-GPS computerized dispatch company, and are thus not subject to the same scrutiny
by a dispatcher as radio-dispatched drivers. However, similar behavior involving a
“community” based on alternative channels of communication goes on at radio-
dispatched companies. Two real examples, reconstructed from my own observations and
the reports of some of the drivers involved, follow:
1. In Figure 3, the dispatcher has called two orders in the Deep (Outer) Richmond. Three cabs check in; their initial locations are denoted by the numeral 1 in the appropriate color. The Green cab is at Thirty-Fifth and Geary; the Blue cab is at Balboa/Arguello; and the Red cab is at Fulton and Stanyan. The dispatcher gives the two calls to the two closest cabs: the order at Twenty-sixth and Balboa goes to the Green cab, and the order at Twenty-second and California goes to the Blue cab.

2. The Red cab, however, is only a few blocks behind the Blue cab on Fulton Street, and sees the Blue cab pull over at Sixth and Fulton to let out a passenger. Since the Blue cab had not been empty when he had checked in and received the radio call, he had in fact been stretching, for although he had not lied about his location he had implied he was available when he was not. The driver of the Red cab informs the dispatcher of
this, who takes the Twenty-second Avenue call away from the Blue cab and gives it to the Red cab. The Red driver passes the Blue cab which is pulled over letting a passenger out and proceeds towards the order.

3. The driver of the Blue cab, however, does not take kindly to being exposed as a stretcher. Fortunately for him, he is friends with the driver of the Green cab, who is already out in the Deep Richmond. He calls up the Green cab and convinces him to switch orders: that the Green driver should get the call at Twenty-second and California and the Blue driver should pick up the Twenty-sixth and Balboa. This way both of the friends will get fares while the Red driver is left with a no-go.

4. The Green driver, who is closer to both orders than either of the other two drivers, picks up the Twenty-second Avenue call.

5. The Red driver arrives at the Twenty-second Avenue address but finds no one there who needs a taxi.

6. The Blue driver leisurely proceeds to Twenty-sixth Avenue and picks up the fare.
In Figure 4, the dispatcher has called an order at Twenty-ninth Avenue and Vicente in the Parkside. The Red cab checks in at the UC Hospital and the Green driver checks in “returning 280”—meaning that he is outside of the city boundaries on highway 280. The dispatcher checks both of them and then asks, “Who else?” When nobody else responds, the dispatcher tells the driver of the Red cab, “Let me know at Twenty-ninth and Vicente.”

As soon as the dispatcher says this the driver of the Blue cab checks in in the Deep Parkside not far from the order. The dispatcher apologizes for not having heard the
Blue driver the first time, tells the Red driver to back off the order, and gives the Blue driver the full address.

The Red driver is suspicious, however, but is too far from the order to feel like racing out to the Deep Parkside to check out the Blue driver. He is friends, however, with the Green driver, who calls him up and voices his own suspicions over the actions of the Blue driver.

If the Blue driver was really in the Deep Parkside, they reason, he would have checked in for the order when it was first called. Instead, the Blue driver waited until the order had already been dispatched before checking in; furthermore, what had evidently prompted the Blue driver to check in was that the dispatcher, by telling the Red driver to “let him know,” (in other words, to ride the call) had effectively exposed the fact over the air that he, the Red driver, was not close to Twenty-ninth and Vicente. The Blue driver then stretched and was given the call, possibly from a location on Upper Market.

The Red and Green drivers share their suspicions and decide to do something about it. They compare their positions and determine that the Green driver is now in fact closer to the order and has the best chance of beating the Blue driver to it. Because the Blue driver checked in close to the order, the dispatcher exposed the actual address over the air; and the Green driver zips over to the address and picks up the fare.

Some minutes later the Blue driver is heard calling the dispatcher (other drivers can only hear the dispatcher’s end of the conversation):

Dispatcher: What is it, [Blue]?
Blue: .........................
Dispatcher: What’s the matter, didn’t they come down? How long have you been waiting there?... Hold on, I’ll call them down..... [the dispatcher dials the number for the address at Twenty-ninth and Vicente] I’m sorry, [Blue], I’m not getting an answer. I don’t see how they got away. I mean you were right there... Weren’t you?

Summary

This study focused on the discourse of radio dispatch, both over the air in practice as well as discourse about radio dispatch engaged in in various off-radio settings. The on-radio discourse and other statements of drivers were analyzed to determine sets of strategies pertaining to playing the radio, and to maximizing one’s ability to glean information from the radio and to play the game of radio cab driving to one’s full potential. Furthermore, the significance of these interpretive strategies for the self-construction of cab drivers as knowing subjects was emphasized.

