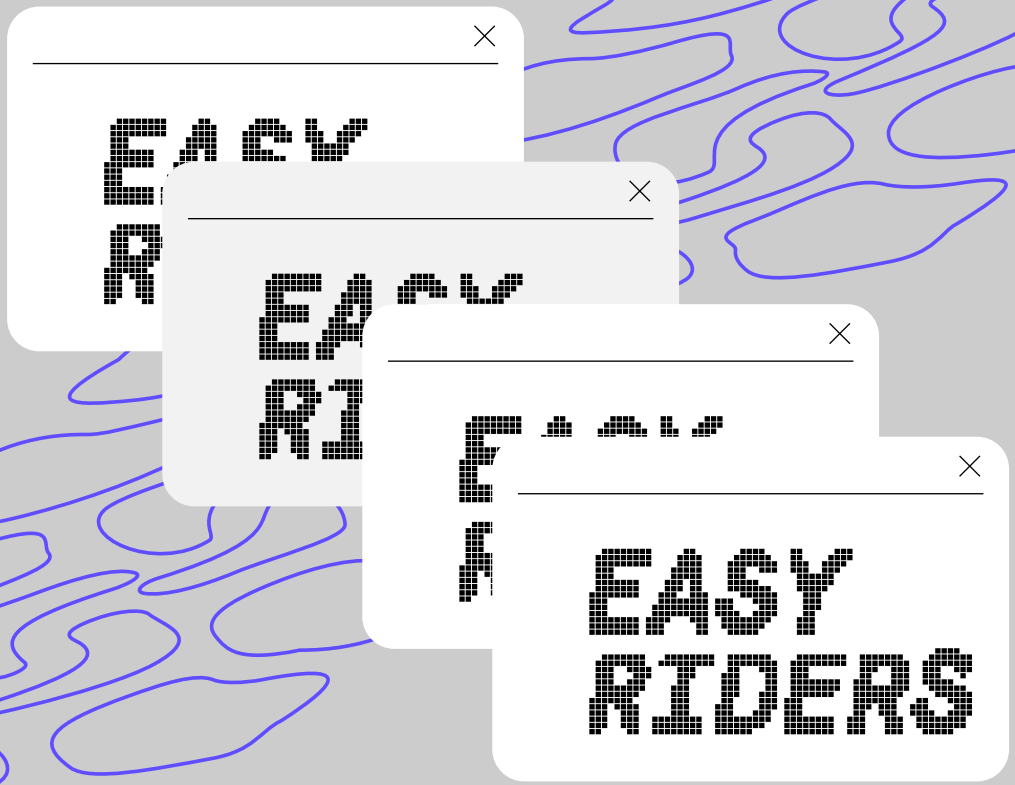
EASY
RIDERS

APHIDS acknowledges the Wurundjeri woi-wurrung & Boon wurrung peoples on whose lands we labour, perform & live.

Sovereignty was never ceded & we pay our respect to Aboriginal elders & community, & to their long & rich history of artmaking on this Country.

APHIDS

APHIDS is a 27-year-old artist-led experimental art organisation based in Naarm/Melbourne. Collaborative & future-focused, APHIDS is led by Co-Directors Eugenia Lim, Lara Thoms & Mish Grigor. The work of APHIDS is feminist, intersectional, angry & funny; bringing artists into meaningful exchange with audiences through performance, critical dialogue & unpredictable encounters in the public realm.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

IS ALREADY HERE

A cyclical performance unfolds across one 8-hour day

GIG WORKERS OF THE

WORLD, UNITE!

Simple things: getting places. Eating. Fair pay. Safe work. We consider ourselves a sophisticated society, but our failure to ensure that each person has these basic needs belies our indifference. As a group of artists collaborating with riders, drivers and workers for companies like Uber, Didi, Easi, and Airtasker, we have been thinking about these things as we make *EASY RIDERS*.

Making *EASY RIDERS* has been an iterative process of conversation and experimentation. To ask workers to perform their labour for strangers is full of ethical murkiness and considerations. Together, we've learned how each other's days are spent—those in the gig economy, those in the arts, those with caring responsibilities. We've talked about how precarious work fuels larger economic systems and lines tech bros' pockets. We've debated what we want to share with an audience and what to hold back, keep private. We've shadowed workers in the streets, they've shadowed us in the rehearsal studio. We are still thinking about which bodies and which labours are valued in this late-capitalist overdrive—and what it is to watch each other, to be seen, or invisible.

