Introduction

The pale hues of The Ampersand Hotel, with its frilly iron railings and Regency columns, unfurl onto the pavement in three neat steps before me. Quivering on its pole is the Union Jack, its free rein governed by a leash, for one certainly would not care for exuberance, as this street must appear a sombre affair. Stationed in South Kensington, west from Earl’s Court, east from Sloane Square, the hotel has endured since the eighteenth century. Alongside the hotel – between the files of cars, lorries, buses, pedestrians and intermittent bicycles, each observing its own rhythm – is a rank of hackney carriages. Their territory is an island drawn out in the centre of the street by a hem of dashed yellow lines.

The eager panting of the cabs’ idling engines performs the ticking bassline; this hum is for humdrum as The Ampersand’s Union Jack is for wind. Weekdays, at 5 or 6 o’clock as those who work in the neighbourhood leave for home or the pub, the hum quietens. As one cab glides out of the rank, another glides in the rear. But at midday, the rank is at capacity, seven cabs within the borders of the hemmed island and another three whose drivers flout the advocated rhythm and perch behind the rank. As the cabs multiply, the panting intensifies; as they depart, it quietens. Forever undulating, the rank listens attentively to the street; a metronome, it mirrors its rhythm. The wearily bitter odour of exhaust fumes from the chugging cabs responds too, in time, broken by little else than the dustbin lorry and its sweet pungent wake. Rarely, the rank
empties – generally in the early hours of the morning, before the tube opens and after the last stragglers lurch and maunder outside nightclubs. During this time, the nagging hum ceases and a tension dissipates. The linear rhythm of the metronome relinquishes its grip on the tempo of the street. Drivers dare to turn volte-face across the rank, buses turn sharply out of the stop transgressing their established territory, private hires and delivery drivers pause on the side of the road to drop their loads. When there is no cab in sight, occasionally a fare will hover atop the central reservation on the pedestrian crossing. Files of vehicles shuttle past either side.

This rhythmic scene continues to unfold around me as I fidget once again on my off-kilter chair, teetering on the faux marble tiling distinguishing the terrace of Cafe Floris with its happy orange facade (fig. 8.1) from the grey gum-peppered pavement of Harrington Road. Between my rickety vantage point and The Ampersand Hotel are the black cabs, stranded on their hemmed island, files of traffic passing on either side (fig. 8.2). This scene can be described in ways as infinite in number as those who play roles within it. From one hundred dispositions would spring one hundred stories. Though this may be, it is from a rather specific disposition, a disposition learned in part, that I hope to tell just one story. The implications of this story travel far further than this short stretch of Harrington Road.

Fig. 8.1  Two women exchanging goodbyes as they leave Cafe Floris. Source: author
Henri Lefebvre, the twentieth-century French philosopher and sociologist, is well known for his work on everyday life and the social production of space that expanded the reach of Marxism and influenced a generation of urban theorists. Lefebvre’s work is unreservedly human in spirit and, though often deeply theoretical, it always comes back to the lived experience of place and everyday life. A key tenet in Lefebvre’s work is the idea that space is a social construct, that we organise our cities, and space more generally, jointly, based on shared values and in such a way that it shapes our day-to-day movements, activities and perception of the world. Lefebvre’s work also sought to pluralise Marxism’s notion of time and emphasised the importance of thinking through (social) time and (social) space together, and what their roles are in creating the conditions for the survival of capitalism. It was with his last work, published after his death, *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004), a text arguably best appreciated as the fourth volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* series (Lefebvre 1947, 1961, 1981), where Lefebvre most comprehensively examined the importance of thinking through urban realities and everyday life, as well as the social production of space and time – the four key focuses of his work – together. The book intricately stitches together these themes to form an interpretive manual for perceiving and understanding, a way of not only

Fig. 8.2 The Ampersand Hotel at dusk, towering over a full rank on Harrington Road. An Uber driver is waiting for their passenger on the double yellow lines opposite. Source: author
seeing, but hearing and feeling, experiencing experience holistically – a disposition, in short. Elements of Rhythmanalysis teases out from diversity general traits, finds order in disorder, the extraordinary in the ordinary, reuniting the quantitative and the qualitative, ‘does not isolate an object, or subject, or a relation. It seeks to grasp a moving but determinate complexity (determination not entailing determinism)’ (Lefebvre 2004:12). As Highmore (2005:69) elaborates, ‘rhythmanalysis is an attitude, an orientation, a proclivity; it is not “analytic” in any positivistic or scientific sense of the term. It falls on the side of impressionism and description, rather than systematic data collection.’

Although a disposition, something that is considered primarily a property of the mind, the body is necessarily at the centre of any rhythm-analysis. For Lefebvre, ‘[the] human body is the locus and centre of interaction between the biological, physiological (nature), and the social (or what is often called the “cultural”), with each of these levels or dimensions having its own specificity and therefore its own time and space or, if you will, its own rhythm’ (Lefebvre, Régulier and Zayani 1999:11). Elden (2004) notes that the body is not only an object of analysis, but also a tool of analysis. Rhythmanalysis requires us to reflexively engage with the continually unfolding and evolving relationships our bodies have with surrounding bodies, materials and spaces, attuning to these entities and developing an insight into their capacities for action, or alternatively, what capacities they have to enable or prohibit action. Paying such close attention to the body results in any analysis being multisensorial in nature, so the rhythmanalyst must not ‘[privilege] any one of [his] senses, raised by him in the perception of rhythms, to the detriment of any other. He thinks with his body not in the abstract, but in the lived temporality’ (Lefebvre 2004:31).

