

Riders

Delivery Riders of Manchester



Chester Jones

In every major city in the UK, there seems to be an unwavering army of e-bike riding delivery drivers, enduring sleet, snow and rain, and facing constant danger day in and day out. In our fast-paced fast-food society, Riders make up the backbone of an entire industry. Yet, to some people, they don't exist until they are stood on the doorstep. The Riders seem to be a workforce that is ever present but in some sense invisible. To me, these people represent a new, and characteristically modern rung below the working class gig-economy workers and migrant workers simultaneously hyper-exploited in a manner specific to our current stage of capitalism. An age defined by algorithms, oligarchs, and the legacy of colonialism.

It is my hope that the portraits presented here will act as positive representations of the Riders, bringing them into the forefront as individuals, and that the writing in this book will shed some new light on their reality for those who are unaware.

Riders

Chester Jones

Designed By
Thomas Aggett

For My Dad.

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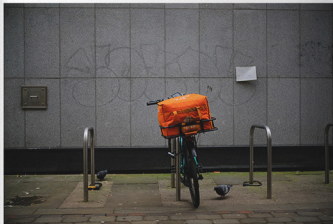


IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Making your way through Manchester, or any major city in Britain, it's hard to miss the Riders zipping around on chunky electric bikes with bright, colourful cubes on their backs. No matter the time, no matter the weather, they seem to be on the job. They have a constant presence in the city, yet they somehow slip under the radar, unnoticed by us unless they're in the way of our car or delivering our food. This is what interests me; the place they occupy in our city and in society at large. Out of curiosity I delved into some research and in my own amateur attempt at some political analysis I began to see these people as a newly manufactured and characteristically modern rung below our traditional working class. Workers doubly exploited by tech-corporations, hyper-exploited if you will, as both migrant workers and gig-economy workers; especially vulnerable to predatory business practices, and suffering the detriments of zero-hour employment contracts at the same time. As I began to learn more concretely about concepts such as the 'gig-economy', the

'platform economy', and about food delivery apps' behaviours (which are discussed in the second section of this book), I became very interested in speaking to people myself to learn what life as a Rider is really like.

Over the course of the project, I spoke to a huge array of people from a massive range of social backgrounds. I spoke to foreign students, to refugees who had fled war, to people who came to the UK with dreams of achieving qualifications and building businesses, and to people who couldn't remember why they decided to come to this tiny island in the first place. The common denominator was their kindness. Whilst many were suspicious of me, thinking I must be working for one of their companies, most were very open and happy to speak to an outsider about the reality they're facing. I was offered to share coffee, some Riders offered to show me round their home countries, and whenever I bumped into a Rider I had already spoken to I was greeted warmly.



DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

Some told me that they were happy with their jobs. Most of the time these were the young Riders, relatively new to the job, perhaps working part-time, who seemed to not be as experienced or as worn out as the older Riders. The general consensus amongst those Riders who had been working longer was that the job is "shit." On the first day of this project I spoke to a Pakistani man who had come to the UK a few years ago as a

business student hoping to start a business here after graduating. He told me about the low pay and dangerous conditions, then summed it all up in one phrase: "bad life." This man had come here with a vision of the UK in his mind that turned out to be very far from the truth. Now, he told me, he feels trapped here in a situation no better than the one he left behind.



To make minimum wage, Riders must complete about four deliveries in an hour which is almost impossible due to long distances and fierce competition. As a result, most Riders end up working around eight to twelve hours a day, some working over six days a week. Many of the Riders told me about their families back home, but when I asked if they sent money to them, nearly all of them told me that they could barely make enough to survive themselves. Nearly every person I spoke to told me how difficult it was to make ends meet, many telling me that they're forced to work another job on top of delivering

just to get by. Riders told me that it was "daylight robbery," and that they felt they were a "slave for Uber." When I asked them about their hopes for the future, some told me they wanted to go back home, others told me their plans of moving upwards; studying and getting qualifications or saving up for cars so that they could leave e-bike deliveries behind. However, for some Riders the only answer that they could give was that there was no future for them. "There is no future in this job, only deliveries" one guy told me. Another Rider told me he has "no hopes for the future because there's nothing I can do but work."