Our research expanded in conversation with a global community of precarious workers online while tracking the actions of their Silicon Valley bosses.
A multiplicity of accounts of working life lived via apps and in Amazon factories.
We've trawled through driver reddits, rider chat rooms, and online forums.
Personal and global experiences of work fuel our big screen and its tangential logics: rain, dogs, drunks, hunger, anger.

Discomfort, complicity, class, race, work, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, collaboration, solidarity, and how to make work together across differences. A friend said that brushing her food delivery worker's hand was the only flesh she had touched for over a year. The racialised and risky work of maintenance: moving things, moving people. Cleaning up messes. Making other peoples' lives easier, or ensuring others' survival in a late capitalist pandemic.

In various ways, these workers already work durationally (while being paid intermittently), but eight hours is a long time to 'perform'. You've seen a single hour, a sliver of our collective shift. We offer an invitation to witness the bodies and experiences of on-demand workers both locally and globally—people who care for us in direct or indirect ways. *EASY RIDERS* is an invitation to slow down, attune to each other, collectivise, come together. Spending time listening and looking at each other—a revolution of witnesses.

– APHIDS

The cost of convenience

Convenience at the tap of a button. Anytime, anywhere. These slogans have baked themselves into the day-to-day lives of many urban residents around the world, creating ways of living that appear seamless and automated, but in reality, are carried out by an army of human workers who face precarious working conditions with little rights or protections in the eyes of the law. In the United States, personal shoppers bump up against ever-changing algorithms that see their wages further swallowed up.[1] In Australia, delivery riders are not required to undergo vehicle safety checks before being approved for work[2] and are fined by police for riding on footpaths as they try to quickly meet their delivery targets;[3] at the time of writing, five people—all recent immigrants—have died on the job between September and November 2020.[4] In Turkey, a delivery start-up is rapidly displacing the age-old, local ecosystem of bakkals (grocers).[5] In China, delivery drivers are pitted against each other to work faster and 'better' as tech companies push out orders with rock-bottom wages (under the purported promise of higher earnings) leading to worker protests and deaths.[6] In South Korea, an e-commerce corporation saw its workers experience a coronavirus outbreak in a high-volume warehouse following the lax application of distancing measures in the workplace.[7] In India, another e-commerce giant slashed worker earnings without reason or recourse.[8] Two months ago, the same e-commerce behemoth in the United States was found to discourage delivery drivers from going on toilet breaks amid gruelling fourteen-hour shifts, resulting in them peeing in plastic bottles.[9] As I write this now, the company has successfully crushed unionisation efforts[10] in Alabama, in what would have been their first union in the US. And these are only a few examples on a global scale.

Depending on who you speak to, these conveniences are multifaceted: for some, it allows the promise of (more) income and jobs, while it gives others the flexibility to ask for anything they might desire, whether that's a meal, a home cleaning service, a load of freshly-pressed shirts, a coveted armchair, a fully assembled bookshelf or a week's worth of shopping. Indeed, on-demand platforms service those with financial mobility while platform workers work hand to mouth under the rhetoric of entrepreneurship. In a capitalist society, who doesn't want to be their own boss? Who wouldn't want to get ahead?

But there are instances where the line between worker and consumer is blurred. When workers are classed under euphemisms such as 'customers', 'contractors' or 'partners', it is almost inevitable (even if it may not be frequent) that we ourselves consume from either the platforms we work at or those adjacent to it, at least for the brief respite its convenience offers, staff discounts not included. Workers are kept sequestered from one another outside of familiar markers (a sticker on a windshield, a delivery bag, a custom bike, a vest or t-shirt) that, aside from the camaraderie these signifiers can encourage in physical spaces, propagate atomisation and discourage unionisation. In the COVID era within so-called democratic societies where class divides grow ever starker, and which scholars refer to as 'neofeudalism',[11] the winner takes all and the rich get richer. The rest can only dream of winning. And then what?