In order to satisfactorily grasp urban experience, Lefebvre advocated an embodied and multisensorial sensitivity to rhythms, a method that closely interrelates both time and space while being centred around the concrete experience of everyday life and its malleability at the hands of the capitalist process. As an analytical disposition, rhythmanalysis seeks to reveal the multiplicity of ways in which society organises the everyday lives of individuals through examining complex entanglements of differing temporalities, their structure and functions. It seeks to understand how a city’s movements, flows and rhythms – from the traffic during rush hour to the crowds of revellers on a Saturday night – are structured not only through the built environment but also through the ephemeral, through rituals, what is repeated, what is not, and the resultant cycles. Through such analyses, the entangled
objectives of multiple agents – human and non-human, material and immaterial, physical and digital – that simultaneously have the propensity to facilitate and restrict one another can be explored through examining their ever-evolving composition in relationship to their ever-changing environment and its various spaces, bodies and technologies. As Hetherington (2013:23) proposes, ‘attention to the rhythms of the built environment is one that challenges a Cartesian outlook on its spatiality as something fixed and plan/grid-like and alongside this to call into question overly dominant understandings of time as something linear and chronological’.

Rhythmanalytical or not, the stories we tell matter. With their narrative magic, places we will never step foot in are conjured before us and become our world, freeing us from the confines of our own travels. Without this mediation, we cannot experience what is not immediately surrounding us. It is only with stories, in all their forms, that we can transcend our bodily cage and achieve a certain omnipresence, over space and through time. Although it is true that we experience some of the world for ourselves, it is but an infinitesimally small fraction of the whole and, moreover, it is no less mediated an experience, one that is seen through a lens – our dispositions – shaped, coloured and curved by stories not our own. So, stories help us make sense of our shared condition of being in the world, putting pen to the contours of our reality and shading the voids in between. Here, ‘story’ should be taken in the very broadest sense: a representation of a perceived reality. If it is possible with stories to change how we see through what we see, and what we see through how we see, to reshape the lens through which all things must pass, then the stories we tell and are told find new meaning, modifying our perceptions and conceptions of the world.

The rhythmanalytical project seeks to change the world through the act of observation itself. As Lefebvre writes, ‘[the rhythmanalyst] changes that which he observes: he sets it in motion, he recognises its power’ (Lefebvre 2004:35). Lefebvre appears to take inspiration from Heidegger and Manheim (1987), who describe poïesis as an activity that brings about a threshold occasion where one thing becomes another, similar to the blooming of blossom or a butterfly metamorphosing from a cocoon, but instead of the transformation occurring in the physical world, the bringing-forth occurs within the artist, poet, philosopher or, in this case, the rhythmanalyst.

Lefebvre acknowledges that in some aspects the rhythmanalyst is similar to a poet or a person of the theatre, both concerned with the act of telling. He goes further and comments on the contributions of art and
music as well as poetry and theatre to the everyday – again, storytelling disciplines. Where then does rhythmanalysis, both the act and product, differ from these established fields? How does rhythmanalysis differ from pliant storytelling? To Lefebvre it begins in how they lack a deep reflection on the everyday and instead most often become a passive constituent of the everyday. For Lefebvre, the act of rhythmanalysis means that, ‘works [that] might return to and intervene in the everyday. Without claiming to change life, but by fully reinstating the sensible in consciousnesses and in thought, [the rhythmanalist] would accomplish a tiny part of the revolutionary transformation of this world and this society in decline’ (Lefebvre 2004:36). So, the work of the rhythmanalyst is more than simply a passive telling of place, but seeks to change place and everyday life through the very act of telling itself. The rhythmanalyst takes the everydayness (mundanity) of the everyday and transforms it, metamorphoses it through poiesis, changing it by doing nothing more than perceiving and conceptualising it differently. Through internalising the lessons of rhythmanalysis, they become part of our consciousness, our dispositions; we start to perceive the world differently, and so the world is different. But the influence of rhythmanalysis is not limited to our internal selves. The stories we tell, the way we go about our everyday lives, the way we interact with our cities, they all change as we change. Through learning to perceive the world differently, through embracing a rhythmanalytical disposition, all that we create changes as we change, and so others – those who listen, read and experience that which we tell, those who we interact with in our everyday lives – they change too. With rhythmanalysis, we can take a small step towards revolutionising our world.

We have discussed the potential of rhythmanalysis to take a small step towards transforming our everyday life and outlined the nature of rhythmanalysis itself, but not why Lefebvre felt it necessary to do so. Arguing that capitalism in the twentieth century had increased in scope, Lefebvre recounted how capital dominated cultural and social spheres as well as the economic, distorting the rhythms of everyday life. Lefebvre understood the knotted nature of everyday life and capitalism, observing that everyday life provides a critical medium for capitalism’s survival.

**Stories of place**

Harrington Road, like most urban roads, is neatly apportioned into several parallel thoroughfares. On either side, bracketing these five thoroughfares, are two colossal five-storey buildings. These are not vast
mansions, however. From the browns of the bricks, the stylistic flourishes, the subtle disparities in architectures, we know these buildings are not two but many. The colourful branding of the resident businesses – Cafe Floris, Khan’s Indian Restaurant, Librairie La Page, to name only a few – means they compete for the attention of passers-by, who pause to eye their offerings through wall-to-wall ceiling-to-floor glass windows. The grandeur of The Ampersand Hotel – itself sharing a wall with NatWest Bank, the most contemporary building in the immediate vicinity – looms over the street. Its ruffled late-Victorian ostentatiousness is not tempered by its understated grey tones. The hotel is comfortable standing among its opulent west London neighbours, a Lamborghini dealership around one corner and the Victoria and Albert Museum around the other.