Radio procedure, although simple in its basic rules, was found to leave the door open for a wide range of work strategies on the parts of both dispatchers and drivers. The limited channel of communication and interpretation open to dispatchers and drivers through the venue of the radio results in an intensification of the interpretive attention given to prosody, diction, and the timing of statements. Drivers interpret what they observe over the radio in terms of the presumed motivations of dispatchers and other drivers, and act on these interpretations, as well as talking about them.

Dispatchers are placed at the point of centralized control over the flow of radio information, a fact which works both for them and against them. It works against them in that they are exposed to surveillance by the company, local government, and Federal
agencies; also they are the focus of constant scrutiny by the drivers whom they dispatch to. It works for them, though, in that they are able for the most part to choose the timing and method of releasing the information at their control. Dispatchers make use of a number of strategies for keeping control over the dispatch setting by manipulating the reactions of drivers and their access to information regarding radio calls.

Drivers make use of a number of interpretive strategies for deciphering the actions of the dispatchers and other drivers and increasing the amount of meaningful information they are able to glean from the radio. For drivers who are successful at this, “playing the radio” becomes a significant aspect of the way they construct and enact their work-identity as cab drivers. The constantly rearising tension and the inbuilt inequality of the relations of power between the dispatcher and the drivers results in the constant reproduction of these relations in the minute-by-minute struggle for orders. What is hidden from drivers, the channels of information which are unknowable or difficult for them to interpret, support rather than undermine this reproduction in the discourse of drivers concerning radio dispatch.

Drivers may resist these relations of power by avoiding the radio altogether, and finding other sources of income. Alternatively, they may sabotage the functioning of the radio by “keying the mike,” to the aggravation of the dispatcher and their fellow drivers. Lastly, they may supplement the radio with information from other communicative devices, such as scanners, walky-talkies, or cell phones. With these communicative devices, drivers may collude with the power of the dispatcher by buying orders, or they
may defeat the dispatcher by cooperating with one another outside of the scene of the radio. Some elaborate instances of such strategies were documented.

Radio dispatch is in the process of becoming an outmoded means of dispatching taxicabs. Increasingly, some form of computerized dispatch is adopted by cab companies. Although the individuals who work these computers are still “dispatchers” and still control information in a way similar to radio dispatchers, the impressive array of skills and manipulative strategies involved in radio dispatch will soon be things of the past. Likewise, insofar as computer dispatch restricts the access of drivers to information to a far greater degree even than radio dispatch does, the surprising multitude of strategies by which drivers interpret, contest, and react to radio dispatching will also disappear. When the last dispatch radio is switched off, will the city in a way become irrevocably silent? Or will the games of truth played by drivers and dispatchers will only shift to some other channel of communication, such as those already made use of by drivers and dispatchers? The next and final chapter will briefly consider the difference between radio and computer dispatch, and what these may mean for the future of cabdriving in San Francisco.
Chapter 8

Computerized Dispatch

Where there is a machine, there is a man to beat it. (New York cabdriver, quoted in Vidich 1976: 39)

I do not have any direct experience with computerized dispatch, and it is here discussed only for the light it sheds on radio dispatch as a historically situated set of practices and knowledges, with all the attendant dreams and conflicts involved.

In San Francisco there are two styles of computerized dispatch, one using GPS and the other not using GPS. The non-GPS system, used for over a decade by the largest company in town, emulates the old stand and radio zone dispatch systems. The city is broken up into a number of zones which correspond geographically to the old stand zones used by the same company until the 1970s (Davis 1990: 83). Drivers can scroll through the zones on a screen in their cab, viewing the number of drivers and/or orders queued in each zone. A driver does not have to actually be in the zone which he or she checks in for. The dispatcher does not have much influence over the process, but can provide some advice and assistance to drivers over a secondary voice channel, and may also call up and berate drivers who fail to pick up loads they were assigned. R. A. Davis, who worked when this system was coming into being, reports that a company brochure pledged it to be fair, fast, and automatic, and that it would increase the number of fares, increase the efficiency of drivers, reduce radio traffic, eliminate scanning, eliminate address checks, save on gas through less cruising, and save dispatch time (ibid.: 82).
The newer computerized dispatch systems add another option to the zone dispatch model, by employing Global Positioning to locate automatically the closest cab to the order. This results in a marked improvement of efficiency over the non-GPS computer system, which often assigns orders to cabs which are nowhere nearby, and which therefore lags in response time behind traditional radio dispatch. The GPS system allows orders to be dispatched by either zone or proximity. Drivers may check in by zone as before but may also cruise for fares, “catching” orders by being in the right place at the right time, just as in the mobile radio system. The dispatcher plays a more significant role in this dispatch system, since although the selection of cabs is automatic, the dispatcher’s action is necessary to actually “send” the order to the driver’s screen, and the dispatcher has some leeway in reassigning cabs and calls.