On-demand platforms are also changing the face of cities around the world. The burgeoning ubiquity of e-commerce conglomerates and tech corporations is exacerbating the rural/urban divide, intensifying housing affordability crises and stoking traffic congestion, not to mention altering the restaurant industry as 'dark kitchens' bloom[12] and small businesses take financial risks (in the form of high commissions, some as much as 30 per cent[13]) in their fear of getting left behind.[14] Beneath the 'invisible' on-demand economy is an enormous global network of logistics, manufacture and transportation, which occurs alongside equally massive sites of disposal, destabilisation, disruption and waste.

The effect of these platforms on the psyche—both human and psycho-geographical—have been downplayed on a mainstream level. While these technologies are arguably considered 'new', they rely on long-standing neoliberal tenets to provoke an accelerated capitalist reality that rests on co-option, privatisation and worker exploitation—what political philosopher Nick Srnicek has described as 'platform capitalism'.[15] This is further compounded when tech companies form monopolies that result in little accountability. In

1 "She was Instacart's biggest cheerleader. Now she's leading a worker revolt," *The Washington Post,* December 2019.

2 "'They don't have brakes, the tyres are gone': food delivery companies accused of bike safety failures," *The Guardian,* November 2020.

3 "Sydney delivery riders under pressure to work faster fined by police," *The Guardian,* March 2021.

4 "Another food delivery worker has been killed, bringing the death toll in Australia to five in two months," *SBS News,* November 2020.

5 "Delivery wars," *Rest of World,* August 2020.

6 "Chinese courier sets fire to himself in protest over unpaid Alibaba wages," *The Financial Times,* January 2021.

7 "The cost of convenience," *Rest of World,* November 2020.

8 "Amazon Pune delivery personnel on strike after reduction in per-package charge," *The Hindustan Times,* March 2021.

9 "Convenience is destroying us," *Intelligencer,* April 2021.

10 "Amazon denies intimidating employees in its official response to the failed union election in Alabama," *Business Insider Australia,* April 2021.

11 "Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* May 2020.

12 "Our ghost-kitchen future," *The New Yorker,* June 2020.

13 "Restaurant anger directed at UberEats," *Australian Financial Review,* May 2020.

14 "Gulp! The secret economics of food delivery: How DoorDash and Deliveroo are changing the way we eat," *The Economist,* January 2021.

15 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism,* (Polity Books, 2016).

the world that Big Tech built, the scenery appears to have changed but the rules remain the same. As writer and activist Astra Taylor points out,[16] 'work has not disappeared, but the person doing the work has changed.' Through what she dubs 'fauxtomation', the worker and their labour are invisibilised in lieu of an application, via mysterious algorithms that make services materialise as if by magic.

In my experiences working as a delivery rider in the past, and now as a domestic cleaner, all while trying to support an artistic career as a writer, the reality has been bleak. Working at others' convenience means that I am generally inconvenienced. The promise of these platforms, that you can 'get anything done' and have your goods and services 'delivered faster', tends to eventuate in a consumer impatience that would occur less often if the services were bought through a traditional agency or brick-and-mortar shop. And if I don't get a glimpse of customers through a usually hasty interaction at their door, then I would hardly see them at all. These types of work are sometimes compared to freelancing as an artist, which revolves around similar modes of precarity, little to no opportunities for unionisation and a bogus winner-takes-all mentality, although it must be said that art-work is bestowed with much greater social capital. For me, these roles occupy two sides of the same coin: as a writer, I find myself working alongside similarly overworked arts workers who ask for copy written at the last minute, editors and event coordinators who expect artists to perform, accept prizes or deliver work within unrealistic timeframes or poor pay. Making art within late capitalism is a vicious cycle: it triggers burn-out and perpetuates overarching systemic discrimination(s) that see more privileged artists able to meet these fraught deadlines, leading to more exposure and more opportunities. In the revolving door of the gig economy, every worker is disposable and replaceable—there is always another hopeful who longs to occupy the vacant role. After all, when gig work—both in the arts and on-demand worlds—is simultaneously framed within the notion of 'scarcity' and as an entrepreneurial 'choice', a veneer of 'fun' is plastered over unspoken realities. Do what you love and die doing it!