Step out from Khan’s or The Ampersand and you find yourself on paving slabs, raised from the tarmac, heralding their pedestrian usage. Further towards the centre is the roadway; vehicles travel east by The Ampersand and west by Floris and then, finally, between the flows of traffic, the black cabs hum idly on their yellow-hemmed island.

When approaching a cab in the rank, almost without exception, the fare will stand on one side of the pedestrian crossing waiting for the little green man to light the way. On the man’s signal, the vehicles halt, the fare marches on in anticipatory silence and approaches the window of the first cab in the rank to begin negotiations (fig. 8.3). This is the correct

![Fig. 8.3](image.jpg)

Fig. 8.3 A potential passenger shows a cab driver a piece of paper with the address of his destination written on it before getting into the back of the taxi. Source: author
etiquette. If a fare appears at the wrong cab, they’ll be shooed to the front of the rank by the driver. A hurried businessman bypasses the ritual negotiation at the cab window and reaches straight for the door, the driver visibly dissatisfied. Sometimes involving a smartphone or, much more rarely, a map, the negotiation takes only a brief moment.

By law, hackney carriages are required to accept all fares, presumably making pre-journey negotiations redundant, although this is not the case. The drivers subvert the prescribed rhythm. Albeit an increasingly scarce event, after a brief to and fro, some drivers will shake their head and make a sharp gesture towards the cabs behind. The fare walks on. This practice, known as brooming, is frowned upon by the trade. The issue is a regular talking point in the digital enclaves of cab drivers, where the community is pained to consider what actions can be collectively taken to combat their falling revenues due to increased competition from loosely regulated Uber, the Silicon Valley firm that facilitates hailing taxis with a few taps on an app. There are several reasons why jobs are broomed; perhaps the driver will consider the proposed trip too short, hence not justifying the length of time waiting on the rank, or until very recently the driver may not have had a credit card machine. As of November 2016, however, hackney carriages have been required to carry a card machine at all times; however, this represents another prescribed rhythm that drivers subvert, by claiming the machine is not functioning when a passenger asks to use it.

Brooming is billed as a practice the profession can no longer afford since the unwelcome arrival of Uber. It is through interactions on Facebook pages rather than in union meeting rooms that drivers are taking collective action to counter this onslaught. The trade's consensus is that its unions have become toothless, dogged by infighting and ineffective management. One measure taken is photographing the licence plates of fellow cabbies who engage in practices deemed harmful to the profession, before posting the details of the supposed misdemeanour along with a photograph and the registration number to private Facebook groups used by the trade. This name-and-shame approach is employed to discourage others engaging in acts deemed as self-serving and collectively harmful. One instance where social pressure has achieved its objective is found in how the trade has boycotted the use of the Uber app as a way of plying for fares. Uber had added the option to hail a black cab, resulting in a significant number of cabbies signing up and offering their services on the app, but through a spontaneous campaign on the streets and online, chastising those who participated, it soon became impossible to hail a black cab using the app. These are
digital interventions with physical repercussions, changing rhythms and changing place itself.

Once complete, negotiations are consecrated by the sharp clink of the opening door and the subsequent wholesome clunk of it slamming shut. The rhythms of the driver and fare acquiesce. The cab fidgets as passengers shift their weight, its indicator flashing, still panting naggingly. Indicate right, three-point turn. Indicate left, edge into traffic. The cab pulls away and after a cursory splutter it catches its breath and begins to purr. The driver swiftly salutes the driver who beckons the cab to join the flow of vehicles, and meanwhile cabs in the rank shuffle forwards, promptly filling the vacuum – a cycle that is repeated again and again, each time the same yet different. Rarely, drivers will tap their smartphones and break rank, foregoing their position in the queue, the negotiation digital rather than physical (fig. 8.4).

Fig. 8.4 A driver breaks away mid-rank. Mostly this happens when the driver has accepted a fare on one of the ride-hailing apps that the profession uses, such as Hailo or Gett. Source: author
After catching a fare, cab drivers often return within hours, sometimes mere minutes, then again the next day and perhaps the next. There are many regulars. Faces are familiar. Waiting for fares, drivers congregate in the small pockets of relative safety between the cabs, normally in no more than threes. Alone for a cigarette (fig. 8.5) or chatting in a group, their utterances confined to their hemmed island, murmurs that become lost in the hum. ‘You can go where you like, but drivers tend to come to the same places,’ Kevin tells me between fares, ‘it’s just force of habit now.’ Our conversation is disjointed, its measure set by the repeated shuffling of the cabs. ‘Had my hips fixed a couple of years ago, couldn’t walk before then, but now every time I stop…,’ the door of the cab slams shut, ‘I’m out. Can’t sit in here for five seconds!’ Reflexively leaning one arm on the cab door, Kevin surveys the rank before looking away; ‘A lot of them have gone now, I mean, they’ve left the trade. A lot of people are leaving the trade at the moment.’ After Kevin waves to a passing cab driver for what must be the third time in the same number of minutes, I comment that there must still be some friendly faces. ‘Yeah!’ – my observation was met with unchecked enthusiasm followed immediately by silence – ‘There used to be…’ Kevin’s voice fades with his words barely audible over the threatening hum of the metallic masses throttling past either side. ‘I’m talking about contemporaries my age – I’m nearly 60, I’ve been driving for 20 years. My first day was

Fig. 8.5  A cab driver sits on the bonnet of his cab while smoking a cigarette between jobs. Source: author
Diana’s funeral, I didn’t want to go out to work. Every road was closed. My wife made me go. “You’ve been studying for three years, get out there and make some bloody money!” she said, “Stop making excuses!”