PRAY FOR THE RAIN

In this job, the expression that "time is money" becomes a very real and constant concern. Speed becomes your survival, and so Riders are often forced to go as fast as they can. As a result, they are constantly getting into accidents and then have no choice but to continue working. One guy I spoke to had a broken wrist and told me that if he stopped working to let it heal properly, he wouldn't have enough money to live. While I was speaking to a young student from Pakistan who had only been a Rider for a couple of weeks, he said something that was meant to be a bit of a joke, but which actually reflected a dark reality of the job. He told me "normally you pray for the nice sunny weather, but us Riders, we pray for the rain to come." When the weather is bad, people are much more likely to do two things: stay at home and order food, and drive their cars. As a result, business is always best for the Riders when the roads are at their most dangerous, when the tarmac is slick with rainwater, visibility is low, and cars are everywhere.

On one of those busy, rainy nights I spoke to Ta Me, a guy who had been working as a Rider for around three years. This conversation was the first time I'd heard about people dying on the job. This fact took me by surprise, but knowing what I now know about the reality of

this industry, it seems my shock was somewhat naive. Ta Me also opened up to me about the psychological effects of working as a Rider, telling me that people on the street don't respect them, and neither do most customers or restaurant workers. "I walk into a restaurant, and I feel like shit. Because we look like shit. We're exhausted."

He spoke to me about the racism that he endures while working; an issue that I'd heard about from other Riders too. Racist slurs shouted through the windows of passing cars, some Riders even telling me that they'd had things thrown at them by people in cars. One guy summed it up plainly, telling me that eighty percent of people are racist towards them. Its no wonder then that the job can take a huge mental toll, especially when Riders are forced to back down from confrontations due to the apps' built in rating systems. A bad rating can directly impact the algorithm, resulting in less work. Another Rider, a Mexican man named Christian, told me how difficult and humiliating it is to have to hold your tongue when a customer is screaming at you for being late, or if an item is missing from their order. It seems obvious that these things are out of the Riders' control, but this doesn't seem to stop spiteful customers verbally abusing the people that deliver their food.

SAM

The same night I met Ta Me, I also spoke to a man called Sam. I told him he had the same name as my Dad and he smiled. Sam had been working as a Rider for six years and the first thing he said when I asked him about the job was "its shit." He told me about how the pay had gotten dramatically worse over time, especially since the pandemic and that he now has to work between nine and twelve hours a day when he used to only work six to eight. When Sam began to speak about the dangers of the job, his eyes started to shine and well up. He told me, as I'd heard from Ta Me, that it was common to have accidents and crashes up to four times a day, and that many people die on the job. But for Sam this fact was incredibly personal; over the six years he'd been working as a rider he told me that three of his friends had died in car crashes. Three people dead, yet the job remained the same he told me, just as dangerous if not more so now that wages are lower, and competition is higher. As far as the platforms are concerned, those people simply gotten left off and will be replaced by someone else. Sam went on to explain to me that it's not just the roads that are incredibly dangerous. Forced to work such late hours in the city centre, he and his friends constantly face the risk of street crime, from thefts to stabbings.

This conversation had a profound impact on me that I would carry through the rest of the project. As I spoke to Sam and saw the emotion in his eyes, the cruelty and disregard of the Riders' companies was made tangible and vivid. I had known already that working for these companies was bad, but this interaction felt like bearing witness to the barbarity myself.



PERMITS, POLICE, AND NO-GO ZONES

Many of the Riders I spoke to, or who saw me speaking to others and taking their photos, were suspicious that I might be working with the police or with their companies. Having explained the project to them, many didn't want to show their faces or be seen to be involved in what I was trying to do. I learnt from some Riders that this was probably because lots of people work on fake or shared work permits. The reason for this is that so many migrants that come into the UK are unable to obtain legitimate work permits from the government, forcing them to go down illegitimate routes. I spoke to one Rider who expanded on this, referring to a "mafia" from which Riders can buy fake work permits and other papers they might need. With no other options, people are forced into shady deals, paying fees of well over a few hundred pounds to get everything they need to appear as though they are working lawfully. Fake permits are not the only cause for suspicion and unease. Riders are also constantly facing trouble from the police, with bike seizures being a regular occurrence. Some electric bikes are rented out from legitimate companies. Some, however, are homemade, taped and strapped

together with duct tape and bungee cord, built with batteries and motors salvaged or ordered online, some of which happen to be illegal in the UK. Lots of riders told me about the enormous setbacks that police seizures cause, with bikes costing up to a thousand pounds, if not more. Not only could that be months worth of wages gone with no reprieve, it also forces Riders to stop working for however long it takes them to get back up and running again.