One can say that my participation in *EASY RIDERS* rests on the intersections of these roles, yet it can be read as just another gig. I mean, let's not kid ourselves: it is another gig. In the two years since I've worked with Eugenia Lim and now APHIDS, alongside fellow worker–performers Wasay, Mirza Baig and Jessica Wen, I have come to find a sense of solidarity through difference that would otherwise be difficult to locate in our respective atomised jobs, be that as a rideshare driver, artist, delivery rider or domestic cleaner. Inside this space I found myriad liminalities, each of us navigating what it means to be a worker in the contemporary world, our roles within late-capitalism coloured by our lived experiences as mothers, students, sons, drop-outs, engineers, friends and lovers. While the equivalencies between the art and on-demand worlds cannot be skimmed over, the fact remains that the visibility of working-class artists in so-called Australia remains rare, and that arts work and its inherent social capital is hardly regarded as a dead-end job. Yet, when art is created outside of a subject/object dynamic, it provides a public-facing platform to consider and point out structural inequalities. All of us found our way into the gig economy through different reasons: some wanted extra income on top of their university stipend, some had family to support, some were compelled by the notion of flexible hours. But the reasons are arbitrary: ultimately we are workers who 'gig' in order to survive.

What does it mean for the future of work if it continues to unfold this way? It cannot be understated that jobs procured through the gig economy have elements of gamification attached to them: certain apps require workers to hit a weekly and ever-increasing target to remain on the platform; workers generally want to receive five-star ratings for the services they offer (even if that happens at their expense); most workers hope to move on to better gigs as their reputations or life situations improve. As the city spreads out before us on our virtual maps, IRL and URL bleed into each other—what goes on through the platforms has direct consequences in our physical lives. For those with pre-existing advantages such as physical/mental ability, financial safety nets and/or privileged identifying markers (citizenship, skin colour, race, gender, dominant language fluency, heteronormativity and so on), the chasm between individual workers widens as each of us seek to fight over the crumbs dispersed by a false 'meritocracy'. I see *EASY RIDERS* as an attempt—through art—to delineate these oft-imperceptible contentions; a work that sheds light on the inherent inequalities that the gig and on-demand economies engender, as well as the myriad labour injustices they perpetuate and remain unaccountable for. It is a work that endeavours to locate the potential solidarities and dissonances between artists and on-demand workers. By seeing our bodies in action, the sheer visibility of mundane, menial labour may bring about discomfort for the viewer. But an ironic distance cannot be afforded; like difficult conversations around class positions and wealth disparity, we need to think about what and how we want to live and work as a matter of urgency.

As the saying goes, life is a game. And Big Tech has found a way to game that. Press play.

[16] "The Automation Charade," *Logic Magazine,* August 2018.

Cher Tan is a worker-performer in *EASY RIDERS*. She is also an essayist and critic in Naarm/Melbourne, via Kaurna Yerta/Adelaide and Singapore. Her work has appeared in the *Sydney Review of Books, The Saturday Paper, The Lifted Brow, Runway Journal, Overland* and *Kill Your Darlings,* amongst others. She is an editor at *LIMINAL* magazine and the reviews editor at *Meanjin.* Currently, she is working on her debut essay collection *PERIPATHETIC.*

The ruins of the eight-hour workday

Erected in 1856 after the world's first successful campaign for an Eight Hour Work Day, the Victorian Trades Hall stands in Melbourne as a historic commemoration to labour rights, and a continuing meeting place for over 4,000 trade union members. In close proximity to the building is a monument that memorialises the historic win for workers with the words, 'Labour, Recreation, Peace' and the number 888, a reference to the campaign slogan: "eight hours' work, eight hours' rest and eight hours' recreation". This is the context and setting for *EASY RIDERS*, a new work by the interdisciplinary collective APHIDS, led in this instance by artist Eugenia Lim. Unfolding over eight hours, *EASY RIDERS* is a durational performance, made in collaboration with four on-demand workers as well as artistic collaborators who "perform" an eight-hour work day to a live and changing audience. While the audience is free to leave at the end of each hour-long cycle, the performers reset their props and repeat the performance.