As business took a downturn following the winter of 2000-2001, the experience of radio dispatch went for many drivers from being at worst a necessary annoyance to an outright burden. As drivers grew more desperate, dispatchers lost more and more control over the flow of dispatch, and as experienced drivers quit, inexperienced and untrained ones took their place, increasing the level of havoc on the radio. Fed up with the experience of swarming, dogfighting cabbies racing around bickering over scraps of business, many drivers at radio companies talk about the computer-dispatch experience in an almost utopian manner, as of a Promised Land of peace, quiet, and rationality:

**Rod:** Can you imagine that at El Dorado, you check in and the computer gives it to you, and it's just you—you can relax, play your music, it's not this catfight like at Ulysses....
The promise of freedom from the power of the dispatcher is a common theme:

**Lotta:** That's why the people that switch companies from this dispatch to computer dispatch... so much easier, you don't have to lie, you don't have to race, you don't have to argue, you don't have to be subjecting yourself to a dispatcher that's nasty, like Mick—I can't believe the guy sometimes, you know, I had so many fights with him!

**Yakub:** At El Dorado it’s not so crooked—only needing tip of five dollars in, not like here....! And with the computer, the dispatcher doesn't know who’s getting what orders, they don’t know anything, so it’s more fair. Much easier to get airports.

Drivers who have worked at computer-dispatched companies report that there is in fact an easier pace, in that drivers don’t have to attend to every second of radio discourse and can even take the time to look up an address if they need to:

**Taoufik:** It’s like when I start with El Dorado, it’s like it is a computer, there is no competition, you don’t need to be so fast, you can take your time to look the map.... so when they give you the address you can take your time, look at the map, and then go to the address....

Not having to understand and interpret the radio is easier for drivers who don’t speak English:

**Taoufik:** And even sometimes you [don’t] need even to speak English. Especially with some company, if you go to El Dorado, over there is a lot of Chinese, they don’t speak any English.... Yeah, they have the computer even sometimes they don’t need, there is so many drivers they don’t deal with the radio, they don’t deal with anything. Never happen to your customers? Like complain, “The other day I took a cab, it’s like he doesn’t speak any English!” I’m trying to explain for him what happens....
Compared to radio dispatch, computer dispatch has its advantages and its disadvantages. Drivers are much freer under the computer system, since dispatchers are neither able, nor have the incentive, to attend closely to their actions and whereabouts. Computer drivers can scroll through the various zones of the city, evaluating the relative amounts of business and cabs based on much more explicit data than the driver who listens to and interprets the radio. On the other hand, the computer is a much more restricted medium of expression, limiting the driver/dispatcher interaction to a handful of possible messages, and cutting the driver off wholly from the dispatcher’s communications with other drivers. The driver cannot hear what the other drivers are doing, cannot hear reports on traffic or possible pickups. The driver/dispatcher connection is supplemented by a secondary radio line, but use of this is closely restricted by the company:

[So you do have a radio or something going on.]  

Taoufik: Yeah, there is a voice, of course.

[Well, how does that work? What is he saying on the radio?]

Taoufik: Well, it’s like okay, he will ask you, it’s like “991, go to voice,” it’s like you switch the channel to the voice, and then you talk to him. It’s like, “What happened, what’s going on?”

[Okay, so its like uh, its for just emergencies, or...]

Taoufik: Emergency, yeah, used for emergency communications, so forth.

[And is it just with you, or can everybody hear him talking to you?]

Taoufik: No, you are the only one, and you're not allowed, it’s like after while I don't know what's the reason, maybe because some this owner or something, they talk on the radio with the dispatcher, you can hear
everything, of course. Okay? So that's why they said okay ... you have to push the button, just like to ask to go voice, and then they will give you the permission to talk to the dispatcher. Otherwise you cannot turn on to that channel without [permission], to hear what's going on.

[Very tightly controlled.]