After taking a photo of a Rider named Muzzamil, we shook hands, and he rode off. A few seconds later, a police car hurtled past me and shouted at him to pull over. A policeman got out of the car and immediately began inquiring about his bike. Muzzamil explained that all the parts of the bike were legal, and that he'd made it himself. The policeman realised he'd made a mistake and walked back to his car. "You scared me, man!" shouted Muzzamil to the officer, clearly having thought his livelihood might've been taken from him a few seconds ago. "That's my job!" the policeman shouted back.





Of course, the police aren't the only ones taking bikes away from Riders. Another harsh reality of the job is bike thefts. A ridiculous amount of Riders told me that they'd had their bikes stolen or that they'd had run ins with bike thieves. Many told me that they had their own personal no-go areas, parts of the city that they had heard bad stories about, or where they'd been targeted themselves. Stories of stabbings, would-be thieves wielding machetes, and gangs of teenagers swarming Riders trying to pull them off their bikes. One Rider, a man called Ahmed, spoke to me about an experience he had riding through Rushalima. He told me about how a group of men had attempted to steal his bike, trying to hit him off with a baseball bat. Ahmed said that he had no choice but to literally fight his way out, saying that he couldn't believe he had managed to escape. This appears to be a reality for many Riders, forced to quite literally fight for their livelihoods, whilst also having to ignore

orders from certain neighbourhoods. And those who are especially desperate have no choice but to take those orders, risking great danger.

To me, the conditions faced by the people I spoke to over the course of this project, are a sinister manifestation of our modern, neocolonial, capitalist society. A society characterised by algorithmic exploitation, the rise of 'techno-oligarchs', and the exploitative and colonial systems of old taking on new forms. As a result, a new group of workers has arisen. A group that faces constant danger and disregard with very little reward. What seems plainly true to me now is that the Riders are both hyper-exploited and under-appreciated in ways in which most people will never learn about. Even those who do learn will most likely never truly understand what the reality is like for these people. The purpose of this project is to help bring as many people as possible, including myself, closer to understanding that reality.



THE CONCRETE REALITY

The situation of the Riders really is modern. Over the last twenty-five years, immigration and emigration levels around the world have reached historic highs and as a result, the number of migrant workers in the Global North has increased massively (Sturpe, 2024). Migrant workers are especially vulnerable to predatory business practices, the kinds of practices that are used prolifically in another major development over the last couple of decades. The emergence in question is the 'platform economy', an expression that has a variety of definitions. The term 'platform' has been applied to countless digital giants from Facebook to Spotify to Uber, the main connection being their links to the 'gig economy'. This is a domain in which workers aren't necessarily considered workers; earning money from 'gigs' (think anything from voice acting to food deliveries) rather than from wages, a situation that lends itself nicely to the cutting inclinations of big corporations.

The term 'platform economy' has been refined by some scholars in regard to food delivery platforms such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo and Just Eat, which all operate in a similar way. The systems that these companies use are standards-based, meaning they're constantly collecting and analysing performance data; data that then gets fed into algorithms. These algorithms are used

to remotely coordinate workers, centralising and consolidating the companies' control through that coordination, but whilst also positioning themselves as "simply empty vessels for hosting interactions that would otherwise be taking place" (Timko and Melik, 2021). The reality is the opposite. These platforms do not necessarily meet existing needs, rather they are active producers of exchanges who also set the terms of their transactions and draw out extra value from their ever-growing piles of performance data.

This level of centralised control is what we must thank for these corporations' massive successes, but it is the promise of freedom that seems to be the platform economy's biggest draw for workers. This must be a big draw, because according to some scholars' estimates, 10% of Europe's workers participate in the platform economy, a large portion of those people working in food delivery. Advocates of this new system argue that platform work offers new, equal and wider opportunities thanks to its casual hiring process i.e. nearly anyone can sign up for platform work. The usual tedious hiring process is made non-existent. On top of this, platform work provides the freedom to choose the location and duration of your labour, no bosses to tell you when and where to work. But is this freedom real or is it merely the illusion of freedom?