There was a sense of loss that saturated our discussions that day. A loss of community, friends, of pride, a financial loss too and, in sum, the loss of a way of life. Our conversation soon returned to Harrington Road and the years Kevin has spent coming here. ‘But yeah, Floris,’ says Kevin, gesturing at the cafe I have so often frequented during my time here, ‘I go there regularly. They give me change, they’ve got toilets. If I buy one coffee there every day, it’s like £700 in the year.’ For Kevin, the road is saturated with meaning, with relationships past and present.

There used to be a Welsh driver who would come along here. A fiery Welshman, Graham, lovely bloke. He sometimes comes around now, but he’s stopped working here, gone other places. Anyway, a bus driver came round here and clipped him, he shouts and the bus driver put his finger! So Graham goes up the road. Obviously, the bus has to stop but the driver wouldn’t open the doors. So Graham was booting it – and this was before I’d had my operation. By the time we were all up there, of course the police arrive and the bus driver says, “I’m being attacked! I’m being attacked!” And we say, “No, he hit him and gave him the big finger!” Anyway, someone on the bus turned around and was a witness against the driver…

We are interrupted, as our conversations always are. ‘Hello there!’ says Kevin, followed by a clink. His greeting is dutifully reciprocated by the passenger, before the door clunks shut. As Kevin winds down the window of the cab to shake my hand, I ask whether he will return to the rank today; ‘I probably will! I probably will. You never know.’

All interactions are inevitably declared and consummated by the familiar clink-clunk. Rhythm meets rhythm and anoints anew. Inside the cabs, each their own aluminium islet amidst a sea of traffic, drivers fleetingly indulge in their own private rhythms. Newspapers, mobile phones, a snack, coffee (figs 8.7 and 8.8). During these transitory interludes, proud drivers will frequently use the time to speedily clean their cabs, vigorously polishing and every so often raising their head in anticipation of the inevitable shuffle. Exceptionally, the street will be startled by a horn. A reminder to shuffle forward or a notification that lights are green.

‘Well that didn’t take long?’ I say as Kevin returns with the customary clink-clunk. ‘No, never does these days… you asked me why I come here,
Fig. 8.6 Besides the rank on Harrington Road, waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, two drivers express different views on the author. Source: author

Fig. 8.7 A cab driver reading a book on her Kindle between jobs. Source: author
it’s because no one puts their hand out and stops me!’ Coming up to rush hour, the shuffle hastens. ‘You know, my first year as a cabbie I cleared gross £42,000, 20 years ago. All right, I was young guns and eager, but last year I worked January to January, 269 days, and I averaged £142 a day gross. There’s no benefits from that, pensions, bank holidays, and by the time I put diesel in here, the running of it, it comes to £36/37,000. Take 10 grand off for running the cab, insurance and all that, it’s £26,000. That’s paper-round money! That’s how it is.’ We shuffle forwards. ‘At the moment, it’s always like this; no one’s being paid. This is a rush hour. Where’s the fares?’ This is a story told on cab journeys, posted on trade Facebook groups and in conversations on ranks around the city. The explanations the drivers provide for their predicament are wide-ranging, complex and multifaceted, but the whims of capitalism unify them all. Although Uber drivers often provide a convenient and ever-visible lightning rod for criticism, protecting and obscuring the socio-economic structures that Uber stemmed from, the reality is understood by drivers to be much more nuanced. ‘Well, look around the houses here at night; you won’t see any lights! There’s no one home; they’re owned by overseas investors! To me, this is one of the richest areas in the world. When you think that an apartment here –you can check in the estate agent windows down the road – it’s about three and a half million! A two-bed apartment!'
Three and a half million in Hollywood and you can buy a ranch! People say, “Oh, Hollywood is richer.” No!

After yet another obligatory shuffle, Kevin’s ire turns to Uber: ‘The problem we have at the moment is that Uber are so heavily subsidised. They’re doing it to get rid of us! And Uber are really big investors in driverless technologies – get rid of the driver, get rid of us, and mop up! I talk to other cab drivers and they don’t get it… “Oh, you know, driverless technology, won’t happen for years and years!” And you say, “It’s here now!”’ After a thoughtful silence, Kevin turns back to me; ‘I don’t think big business has a very compassionate attitude.’ Courtesy of speculative investing, Uber can raise billions of dollars of cash from investors, allowing it to run at a loss in the short term since it, and its investors, expect to be able to operate as a monopoly in the future once they have forced individual cabbies out of the trade by making their work economically unviable. Many conversations concern the notion that faceless powers govern much of the drivers’ everyday lives, whether these powers be big business, the advancement of technology, regulatory agencies, the relentless onward march of capitalism or, as it most often is, a combination of them all. The rank on Harrington Road, as a place and feature of the urban environment, is itself faced with obsolescence due to such forces. With the proliferation of smartphones, and with businesses like Uber combined with a loose regulatory system, the rank is rendered increasingly superfluous as more people unlock their phones to hail a taxi, normally arriving anywhere in London within a couple of minutes, from the comfort of their living rooms. ‘This is how the world works now. It’s habit, they do it everywhere they go. People like to think their driver is outside.’ With a plummy accent, Kevin pulls back his shoulders and makes a buoyant hand gesture; “They say, “Oh! There’s my driver!””