**Taoufik:** Yeah, controlled, yeah. You don't have just pick up the radio and then start talking or pick up the radio, just listening what's going on. That's why they do it, like they find a way, they said “Okay, this is getting messed up with the GPS.” That's the reason, they said. Of course, there is another reason, maybe. Maybe is true, maybe so. But still there is another reason. [laughs]

There is another reason—besides “messing up the GPS”—for controlling use of the voice line: limiting the channels for driver interpretation and challenge of the dispatch process. In fact, limiting the drivers’ scrutiny and control over the process is one of the main advantages of computerized dispatch to companies and office personnel. Although dispatchers have also lost some powers of manipulation and interpretation of their own in the switch to computer dispatch (see Chapter Seven), they have more input into the process than is recognized, and their actions cannot be observed by the drivers.

**Quong San:** El Dorado is just as crooked or more—worse, much worse, than Ulysses. Because they have *all* the control.

The dispatcher has the ability to redirect orders and override the GPS system:

**Taoufik:** I believe the dispatcher has some some, uh, stuff, like he can play with this... with the GPS, like, take out that order, that doesn’t put in the GPS to go automatic, you know? If you say the GPS system is like, the GPS catches who’s near the address, okay? But I believe when it is good fare or something he can take it out, from the GPS and send it directly to the driver. He can do that, you know.
Ahmad: The dispatcher, he has a lot more power at El Dorado, because the dispatcher has to actually send the order—so the computer assigns it to a driver, the driver has to accept the intersection, he doesn’t get the address, so then the dispatcher has to hit like “Send,” but he can switch it, too, like to a friend of his. Like say the guy takes a call at Broadway and Webster, it says do you accept? When you accept it, it gives an address at a different location. Not Broadway and Webster, but somewhere else. Why? Because the dispatcher took it away.

Faced with the suspicion that their orders are being manipulated, drivers may come up with strategies to combat the dispatcher’s control:

Ahmad: But the drivers then, what they do when that happens, is maybe they go “oh, well, what happened?” and they go to the new address. But some drivers, they go to the first intersection, like if it’s close, and they don’t know the address but they drive around and around that intersection until the people come out with their luggage and everything and they can take it! And sometimes that’s airports! That’s the drivers’ reaction...

The same factors are at work in computer dispatch as in radio dispatch, at least with the computer system the above drivers are talking about. The dispatcher has privileged access to the flow of information, and the drivers must glean what information they can through the limited channels of communication at their disposal. Although the technology has changed and with it the concomitant skills and practical knowledges made use of by dispatchers and drivers while working, nevertheless the differential relation of power remains and with it a ready suspicion of the dispatcher by the drivers.

Computer-dispatched drivers also find ways to subvert the computer’s dispatching rules, to improve their chances of getting calls. A computer dispatcher referred to these driver tactics as “computer games.”
**Dave:** I took a Gotham cab one time and the driver asked if it was okay if he turned off the meter—since I knew how much the fare was—so he could check in in that zone.

“Empty cabs always come before full cabs” is a central rule of dispatching, as Henslin (1967a: 65) learned, whether the method is by stand, radio, or computer. One method radio cabs use to “stretch” is to claim they are empty when they in fact still have a passenger (an example of which was given in the last chapter). Computerized cabs, however, are at a disadvantage in this, because as soon as they hit the meter the computer reads them as having a fare, and they are ineligible to compete for orders until they drop. Drivers find themselves in a similar position as under the old commission system, in which they had an incentive to take fares with the meter off, and they respond with an old-fashioned tactic—by coming to an agreement with the passenger (see Chapter Two). Just as in the old days, this tactic depends on an assessment of the passenger and the trip itself:

**Taoufik:** Yeah also you can do it, after a while I do it the same way, because I start with the customer to say, “you know what, like”—let's say El Dorado, they have lot of business on Third Street over here, or Sunset, or Richmond. Okay? And I’ve got a customer going to the Sunset or Richmond or Third Street, whatever, like always there is a call over there. Okay? Always there is chance to have a call. So what I do with the customer, it’s like, “Do you take cabs like, always, like, everyday? You know how much it’s gonna cost?” They will say, “Yeah, I know.” “Hey, how much it cost?” “Maybe fifteen, sixteen.” “Okay we'll make it fifteen, okay? But I got to turn off the meter”—because if the meter is on, you cannot catch any order, the GPS doesn't give you anything—and then the same way, my way to the Richmond or Sunset, I trying to catch something
over there, bidding on the order, coming my way.¹