"BE YOUR OWN BOSS"

The idea of being 'your own boss' must be appealing, but in tired catchphrase of the platform economy there is a great sense of irony. Because the Riders and other platform workers are, from a legal perspective, contractors rather than workers, they lack a few advantages that typical employees have. For instance, platform workers are not legally entitled to certain benefits such as the minimum wage, sick pay, overtime pay, paid holidays or on-the-job accident insurance. They are also much weaker when it comes to their collective bargaining power due to their independence from each other, this forces them to work in harsher conditions for reduced wages. The reduction in question is about 40% in real terms since 2018 (Dempsey and Masud, 2024). Whilst Riders are able to make certain choices about their work, the reality is a life of income instability, a continuous employment relationship without continuous work. Without a guarantee of continuous work, workers must make themselves continuously available in order to make ends meet. These conditions produce a heightened level of competition between workers which of course only really benefits the platform companies. This competition doesn't just speed up delivery times, it makes the companies' zero-hour contracts seem much more attractive. In reality, these contracts are nothing more than a tool for companies to evade their employer obligations. (Umer, 2021)

Overall, the alleged freedom of platform work appears to be nothing more than a mirage; a gross distortion of the notion of freedom used to draw people in. Manchester's Riders specifically

are mostly migrant workers, making them more vulnerable to exploitation by platform companies. These companies are aware of this vulnerability and take advantage of it. It is their understanding that the precarious circumstances of migrants living in the UK make them the perfect candidates for an over-exploited workforce that wouldn't dream of fighting back against their employers. At the same time, the flexibility and the easy sign-up process of platform work makes becoming a Rider the obvious choice for people arriving in the country needing money. It is this drive for survival, and the precarity of citizenship, that gives the platform companies' their ideal workers. Pushed out of their home countries either by the scourge of never-ending wars or by financial uncertainty (both postcolonial effects: the disruptive legacies of Empire) migrants find themselves in the UK with a severe lack of choice, work whatever job you can get, or go home. Their status as migrant workers makes them especially vulnerable to the predatory business practices mentioned above. Without safe channels for whistleblowing or proper opportunities to air grievances, and with the looming fear of unemployment or deportation, migrant workers working food delivery jobs are forced to work several times harder than 'traditional employees', in conditions much more dangerous. Some equate these conditions to Modern Day Slavery (Bryson, 2024). Whilst this is a subjective term, and whilst platform companies do tend to operate within technically legal boundaries, it is no doubt that the enormous successes of these companies are hugely thanks to the miserable conditions that their Riders face.



PR MOVES AND 'RIDER LAW'

On the surface, one of the giants that makes up the holy trinity of food delivery companies appears to be making a step in the right direction. In May 2022, Deliveroo announced a first-of-its-kind voluntary partnership agreement with British trade union GMB, which covers over ninety thousand Riders. Of the arrangement, GMB national officer Mick Rix said "this deal is the first of its kind in the world, tens of thousands of riders of one of the world's largest online food delivery services will now be covered by a collective agreement that gives them a voice ... Riders deserve respect for what they do, and Deliveroo deserves praise for developing this innovative agreement with GMB – a blueprint for those working in the platform self-employed sector." This partnership gives GMB the rights to collectively bargain in regard to pay, and allows GMB to represent individual riders in disputes with the company. It also gives the union consultation rights on benefits as well as issues such as health and safety, this means that GMB must be informed and consulted if changes are to be made. Unfortunately, though, the agreement has come under fire from smaller grassroots unions such as the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) who have the largest membership of app-based couriers in the UK. The IWGB boldly labelled the arrangement "soft-union-busting" and called it "nothing more than a hollow PR move" to make investors and customers feel comfortable, rather than benefiting their workers. Deliveroo has made other moves to appear to be on the side of its workers, for example the company also pledged to pay its Riders the national minimum wage. However, this only applies to the time spent delivering an order, not the time logged onto the app. On top of this, the agreement with GMB has reinforced that

Deliveroo's Riders are technically 'self-employed' rather than 'workers,' an aspect that has garnered more criticism. Alex Marshall, President of the IWGB said that because the agreement "accepts couriers' status as independent contractors, it undermines the ability of workers to enforce their rights and minimum earnings outside of time spent directly fulfilling orders ... this backroom deal is a cynical PR move and does little to tackle Deliveroo's documented history of eroding worker rights." (Skelton, 2022)