The cabbies, their relationships, politics, digital doings – they’re all but a small fraction of the unfathomable totality of Harrington Road that they exist within and without. The fluid and responsive rhythms of the rank contrast with the strictly timetabled buses, the bus stop’s arrivals board forever counting down to the next approach (fig. 8.9). Never more than 10 minutes to wait, the buses’ rhythms are both diurnal and nocturnal. The jellyfish crowd waiting for the bus repeatedly swells and billows after school and contracts in the early hours, pulsating in perpetuity. The latest rendition of the Routemaster nods at times past with its patriotic red and appropriation of the iconic design of its predecessors, except now, being part electronic, it gleefully whistles to a standstill. Inevitably a figure will raise a hand, signalling the bus to stop – an enduring relic of a rhythm supposedly confined to the past; today,
regulations demand buses to come to a standstill regardless of a raised hand, although both driver and passengers eagerly collude to defy another prescribed rhythm. Back door opens, passengers pile out. Front door opens, passengers pile in. As the bus, at a standstill, fills, it obliges the oncoming vehicles motoring towards the junction to flow around its red mass. The traffic lights at the junction conduct the next move. On red, the little green man shines and pedestrians walk freely over the crossing; barely a head turns to survey the traffic, people placing their faith in others’ respect of the persuasive charm of these few colour-coded lamps. Red, amber, green. With a buzz and a whistle, the bus sets off with staccato mopeds and treble vans joining the cacophony. While the traffic light is green, the columns of oncoming traffic cease, as do pedestrians at the crossing, each awaiting their respective cue from their respective conductor.

Owing to the locality, with its wealthy francophone residents, the Lycée Français, the Institut Français and the French bookstore across the road from The Ampersand, the rambling chit-chat is perfumed with notes of French. French is, of course, only one of many languages to be heard, given the many huddles of tourists with their wide eyes dashing between Google Maps and the road, as well as the diverse nationalities of the city’s inhabitants. Tourists experience Harrington Road, and the city, from a disposition not like that of others. Time moves more slowly

Fig. 8.9  People wait as the digital timetable counts down to the arrival of the next buses. Source: author
for these transient peoples, who take a pace unfamiliar to those for whom
the street’s presences are but a daily afterthought; for the commuter the
street is but a route to a destination, for the tourist the street is both route
and destination. A pause to admire the hotel’s grand architecture, the
curiosity to take to Wikipedia and seek local histories, a slowed walk
to compare ratings of local restaurants. These interludes of interludes
often clot the pedestrian flow – particularly at peak hours, before and
after school or work. Come rain or snow, those walking Harrington Road
find their priorities suddenly individually disordered but collectively
cohered. Commuters, residents, shoppers, students and tourists scramble
for shelter. The street hastens, pedestrians scurry and jostle, crowds
gather under the welcome refuge of the bus shelter; then there is relative
quiet once shelter is sought. Drivers return to their aluminium islets,
and prospective passengers, with little patience for the little green man,
dart towards the cabs at paces hardly seen in kinder weather, many
foregoing Uber for what, in an inversion of circumstances, is now the
most desirable option. Concealed and closely observing the events of
the road, no matter the weather, is the hotel’s doorman (fig. 8.11),
dormant until the hesitance of a taxi before the steps or the sound of a
suitcase being dragged along the pavement alerts him to an arrival.

Though seldom so, buses are late, betraying their timetabled
decree. If this coincides with the school bell, just before 4 o’clock most

Fig. 8.10  A woman staying at one of the luxury serviced apartments
opposite The Ampersand Hotel stands and watches as her luggage is
loaded into the Middle East Cargo Services freight van. Source: author
weekdays, the crowds will spill out from the bus stop into its surroundings. Children, not yet submissive to the dictated codes of a prim London street, will sit on the hotel's steps, and passers-by will jostle impatiently through the throng. Pairs and small groups cease their chatting while manoeuvring through the crowd, and lone walkers momentarily sheathe their phones and submit full attention to what is physically before them. Nearby, the single-file queues at the cashpoints wait in devout silence, leaving a respectful distance while customers are paid their respects. A larger crowd; more anxious glances over shoulders.

Whether a guest at The Ampersand relaxing in the hotel lounge, the waiter finishing up at the cafe opposite, or the student sitting in an apartment down the road, anyone can digitally meld the rhythms of the street. The tired waiter, arm outstretched, phone in hand, opens the Uber app. ‘Where to?’ A few taps, the destination entered. A moment to calculate, every turn of the journey mapped. Small cars icons populate the map and float sheepishly along the grid representing the surrounding roads. Confirm pickup. ‘Optimizing pickup’, ‘Finding your ride’, ‘Meet
outside 15 Harrington Road’, ‘2 MIN AWAY’, ‘1 MIN AWAY’. ‘Arriving
now’. The passenger, eyes darting between the phone and the oncoming
traffic, finally matches number plates and signals to the driver by waving
the phone screen in the car’s direction. The driver pulls up in near silence.
Only an electric whir dissonant to the choking hums of the black cabs
separates the car from the soundscape of the street. The driver pauses
nervously on the double yellows (fig. 8.12). Some passing drivers swerve
with exaggerated motions, others sound their horns; cabbies look on
from the rank, not hiding their contempt. And then as silently as they
come, they go, leaving the rank all but a relic in their rear-view mirror
(fig. 8.15). No option to pay cash.

A cab stops beneath The Ampersand’s Union Jack (fig. 8.13). The
concierge flutters down the flight of stone steps, promptly opening the
cab door to greet the guests while simultaneously relieving them of
their luggage. The flight of steps sets the rhythm for the guests. Stride by
stride, a pedagogic drumroll, an introduction to the novel rhythms of
the hotel. On a guest’s departure, a flitter towards the rank will follow the
flutter. Another of the street’s denizens who has no time for the little
green man, the concierge waits expectantly for a gap in the traffic. A
brief survey of the traffic, a dash, negotiation, clink-clunk, cab fidgeting,
three-point turn, salute, swing toward hotel, clink, concierge out, guest
in, clunk, swing, drive. And then concealed once more, again dormant until conducted once more to play conductor (fig. 8.14).