I heard rumors of ways drivers can “confuse the GPS” by checking in multiple times for a call, and so “catch” the order. A driver at Gotham, which does not use GPS, crowed about his “skill with the button” but would not elaborate. Also, drivers who receive a call and decide they don’t like the looks of it can turn it down, or send it back even after they have received the address—this slows down dispatch, however, and may provoke the dispatcher to berate repeat offenders over the voice line:

**Taoufik:** Yeah, you can refuse calls. But you have to be the smart way too, it’s like, don’t refuse it, because so bad the dispatcher will “What do you mean, you don’t want to pick up that order?” So better it’s like you put just like you had the flag....

So instead of blatantly refusing a call, a driver can push a button indicating he or she has taken a flag (i.e. a street hail), then turn the meter on and off, clearing themself for the next call.²

There is always the option for some of using alternative channels of communication to short-circuit the dispatching procedure:

**Seth:** I was taking an El Dorado cab to the Sunset, and we were going out along Lincoln and I was asking the guy—he was an owner—how [the computer] worked, and how he was gonna get his next fare. He was all, “Don’t worry about it, watch this,” so he called up the dispatcher on his cell phone right there and said, “I’m going out to the Sunset, give me an

¹ Tricking the computer into giving you a new order before you have completed your last one is called “order stacking.”

² This technique is called “rapid meter.”
order.” So the dispatcher was like, no problem, and the order popped right up on his screen. He wasn’t first up, he wasn’t even in the Sunset yet!

Computer dispatch, if anything, consolidates the dispatcher’s power over the dispatch process. It achieves this by further limiting the channels of information available to the driver regarding orders, other drivers, and the actions of the dispatcher. This can be seen as a further step in the process initiated decades ago with the switch from open to closed radios. Nevertheless, drivers continue to come up with strategies to resist the dispatcher’s manipulations and to improve their chances of getting calls. Drivers can cultivate a “skill with the button” to escape the stricture of the rules of computer dispatch and achieve some level of control over their work. Radio and computer dispatch each make possible certain constellations of communicative possibilities, with their attendant sets of interpretations, strategies, and resistances. Insofar, however, as computer dispatch retains and even strengthens the central power differential between dispatcher and drivers, it presents not a utopian resolution to the conflicts of radio dispatch, but more of the same.

[Do you like the radio better or the computer better?]

Taoufik: The radio you feel sometimes it is better if it is honest. At least you know what is going on in the city. The computer you don't know, only, it’s like, your part. What the dispatcher give you, the computer [gives you], but you don't know exactly what's going on in the city. Because sometimes around the block, near you, there is call, but he give you call further away, without knowing, it’s like, exists that call. With the radio it’s like you hear everything, you know which one is like near to you, other than I don't know... This selfish business sometimes... [laughs]
Chapter 9

Summary and Additional Questions

In Chapter One, the definitions of the terms discourse, knowledge, and strategy were discussed, and how they were to be used to understand cabdriving as a practice and an institution. An attempt was made to outline some of the various discourses surrounding cabdriving, and to situate this study within the discourse of cabdrivers on cabdriving, in the space of that occupational discourse’s articulation with social science representations of cabdriving which are influenced by the experience of driving, primarily through the method of participant observation.

In Chapter Two, the occupational structure of the local cab industry was briefly described, with an eye to emphasizing the role of internal class divisions among drivers (who owns, who drives) in the “atomization process” in which competition and individualism are reinforced while solidarity among drivers is undermined. Historically, the predecessors of modern taxicabs were traced back, through the horse-drawn era, to the hackney coaches of proto-modern Paris and London. The evolution of the cab or hack as a recognizable and available means of transport for classes other than the nobility was traced, as was the increased mobility of cabs as they emerged from the inn-yards and standings where they originated to prowl the streets for fares; along with this mobility came the historical development of regulation and surveillance over cabs and their drivers, as exercised by governments and cab companies. The role of changes in
communicative technology in transforming modes of dispatch was described, as was the role of local legislation, and of the larger industry trend towards the fiction of “self-employment,” in bringing about the structural divisions noted in the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter Three dealt with the cab garage as a scene of work socialization and of the processes involved in getting “put out” in a cab for a given shift. The role of “spare” cabs in cab industry operations and folklore was underlined, and the phenomenon of tipping for a better vehicle was described.