This knife was driven in further, then twisted some, in 2023 when the UK Supreme Court ruled that Deliveroo Riders cannot be recognised as workers or represented by trade unions in regard to collective bargaining. This ruling came after seven years of fighting by the previously mentioned IWGB on behalf of tens of thousands of Riders. It was unanimously decided between five judges that the contract between Deliveroo Riders and the company did not constitute an employment relationship, simply because Riders can get other people to complete their orders for them without the involvement of Deliveroo. The Court stated that "Riders are thus free to reject offers of work, to make themselves unavailable, and to undertake work for competitors ... these features are fundamentally inconsistent with any notion of an employment relationship." Whilst this may be true, we've seen how the apparent freedom of platform work is transformed into misery for workers, and it's therefore quite difficult to feel any sense of justice from this decision. Unsurprisingly, Deliveroo said this was a positive judgement and happily reasserted that thousands of people flock to them each week the experience the joys of flexible work.

This ruling was a momentous occasion not just for Deliveroo but for all other companies in the gig-economy, and it will no doubt inform all of their business practices going forward. The idea that platform workers aren't 'proper' workers is hammered home once again, and as a result, legitimate bargaining power and other employment benefits remain out of reach of the Riders. There was a chance that this ruling could challenge that idea. Whether Riders will always be stuck in this sort of catch-22 situation is unsure, but the IWGB says it won't stop fighting, and we've seen in other countries how political pressure can create real change. For example, over two years ago Deliveroo ceased operations in Spain after the country amended laws to give gig-economy workers further rights including collective bargaining (Criddle, 2023). Known as the 'rider law', the amendments have made it so platform workers will be considered employees rather than self-employed contractors. It also forces food delivery platforms to inform Riders

about the ways in which computer algorithms and artificial intelligence are affecting their working conditions. Deliveroo claimed that these changes were not the determining factor for their move. (Joly, 2021)

We cannot really know if Deliveroo was pushed out of Spain by the country's harsher legislation or not. But this is where another concern arises; who will Riders work for if their platforms shut down? Will the companies be forced to start treating their workers better, or will they simply leave and take the jobs with them? If food delivery platforms shut down, what new predatory companies will step in to exploit the people most in need of work? Currently, those with false work permits, unstable financial situations, and precarious citizenship are the people most vulnerable to exploitation. And, without major changes to both corporate and migration laws, the conditions they are forced to work in will continue to get worse and worse.



SOLIDARITY

Given how bad these conditions already are, it is no wonder that many Riders have made attempts to organise and strike. On February 2nd 2024, the grassroots group Delivery Job UK held its first strike. Ahead of the strike, Delivery Job UK emailed all the companies that were to be targeted. In response, Deliveroo emailed all their Riders a letter from GMB stating that they were the "trade union for delivery drivers" and that they will "fight for the issues that matter to you." One of the organisers of the strike said that the responses from Riders went something like "Who the fuck are these guys? We've never heard of them or been approached by them." On the day of the February 2nd strike, Deliveroo emailed restaurants encouraging them to call the police if "staff or customers feel under threat" or if they "observe loitering or anti-social behaviour", a move that left Riders feeling uneasy and upset. A spokesperson for Deliveroo said that the company "aims to provide riders with the flexible work that riders tell us they value, attractive earning opportunities and protections" and then went on to mention the voluntary partnership with GMB. Similarly, UberEats said that it offers "a flexible way for couriers to earn by using the app when and where they choose" then also claimed that "the vast majority of couriers are satisfied with their experience." Just Eat attested

that it takes the "concerns of all couriers on the Just Eat network extremely seriously" and that it "welcomes their feedback" also adding that they offer "regular incentives to help them maximise their earnings." Given these lacklustre responses, Delivery Job UK organised another strike to take place later that month on Valentine's Day. News spread through WhatsApp groups and by word-of-mouth among Riders waiting outside restaurants, and when Valentine's Day arrived, thousands came out to defy their companies. Huge convoys of striking Riders rolled through the cold, icy streets on mopeds and electric bikes, chanting and beeping their horns. A bold and moving act of solidarity against a faceless enemy. With such a large strike on such a crucial day for business, along with a platform boycott by the cause's supporters, it was expected that the outcome would be more positive than that of the strike's predecessor. However, the responses to the Valentine's Day strike were unfortunately more or less the same as the responses garnered by the first one. Just as lacklustre and impersonal. Again, the companies hammered home their claims that most of their workers are happy, and again they reasserted their pride in offering flexible work. Neither strike resulted in a pay rise. (Smythe, 2024)