For workers within the 'gig economy', the hourly wage and the eight-hour workday is simply non-existent. This is also the case for artists, freelancers, caregivers and so many others whose unsalaried work sits outside the hourly wage. For their role in *EASY RIDERS* the 'worker–performers' are remunerated with an hourly wage, plus superannuation, a fee that has been calculated based on the Live Performance Award pay guide. What equivalences of value are produced between different forms of work? Why does one industry have unions, standardised pay, awards rates, while others do not? It is these unequal divisions of labour, remuneration, and value that form the central tensions of *EASY RIDERS*, which are further highlighted by the performance's very setting within Trades Hall and the pay structures that underwrite the performance.

Karl Marx argues that the wage, and its promise of rest and leisure, obfuscates the labour that goes into reproducing one's body for waged work: feeding, sleeping, cleaning. It is this contradiction that lies at the heart of our capitalist condition, the waged workday only creates the illusion of equal and adequate remuneration. The invisible, un(der)paid labour performed mainly by women and people of colour is a structural dependency, and a necessity, of capitalism.

"Monuments", writes Anne Boyer in *Garments Against Women*, "are interesting mostly in how they diminish all other aspects of the landscape."[1] The eight-hour workday, like the monument, diminishes the work that exists outside of it. Other names for this work include maintenance, reproductive labour, social reproduction, the second shift, the double burden. If not performing these tasks of maintenance yourself, someone else is performing them for you—traditionally, the unwaged housewife, and more recently care workers, cleaners and service workers. As middle and upper-class women entered the workforce en masse post-WWII, the work of social reproduction was outsourced, by and large, to people from the Global South. While the work remains, the person responsible has changed. *EASY RIDERS* reminds us of this uncomfortable truth, highlighting its 'worker–performers' as a small cohort of those responsible for performing this outsourced labour.

Another notable feature of monuments is their affinity to ruin. It strikes me that the eight-hour workday is a monument in ruins. Fought for by unionists and labour movements of the late 19th and early 20th century, and strongly backed by Henry Ford, innovator of mass production, the eight-hour workday was considered a working-class triumph. Never mind that Ford's motivation for the 40-hour work week was the increased productivity of his workers. In our current moment, our working conditions can be categorised by a shift away from the manufacturing sector to the global service industries of finance, hospitality, entertainment, education, and care work. This new post-Fordist capitalist economy is defined by a reliance on immaterial or affective labour.[2] Feminists have long been concerned with affective reproductive labour as fundamental to contemporary models of exploitation, and the possibility of overturning such exploitation.

Operating from an intersectional feminist position, Lim's previous works register an attention to outsourced labour and collective action. From 'on demand' video art that requires pedal-power to operate, a collaboratively constructed floor-based sand sculpture of the 'Palm Jumeirah', to porcelain-cast bootleg iPhones and fake currency, Lim considers the racialised, gendered, classist dimensions of exploited labour. Intersectional thinking such as this is a necessary contribution to the current resurgence in Marxist Feminist theory, which initially focused on unwaged reproductive labour performed by housewives. The recent interest in this second wave Feminist theory coincides with the recognition and citation of pioneering American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles who Lim, among many other contemporary artists, cites as an art hero.

Ukeles' long-term and socially engaged projects are concerned with the invisible labour of "maintenance", from the unpaid work of motherhood to the sanitation services that underwrite every city. Ukeles is renowned for her long-term collaborations with non-artists, such as the maintenance staff of the Whitney Museum tasked with preserving the building and its material resources, or the sanitation workers of New York. Although *EASY RIDERS* is built on collaboration with maintenance and service workers, in this case, so-called 'independent contractors' for Uber, Deliveroo, Easi and Airtasker, the conditions of work have changed greatly. APHIDS' collaborators are dispersed, without direct access to co-workers, centralised meeting spaces and safety nets. Whereas Ukeles highlights the supportive labour upon which cultural and social institutions, indeed our cities, depend, *EASY RIDERS* draws attention to non-unionised local on-demand workers who sustain global platform capitalism. Both APHIDS and Ukeles register a preoccupation

1 Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2015).