In Chapter Four the focus shifted to the interactions of drivers and passengers in the cab. Who drivers are, what their motivations are in driving cabs, and what role work culture plays in maintaining and transmitting certain norms of behavior among drivers was discussed. The importance for the driver of control over interior and exterior space in the interaction with passengers was emphasized. Various tactics deployed by drivers and passengers in the quest for interactional control were listed, and some stories told by drivers about dangerous encounters with passengers were analyzed for what they revealed about the importance, again, of interior and exterior space in the driver’s sense of occupational control and competence. Finally, situations in which drivers and passengers achieve a more sociable, productive relationship were examined.

Chapters Five and Six contextualized the emphasis on radio play by delineating the other kinds of spatiotemporal strategies available to cabdrivers. Cabstands and the airport were discussed in terms of the strategies and power relations, as well as some of the occupational folklore, involved in playing them. A discussion of the strategies and
techniques of cruising the streets led into the issues of discrimination by race or destination, and situations in which communication and norms of behavior break down, often through heightened competition.

Chapter Seven dealt with the strategies, knowledges, and power relations involved in radio dispatch. The privileges and pressures under which dispatchers work, and the ways they seek to control radio procedure both for occupational reasons and for private gain, were discussed along with the ways drivers strategize to affect or counteract the actions of the dispatcher. Ways that drivers use the radio to feel the pulse of the city, or to “see” the movements of their fellow drivers, were discussed, as were the emerging uses by drivers of alternative technologies, such as scanners, walky-talkies, and mobile phones to get around the constraints of the radio dispatch mode, and to subvert the power of the dispatcher as well as the strategies of other drivers. Finally, Chapter Eight briefly described the significance of the ongoing shift from radio to computerized dispatch. A limited discussion focused on the way the change in technology transforms, but does not eradicate, the struggle over the dispatch process.

Driving a cab is a job which offers unusual benefits. Drivers are under no immediate supervision and have control over most of the choices they make during the day. They are free to roam about the city and to put their time to the use they see fit. There is certainly a sense of adventure about the job, which begins with each shift, as the driver pulls out of the garage. The wide array of urban sights and denizens they are able to see and interact with is an occupational attraction often remarked upon by cabbies. The occupational environment encourages a positive individualist ethic of self-making, of
liberation through mobility, which is expressed in one way through the joy and sense of identity experienced in the competent use and deployment of occupational strategies and knowledges, and shared among drivers through the discourse they engage in about their jobs over cell phones, at cab stands, or after work in the garage or in bars full of other cabbies.

The same individualism, however, which is expressed in the playful side of the game of cabdriving, is also found in the erosion of solidary norms when competition becomes too desperate. One problem with this study is that, although attempts are made to invoke history, the description here of driver knowledges and strategies is too synchronic. The time period during which I drove a cab was marked by a dramatic shift from very good times, when many drivers could live comfortably from driving three to five days a week, to very bad times, when cabbies driving six or seven days a week have trouble paying rent or feeding their families. With this comes a definite change in the tenor of competitive strategies, hints of which pepper my descriptions above. Thus drivers who once cruised side by side are more likely to race each other for street hails; those who once relished the luck of the draw are more likely to compete for the favor of dispatchers or hotel doormen; and radio players are more likely to race, stretch, check each other out, and contest the dispatcher’s control over the process. The individualizing character of the job which on the one hand allows the driver freedom and mobility, on the other hand renders them defenseless against the atomizing effects of competition, in which even the rules of the game change.
There are hints, however, of possibilities for transformation even within the cumulative swarming of driver competition. The use of technologies such as cell phones and walky-talkies challenges the centralization of control over information inherent to both radio and computerized modes of dispatch. There is a utopian discourse on the ability of such distributed communication networks to redistribute the control of information horizontally instead of hierarchically (e.g. Rheingold 2002), and it is worth wondering if such technology could radically change taxicab dispatch. There is a company in London which uses mobile phone triangulation to connect callers (who must be on cell phones) directly to the nearest drivers, without the use of centralized dispatching.\footnote{www.zingotaxi.co.uk.} The company, however, controls the routing technology and the access of drivers to it. It thus remains to be seen whether such technology can or will be used to decentralize taxicab dispatch and free drivers from some of the constraints they work under. If so, it will be the atomized, overflowing character of driver competition which breaks down the current hierarchy.