**Conclusion: Stories of place and the place of stories**

Harrington Road and its surroundings are read and written by its denizens, consciously or not, as a script allowing for certain actions and disallowing others, possibilities communicated through a complex system of signs – not only road signs, of course, important though they are. This is a symphony with not one conductor, but many. The arc of the road, the yellow lines painted on the road’s surface, the sound of horns, little green men, people’s gestures and motions – all conducted conducting conductors. So, this is not a script by a solitary author written to be passively read as immortal and immutable by a solitary reader – it is a script that has been both read and written over the passage of histories by innumerable authors, some known, others not, and continues to be simultaneously reread and rewritten by innumerable more in a state of constant barely fathomable flux. A palimpsest penned in a myriad of languages, its totality understood by no one, fragments understood by all. Every tourist, every driver, the concierge, Uber, the government – they are all authored and authors through their very

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**Fig. 8.13** A black cab driver smiles as he drops off a family arriving at The Ampersand Hotel. Source: author
Fig. 8.14  The doorman stands alone waiting in the lobby of The Ampersand Hotel. Source: author
presence, physical, cultural or digital. Chaos that by some marvel presents itself as coherence. A script where each line exists to be championed or chided, and adhered to, ignored or changed. All actors have their role, their script, but improvise they do.

The script for the drivers of hackney carriages was first set out hundreds of years ago, and many of the drivers’ rhythms apparent today are but whispers of yesterday’s. Cabbies speak proudly of their profession being the oldest regulated public transport system in the world; the first regulated black cabs took to London’s streets in 1654 when Oliver Cromwell passed an act of parliament setting up the Fellowship of Master Hackney Carriages. It is almost idle to note that society and its technologies – a relationship that should concurrently be inversely formulated as technology and its societies – has undergone immense change since the hackney carriage’s inception, and the rhythms that would resemble Lefebvre’s conception of the meta-stable equilibrium then would not now. It is, in part, these rhythms that have traversed the intermediate centuries from then until now that result in the present discordance, the arrhythmia, in today’s symphony. Without doubt these rhythms have transformed, to some extent, over the course of time. They will have mingled with some rhythms, clashed and coalesced with some more, since they are, as already propositioned, not immortal and immutable. That said, remnants of archaic rhythms are certainly discernible to the rhythmanalyst of today.

Fig. 8.15 Harrington Road seen through the rear windscreen of a hackney carriage. Source: author
The act of hailing a cab with a raised hand from a street corner, the inherited materiality of the rank alongside the rituals and etiquettes coupled to it, the driver's encyclopaedic knowledge of the city's streets. Compare these rituals associated with the hackney carriage to what is made possible through the advent, and adoption of, digital technology. Through the Uber app, without raising a hand or searching for a rank, a passenger can, with a few taps, hail a car that will arrive within a few minutes – wherever he or she is in London and at whatever time. Riders need not open their wallets; payment is taken automatically from a stored credit or debit card, and a fare estimate is provided prior to departure. For the driver, there is little barrier to entry. Drivers are not required to commit to undertaking a costly and intensive three- to four-year training course (the equivalent duration of an undergraduate degree in the UK), memorising over 25,000 streets and learning to, on command, verbally recite the most efficient turn-by-turn route between any two while at the same time being able to note whether junctions or roundabouts are crossed and what points of interest may be alongside the chosen route, or, for that matter, undergoing a minimum of 13 periodical examinations. This laborious process, a process that contributes to the great pride felt among black cab drivers for their profession and its history, is replaced by a few cursory checks: a criminal background check, a medical and a simple topographic test. Before the advent of satellite navigation systems and their ilk – so the vast majority of the hackney carriage’s history – there was an obvious necessity to be able to navigate the city’s streets without assistance. Today, however, the destination is input by Uber passengers before the car has arrived, the most efficient route calculated, and turn-by-turn instructions provided; as Kevin comments, ‘The world has changed, you’ve got it on your phone now. When I did [the knowledge], there wasn’t sat navs.’ Apps such as Waze go a step further by tracking their millions of users’ speeds and locations and combining that data with user-submitted reports of incidents, closures and other relevant information, to continually calculate and update these step-by-step directions over the course of the journey to ensure the fastest route is always taken – something that no matter how many years of training black cab drivers submit to, they cannot alone replicate. It is worth noting that something Uber will never replicate is the prestige associated with driving the iconic black cab and the pride the drivers feel for their historical profession. ‘The pride is immense,’ says Colin, a cabbie I met at the rank on Harrington Road who had only in the last few years ‘passed out’, the trade’s term for passing the knowledge of London and receiving a hackney carriage licence (a term, incidentally,
also used for referring to completion of the first stage of British Army training), ‘that’s one reason why I’ve never entertained the idea of becoming an Uber driver. It’s about prestige. It’s kind of elitist but in a good way, not in an arrogant way, you know….’ And with the prestige comes quality, as Steve attests, using the discount clothing retailer Primark as a metaphor for Uber, another example of a race-to-the-bottom capitalist entity, ‘It’s like I just said to Greg, the thing is if you go to Primark – and first of all you come out with 32 bags, because it’s cheap and nasty – but after you’ve washed it and it’s gone out of shape, you’ll go back to where you started from: Ralph Lauren!’