AN INVISIBLE WORKFORCE

Political and economic destabilisation, climate change and war have created tens of millions of migrants in the past few years alone. Some of those people come to our country only to find themselves in a situation that is hardly, if at all, an improvement on what they left behind. They find themselves taken advantage of by the same group of people that caused the wars, the climate disasters and the widespread instability to begin with. And on top of that, they face abuse and ignorance from the rest of us. To many people, the Riders don't exist until they're stood on the doorstep. Scholars have written about how the platform economy's demand for homogenous, mind-numbingly repetitive tasks has led to the creation of an interchangeable and invisible workforce, benefitting companies but only isolating and damaging Riders further (Umer, 2021). The aim of this project is to counteract this effect; to bring Riders into the forefront as individuals, representing them positively and on their own terms. The following ten portraits are of people who were kind enough to help me with this project. I learnt a lot from them, and some were happy for me to record some of what they told me in this book. Hopefully these images convey something about the Riders that you might not have seen elsewhere.



Cristian, Manchester, 02.04.25

"My hope for the future is that finally people, especially the working class people, can have the opportunity to understand his role in the history so we can eradicate the idea of borders and banal nationalistic feelings that divide us all around the world. In that way we can build a society free of any kind of discrimination and be able to have societies where the basic needs would not be an obstacle to have free time and develop other capabilities as art, music, philosophy, etc. and anyone can explore their own happiness without any economic, political or cultural restraint. Then we could have a world free of wars and classes. But my hope in short term is that Palestine and its people could have the opportunity to live in peace and have sovereignty of their own land."



Mohit, Manchester, 08.04.25

"My future, my grand plan, is to quit this job. After four months I will start again in winter, because in winter work is good. Because everybody orders online, in summer everyone comes outside but in winter if the weather is right, work is very busy. In the sun rise, there is no work."



Hamza, Manchester, 08.04.25

"My future hobbies or goals are to become a marathon runner and win a gold medal in the Olympics. Secondly, I want to become a content creator around the world. Discover what is on this planet and its cultures."



Haseen, Manchester, 07.04.25



Abdi, Manchester, 07.04.25



Amani, Manchester, 09.04.25



Mohammad-Ehtisham, Manchester, 09.04.25



Atekilti, Manchester, 14.04.25



Mohammad-Ahmed, Manchester, 14.04.25



Milli, Manchester, 14.04.25



AFTERWORD

Over the course of this project, I probably spoke to around a hundred Riders, maybe more. Most of my time was spent wandering alone around Manchester trying to find people who would speak to me or let me take their photos. Unsurprisingly, not many people were happy to pose for a portrait, but nearly everyone I approached seemed happy to talk. The responses to the project were overwhelmingly positive, and I was met with unbelievable openness from nearly everyone I spoke to. Learning from the Riders themselves was an incredibly vivid and eye-opening experience; a slightly unorthodox research method that ended up being intensely personal. When I began going out with a team and a backdrop, we garnered a lot of attention from both Riders and people going about their day. Some good, some bad. One Rider screeched to a halt when he saw us and began yelling something like "What are they doing! Think about the company! The company!" Abdī, the Rider who's portrait I was taking told me not to worry, and pretty soon the sceptic was laughed away by the crowd of onlooking Riders.

My hope was that the huge backdrop and the bright flash would be something of an experience for the people I was photographing. I like to think that this worked out, that it was an experience that stuck with them, and that they will have proudly shared the photos with their friends and families. On top of this, I hope that the many conversations I had with the Riders are another thing that stuck with them. My plan was to devote a lot of time to talking and building relationships, resulting in a stronger level of trust that made the project more authentic. Going forward, this is something I want to work on much more. Developing relationships until we're at the point where this book can be made again from scratch, with the input and help of the Riders themselves, with their own words and their own images, represented on their own terms.

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