In the first chapter a comparison was made between participant-observation as ethnographic method and participant-observation as the work of cabdriving. To what extent the observations of this participant \textit{in} the occupation of cabdriving are valid or relevant depictions \textit{of} cabdriving in general, or even in San Francisco, can not probably be finally decided, by you, me, or anybody—even cabdrivers, although they will, no doubt, have opinions. Readers will have to look through the text and decide whether I am \textit{trackable} enough to be trusted. For which purpose I will provide one more story: once I
was taking a passenger from the airport to an address she had given me in the neighborhood of West Portal. As we came up Junipero Serra towards Portola, she became agitated and accused me of taking her the wrong way. After a short disagreement she handed me a piece of paper with her destination on it, which revealed that, although she had told me she was going to San Francisco, what she really wanted was a street with the same name in Daly City, which we had already passed through. Muttering curses under my breath, I turned into the warren of St. Francis Woods, and with some quickly executed maneuvers, had us soon back on the freeway to D.C. As I later discovered, it was at that point—turning back frustrated and annoyed—that I shook the DEA agents who had been trailing my passenger from Mexico City. As I later explained over the phone to a certain Lieutenant O’Malley, “If you want to follow a cabbie, you ought to hire a cabbie!”

Although it may be alleged that this story does little to illuminate the preceding discussion, I feel it is a good story nonetheless. I like it, because it gives the impression that, even if I don’t know everything, I know what I’m doing.
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Glossary

**address check** – A driver who has taken a radio call, but forgotten the address uses this term to ask the dispatcher to repeat the address. When calling “*address check*” a driver will be answered before an “*over*” but after a regular check-in. “*Address check*” may also be used to check whether there are any problems with the order, or any information the dispatcher may have failed to divulge.

**assigned** – A driver who is assigned to a particular cab has an advantage over those who are *scheduled* but have no cabs, and over those who are *extra*.

**beef** – To send a cab to the shop. “I’m beefing this cab, it keeps stalling out.”

**bingo** – A check-in at the location at which the order has been called. Santee (1989) gives a definition for bingo equivalent to *bounce*.

**blind check-in** – Bidding for an order without knowing where it is, for instance when the driver did not hear what the dispatcher said. Irritates dispatchers.

**bounce** – To find another fare where you drop.

**board** – The surface on which cab orders were once kept in front of the dispatcher. Still used by dispatchers (who are more likely to be looking at computer screens) to indicate the number of orders available: “I got two orders on the board,” “The board is clear.”

**callback** – A repeat call for service from the same location. Term used by dispatcher to indicate reliability of order: “I got a callback on Noe, who’ll go?”
**cashier** – Office worker who gives out cabs to drivers and takes in money at the end of the shift. Also, *window.*

**check-in** – A bid for a radio call. A driver may check in with their location, as *dropping,* as *en route,* or as “will *ride.*”

**check out** – To drive by an order to see whether the driver who was dispatched to it is there yet.

**clear** – 1. Of a driver, too far from a call to be competitive. The dispatcher may *clear* the driver, or the driver may *clear* him or herself: *Dispatcher:* “409, where’d you get to?” *409:* “Nevermind, I’m clear.” 2. The dispatcher may *clear* the *board* by putting out all available orders before new ones come in.

**clock** – The taximeter.

**closed stand** – A stand which only certain cabs can play.

**come in** – To check in or bid for an order.

**cruise** – “Ply for hire,” “play the streets,” to wander the city looking for fares.

**deadhead** – To drive a long distance without a passenger. As opposed to the cruiser, the deadheader is directly going somewhere in particular, such as a neighborhood where business is presumed to be better.

**dispatch** – 1. To send a cab to an address: “Cab 1207 was dispatched to 999 Green Street.” 2. To give an order to a cab: “The 999 Green Street was dispatched to me.” 3. To call out orders over the radio, filling the role of dispatcher: “Joey dispatched on the night shift.”
**dispatcher** – 1. One who dispatches, by radio or computer. 2. A loaded die.

**driver** – Most common term in the business for the driver of a taxicab.

**drive-by** – 1. To go by an address without stopping, suspecting that it is a *no-go*. 2. See *check out*.

**drive-through** – When business is so good at the airport that cabs can enter and pick up without having to wait, it is called a *drive-through*. Sometimes used for hotel or nightclub stands.

**dropping** – A driver checks in for a call as “dropping” to indicate that they have a passenger but will be empty momentarily.

**en route** – A driver checks in “en route” with their destination to indicate that they have a fare which they will be dropping in the vicinity of the order called.