The rhythms that emanate from the weight of rituals designed so many years ago – ranks, hailing by hand, the knowledge – for a society of different demands and technological capabilities, grate against those of the ‘modernisers’ who embrace the dictums of global capitalism and technological change. Hetherington (2013:21) – referencing Sheringham’s (2010) conceptualisation of the city as an archive ‘where the past is conveyed through the everyday materiality and lived practice that shapes their composition’ – talks of the ‘evocative power of the past to engage active subjects’ and how material traces of the past remain part of the urban fabric. The resultant state is one of arrhythmia. It is as ordinary to observe a nondescript black electric car whizzing to a halt by the pavement next to the rank on Harrington Road – dithering on the double yellows, hazards on, waiting for the phone-waving passenger to approach – as it is to observe a fare walking over to the window of a black cab, anything but nondescript, engine ticking and chugging, idling on the rank. With the rank being an artefact from another era, and the trade so intimately connected to it, both physically and economically, it could be seen as the ultimate symbol of the grim power of capital to render obsolete. As tempting as this explanation is, it is also careless. Capitalism and its artifices are too often seen as a natural force – something that pre-exists and has its own complex internal organisation that is uncontrollable and destined to never be fully understood; something that transcends, and is external to, humanity – but this is a well told lie, and Harrington Road provides an exemplary flashpoint.

This is arrhythmia by design. An important author of the script that sets out the role for a black cab driver on Harrington Road, one that constructs the structure of the chamber that a driver’s everyday rhythms rumble through, and certainly the author that receives the most condemnation from drivers for their current predicament, is Transport for London (TfL). TfL sets out and enforces the policies with respect to the usage of ranks, the right to ply for fares on the street (as opposed
to booking over the phone or via an app, as is mandated by TfL for private hires), the legislation related to the taking of payment and what training is required to acquire a hackney carriage licence (pass ‘the knowledge’). Regulators such as TfL are formations within the capitalist system that are purportedly designed to curb the effects on people of the worst excesses of capitalism, or to limit negative externalities, in economic textbook terms. In this instance, the laissez-faire approach taken, an approach that is wholly ideological insofar as it does not subject drivers working with (or for, depending who you ask) huge monopolies like Uber to the same requirements as for individual black cab drivers, or at least approximations of them, has directly resulted in the present discordance, or arrhythmia. It should then too be interrogated for to whom these so-called ‘negative externalities’ are limited, if not the cabbies. It is easier to refer to people as ‘negative externalities’; it strips away their humanity and leaves in its place a simplified but hollow calculation. To the cabbies of Harrington Road, whose careers are threatened by ‘modernisation’, the only people who see their ‘negative externalities’ curbed are ‘Travis and his £50 billion mates’, to quote Steve, another Harrington Road regular Kevin introduced me to, who is here referring to Travis Kalanick, Uber’s billionaire CEO and co-founder. Like all drivers I spoke to, Kevin too has strong feelings on the matter: ‘Regulators don’t take pride in us. We get voted the best cab service in the world, year in, year out, and you would think TfL would have pride in that, but it don’t seem to mean anything to ‘em. They’re the ones that will ultimately put the boot in us’, Kevin had told me resolutely, punctuating his assessment with an abrupt sip of a coffee he had just bought from Cafe Floris. As long as capitalism is allowed to drive on untamed, the hackney carriage will continue to be but a black blur in Uber’s rear-view mirror. Steve had arrived while Kevin was mid-sentence; ‘I mean, I think we have a lot of advantages, but I don’t think people in power are giving us any help…’

The arrhythmia that reigns on the rank of Harrington Road is not isolated. By this I do not mean, merely, that this discordance (or disruption, to take a buzz-word from the Silicon Valley lexicon) extends to all London’s, Britain’s or even the world’s ranks and roads, although this is no doubt true. By this I mean that arrhythmia is the default state of capitalism. What we have here on Harrington Road is a concrete instantiation of an abstract ideological battle, a battle between the further entrenchment of untamed neoliberal capitalism and the call for more government intervention to protect workers through regulations or other means. Is Uber not the ultimate embodiment of all that neoliberalism represents? Inbuilt into the structure of its service are the ideals
inherent in neoliberalism (profit over people): price gauging (or as a feature using algorithms, such that prices quoted to passengers increase instantly when there is increased demand from passengers or a decrease in the supply of drivers), the obsolescence of their own employees (Uber is investing billions of dollars in self-driving technology with the express purpose of replacing drivers) and the minimisation of drivers’ rights and wages (Uber treats its drivers as being self-employed rather than employees of the company, meaning it does not have to guarantee a minimum wage; Uber is currently appealing an employment tribunal ruling that drivers must be treated as workers).

It is an unfortunate irony that Uber and black cab drivers are actually, as noted, in an unremarkably similar predicament: both are struggling with precarity, low wages, long hours, and share similar socio-economic backgrounds; it is typical of capitalism, with its simultaneous destructively creative power to divide and conquer the working classes. It should not be surprising – although given the present tensions it may be – that black cab drivers and Uber drivers have a lot in common. It is a miserable quirk of capitalism that specialist labour is replaced by generic and unqualified labour for the sake of economic efficacy, irrespective of substance. The animosity among taxis drivers provides an everyday instance of this with traces of conflict seen on a daily basis – cabbies not letting Uber drivers out at junctions, for instance, or a Toyota Prius pulling up beside a rank. This inevitably leads to a situation where capitalism has institutionalised distinctions between the working classes. Of course this serves capitalism well, splintering and creating conflict between socio-economically similar groups while simultaneously providing a convenient distraction from injustices inherent in capitalism and rendering any possibility of cohesive collective action between these groups unlikely. A much-lauded characteristic of driving a taxi, whether black cab or Uber, is the sense of freedom it provides; ‘You can work unlimited hours, where you want, when you want,’ says Kevin. But of course, this freedom is really the freedom to act in a certain way within strict prescribed boundaries that Kevin has no direct control over – a fictive freedom. The prisoners are free to act more or less how they wish within their cell. As Greg, another of the Harrington Road regulars mused, ‘At the end of the day, I have to come out for work whether I have Uber here or not, and that’s the case for most drivers.’