2 Post Marxist scholars Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their book *Empire,* discuss affective labor as a feature of the current work climate with the increase of services and knowledge workers. For a discussion of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* see: Steve Wright, "Reality Check: Are We Living in an Immaterial World?," *Mute Magazine,* November 2015.

with the context and social conditions under which artwork is produced, disseminated, and received. They recognise that cultural workers extend beyond the "lookers, buyers, dealers, makers" to the cleaners, security staff, caregivers, sanitation workers and service workers that are equally vital to the development and maintenance of artistic production.[3]

The global pandemic has drawn attention to the gendered, racialised and often invisible precarity of both care workers and caregivers, and accelerated the conditions of late capitalism, exposing the most vulnerable to even greater income and health disparity. Low-waged and highly casualised, care and services workers have gone without access to sick leave, while positioned on the "front line" delivering resources, providing safe transport, and caring for those with disability, the elderly, children, the sick. Food delivery service providers became recognised as essential workers, and the closures of schools and childcare centres has drawn attention to the vital role of teachers and caregivers as indispensable labourers of social reproduction. Care has taken on a more immediate and urgent meaning. The arts and cultural sectors have been made particularly vulnerable, the forced and extended closure of many arts institutions exposed the generalised precarity of the sector. *EASY RIDERS* draws uncomfortable parallels between the so-called independent contractors of the platform economy and the unsalaried arts worker. Both are participants in systems of exploitation, without unions or standardised working conditions.

[3] I am borrowing this phrase from Martha Rosler's essay 'Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, Makers: Thoughts on Audience', originally published in the Spring 1979 issue of *Exposure*.

The monumentalising of the eight-hour workday hides the un(der)paid work that occupies the other 16 hours. The context of Trades Hall and its adjacent monument, as a setting for *EASY RIDERS*, positions the eight-hour workday as a romantic aspiration, an enshrined relic from the past that is no longer able to speak to our current labour conditions. *EASY RIDERS* troubles our complacency around labour conditions and the future of work. If the exploited conditions of the industrial revolution brought about the labour battles for the eight-hour workday, what do we fight for next? What new systems of remuneration and imagination can we propose in order to reclaim our time, our care? Can we fight for a reality where workers are not disposable, but rather are valued and protected? Can we imagine a world where work can really end?

Amelia Wallin is a curator and writer, and the Director of West Space in Naarm/Melbourne. With a focus on care, feminisms, and reproductive labour, Amelia is concerned with alternative models for instituting. Amelia has curated programs and exhibitions in New York at The Hessel Museum of Art, The Kitchen, and Performa, in Sydney at Firstdraft and Tiny Stadiums Festival and in Melbourne at West Space. She holds a BA in Theatre & Performance Studies and Art History & Theory from UNSW, an MA in Arts from the Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York, and is a current PhD candidate at Monash University.

EASY RIDERS
A new work by APHIDS

Eugenia Lim – lead artist
Lara Thoms – co-creator
Mish Grigor – co-creator
Cher Tan – worker–performer + writing consultant
Wasay – worker–performer
Mirza Baig – worker–performer
Jessica Wen – worker–performer
Corin Ileto – composer + sound designer
Katie Sfetkidis – lighting + video designer, technical manager
Amrita Hepi – choreographic consultant
Imogen Walsh – set designer
Gemma Baxter – costume designer
Cassandra Fumi – stage + project manager
Rebecca McCauley – graphic designer + operations manager
Alexandra George – producer, film adaptation
Ching Ching Ho – assistant stage manager + interpreter
Rachel Lee – lighting associate
Olivia McKenna – sound operator
Rosie Fisher – producer

aphids.net

APHIDS

Commissioned by RISING. Supported by Victorian Trades Hall.
The work has been made possible by the Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) Fund – an Australian Government initiative; the Australia Council for the Arts, its funding and advisory body, The City of Melbourne through its Triennial Grants program 2018-2020, Creative Victoria through its Organisation Investment Program. APHIDS would also like to acknowledge the generous support from RISING Festival, the Centre of Visual Art, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, West Space, and MPavilion.
Thank you to: Antony Moore and all at Trades Hall, Grace Herbert and all at RISING, APHIDS board and donors, Misha Lee, Nat Cursio, Becky Sui Zhen, our previous EASY RIDERS worker–collaborators, Melbourne Fringe, Amos Gebhardt, Freya Waterson, Collingwood Yards, Jo Porter and QVWC, Lana Nguyen, Karli Laredo and Stefan Polastri. Most importantly, we thank our team of collaborators and our loved ones for their collective support in realising this 'labour of love'.