**extra** – A driver who is neither assigned nor scheduled for the day.

**first up** – The driver with priority at a stand or in a zone.

**flag** – 1. To wave down a cab. 2. A passenger picked up off the street. 3. The lever which started old-time meters.

**gasman** – Garage worker who gasses up cabs, checks the oil, and records the mileage.

**gates** – Or *gate fee*, the charge a driver pays a company to lease a cab for one shift.

**gypsy cab** – An unauthorized taxicab, often an out-of-town cab taking advantage of the better business in the city.

**high-flagging** – To take a passenger without turning the meter on.

**jump the lot** – To steal ahead at the airport without waiting your turn in line.
key the mike – To hold down the button on your microphone, creating noise which disrupts the dispatching process.

land line – A stationary telephone in a house or business, more trackable than a mobile phone.

medallion – A permit to operate a cab, physically represented by a square piece of metal with the cab number on it.

meter-and-a-half – 1. One and a half times the standard fare, charged for trips ending more than fifteen miles outside of the city limits. 2. Such a trip.

milk run – A passenger who by private arrangement with the driver is transported on a regular basis; a regular.

no-go – An order for which a cab is dispatched, but for which no passenger is to be found.

no-pay – A fare that results in a lack of payment.

no-show – A no-go.

old maid – A large bill for which the driver has to make change.

oldtimer – 1. A longtime cabdriver. 2. Someone who should have known better.

open lot – At the airport, same as a drive-through.

order taker – Dispatch office employee who answers the phones, usually a driver.

organ donor – Or donor, a bicycle messenger.

over – A request to talk to the dispatcher. Lower priority than a check in or address check.
owner – Or owner-driver, a cabdriver who owns one or more medallions.

personal – A fare established in advance by the driver and passenger, without the mediation of the dispatcher.

pickup – 1. A street hail, a passenger picked up without the help of dispatch or stands.

   2. Also possibles, street hails called over the air by a dispatcher: “Pickups at the wharf.”

plate – See medallion.

play – Like work, but it involves cabdriving.

possible – See pickup, def. 2.

radio check – Drivers call “radio check” when, due to air silence, they suspect their radio is not working, or if they think the dispatcher is ignoring them.

ramp cab – A handicapped-accessible van cab.

regular – A passenger who takes a cab frequently, with the same company or the same driver.

ride – To drive a long distance for a radio call. “Who’ll ride the Sunset?”

riding ready – When drivers who have ridden calls near their destinations, they announce to the dispatcher that they are “riding ready.” Also R and R, rocking and rolling.

rolling bingo – A driver calls a rolling bingo when they are about to enter an intersection at which an order has been called, and expect to be in the intersection by the time they are read by the dispatcher. Some dispatchers refuse to recognize the term,
since it is a way to call *bingo* without actually being *bingo*, but without technically *stretching*.

**rounding out** – When I was in cabdriving school, I was told, whenever I had a passenger I suspected was going to rob me, to call to the dispatcher “[cab number], *rounding out* [destination],” so the dispatcher could have cops ready at the destination when I arrived. At neither company I worked for was anyone familiar with the term.

**run** – A series of bounces.

**sandbag** – To sit at a location expecting it to be called.

**scheduled** – A driver who is *scheduled* has a set shift but no set cab. A step above being *extra*, but without the freedom.

**shop** – See *beef*.

**short** – From the airport, a trip going less than fifteen miles or taking fewer than thirty minutes round-trip.

**short shift** – To turn the cab back in for another driver to take out.

**spare** – A cab in the 2000-series, put out with the medallions of regular cabs which are in the shop.

**stand** – 1. An established location where cabs line up to wait for fares. Also *line*.

2. What cabs are doing when they appear to be parking: *Officer*: “Move it, cabbie, you can’t park here.” *Cabbie*: “I’m not parking, officer, I’m **standing**.”

**step on** – To *come in* on the radio when the dispatcher is trying to hear someone else speak. “Everybody quiet now, you’re stepping on Triple-Deuce.”
**starter** – At the airport, an official who oversees the loading of cabs.

**stretch** – To lie about one’s location or status in the hopes of obtaining a radio order.

**taxi detail** – The branch of the police department charged with enforcing taxicab regulations. Reputedly not a plum job.

**walk-up** – A fare who walks up to a cab at a stand, instead of coming out of a hotel or dispatched over the radio.

**waybill** – “bill of fare,” or “tripsheet,” the sheet on which drivers are required to record trip information.

**window** – 1. A small slab of bulletproof glass, through which *cashiers* interact with *drivers*. 2. The position of *cashier*. 