We see that the materialities, technologies and ideologies of the present, and the remnants of those inherited from our past, have a distinct and very real effect on everyday rhythms and place. We see that the structures of daily lives are deeply affected by government regulations,
advances in technology, economic ideals and the weight of history, the one-time necessity for cabs to be easily accessible at a rank, and for their drivers to memorise how thousands of roads connect to one another, for instance. Impersonal forces, with origins far removed from the denizens of Harrington Road, govern every aspect of daily life down to the most intimate bodily movements, the raising of a hand to hail a cab or the tapping of a phone screen to do the same. We see rhythms are not confined to a discrete segment of time and space but reverberate through history and resonate around a globalised world, often with consequences most damaging for those already most exploited. It is for these reasons that rhythmanalysis as a way of perceiving and telling finds purpose. Through an actively reflective engagement with place and everyday life we can hope to disentangle and hence revolutionise our incumbent relationships – material, social, digital, ideological, bodily – that provide the structure for capitalist society. The stories we then tell must not be passive reproductions of the world, devoid of poetry, critique and reflection, and instead must carefully embrace another way of telling which grasps their inherent power to create and recreate, to revolutionise, and instil life into everydayness. This is the place of stories.

Methodological note

My exploration into the rhythms of Harrington Road began in the spring of 2015 and continued intermittently, often with long gaps in between, until January 2017. There was the opportunity – over the course of days, nights, seasons and years – to immerse and re-immerse myself in the rhythms of the road and capture an understanding of place that was far longer term than I had originally anticipated, although, at the same time, this stop-start approach led to complications. There was no timetabled or structured approach to my visits; instead they were sporadic and planned at the last minute, with the one exception being during initial fieldwork in mid-April 2015 when I stood witness to three consecutive dawns turn to dusk on Harrington Road. Other than this singular exception, my visits so many months later would take place when time would allow, most often compressed between other research commitments.

So, although over the course of what was almost two years I visited Harrington Road several times across seasons, there were long hiatuses between trips and threads of thought became hard to hold onto. As a consequence of this structural vacuity, I repeatedly found myself, upon studying my fragmented notes, to be making the same observations.
ad nauseam, albeit each time perceived and formulated somewhat differently but with the overall character generally remaining the same. Both impulsively and uncritically, my response was to problematise this, seek a solution and organise my fieldwork and note-taking such that this would no longer continue.

After rereading Lefebvre, the serendipity of this supposed complication became clear. What I stood to gain from my chaotic approach, in which the same observations were made again and again, was a valuable insight into the repetitions of the road. Through the chaos came clarity, cycles became transparent, the measure of the street apparent – the rhythm palpable, and with the right words life was created out of chaos. What was perhaps the most productive outcome was how in each noted repetition, difference was there to be found – not only in the observed event itself but in the ways in which it was perceived. This difference within repetition is crucial to Lefebvre’s approximation of rhythm-analysis. As Hetherington notes, ‘[rhythms] are made up, [Lefebvre] suggests, not only of the built environment and infrastructures through which people move but through repetitions of activity that also produced ripples of difference that mean that any one time in the city is never quite the same as another’ (Hetherington 2013:23). As is so often the case, structure seems to manifest itself virtually autonomously from the unstructured, or at least from what is perceived as such. From this point on, allowing whims to grasp me, I succumbed to a structurally unstructured approach, not to lead rhythms but to be led by them.

Contingency, ever apparent, played a further role in the choice of locale. For the original research I was interested, quite specifically, in cabbies and their relationship with place. My requirements were straightforward: I sought a well-used taxi rank with somewhere nearby convenient for me to sit for long durations. This led me to Harrington Road, which happened to be ideally situated in that there was Cafe Floris, with its outdoor seating and cheap coffee, which happened to provide an ideal vantage point across from the rank. Lefebvre in his famed rhythmanalysis of Rue Rambuteau in Paris sits on his balcony overlooking the road below in order to achieve a ‘certain exteriority’ so as to discern how ‘noises distinguish themselves, flows separate out, rhythms respond to one another’ (Lefebvre 2004:38). But of course, as Lefebvre notes ‘to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it’ (Lefebvre 2004:37), and therefore it is also necessary to find this elusive balance between exteriority and interiority. It is a well-used trope that when deeply immersed within a culture, society or just a general way of being, it can be arduous achieving the distance required to attain
valuable insights. Then, inversely, it is needless to say that being too far outside of something will likely not be fruitful. Instead, ‘In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely... A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function’ (Lefebvre 2004:27). Cafe Floris, with a terrace cordoned off from the road, provided me with the right balance of exteriority and interiority.

Mostly the rhythms carried me. Notably, though, for a day in early 2017, around two years after first setting foot on Harrington Road, this dynamic was deferred when discussing the rank, the road and the trade with any driver on the rank willing to chat. Although not a structured interview – there were no comprehensively premeditated questions or anything written in preparation – to describe this as something as informal as a chat is perhaps misleading. Before arriving that day, I had already constructed an identity for myself on Harrington Road as well as in relation to the trade. In short, there were topics that would inevitably be at the forefront of my mind when approaching drivers. This combined with the imposed asymmetries that are incidental when openly recording the conversation make this a relatively less spontaneous affair. With few exceptions, cabbies were generally glad to have someone listen to them speak passionately about their concerns about the precarity of their centuries-old profession. One of the most prevalent concerns voiced was how they felt sidelined; that the powers that be, notably TfL, were unhearing.

References