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**The spatial dimension of platforms deliverymen labour.
Workforce management by algorithms: comparative
perspectives between Nantes and Marseille (France)**

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The spatial dimension of platforms deliverymen labour

Workforce management by algorithms : comparative perspectives between Nantes and Marseille

Claire Burban

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Urban Logistics

Getting the goods in Weimar and Thüringen

7th – 8th December 2023

Introduction

- Labour geography of the « uberalized » working-class in urban centers, a *racial capitalism* (Mc Millan Cottom, 2020; Gebrial, 2022; Bernard, 2023)

- **The spatial dimension of platforms deliverymen labour :**

« Non-geographical approaches to work and employment miss essential factors (...) Geography is more than a simply "background scenery". Instead, it has a constitutive role to play in the drama of what happens to workers and what workers can do to change the terms and conditions of their employment » (Herod, Peck, Wills, 2011 : 176)

- **Thesis defended in this presentation :**

Via their algorithms, platforms control and constraint the workforce (deliverymen).
By using technological tools, such as geolocation, they use the spatial dimension to control labour forces.

Introduction

Datas and materials :

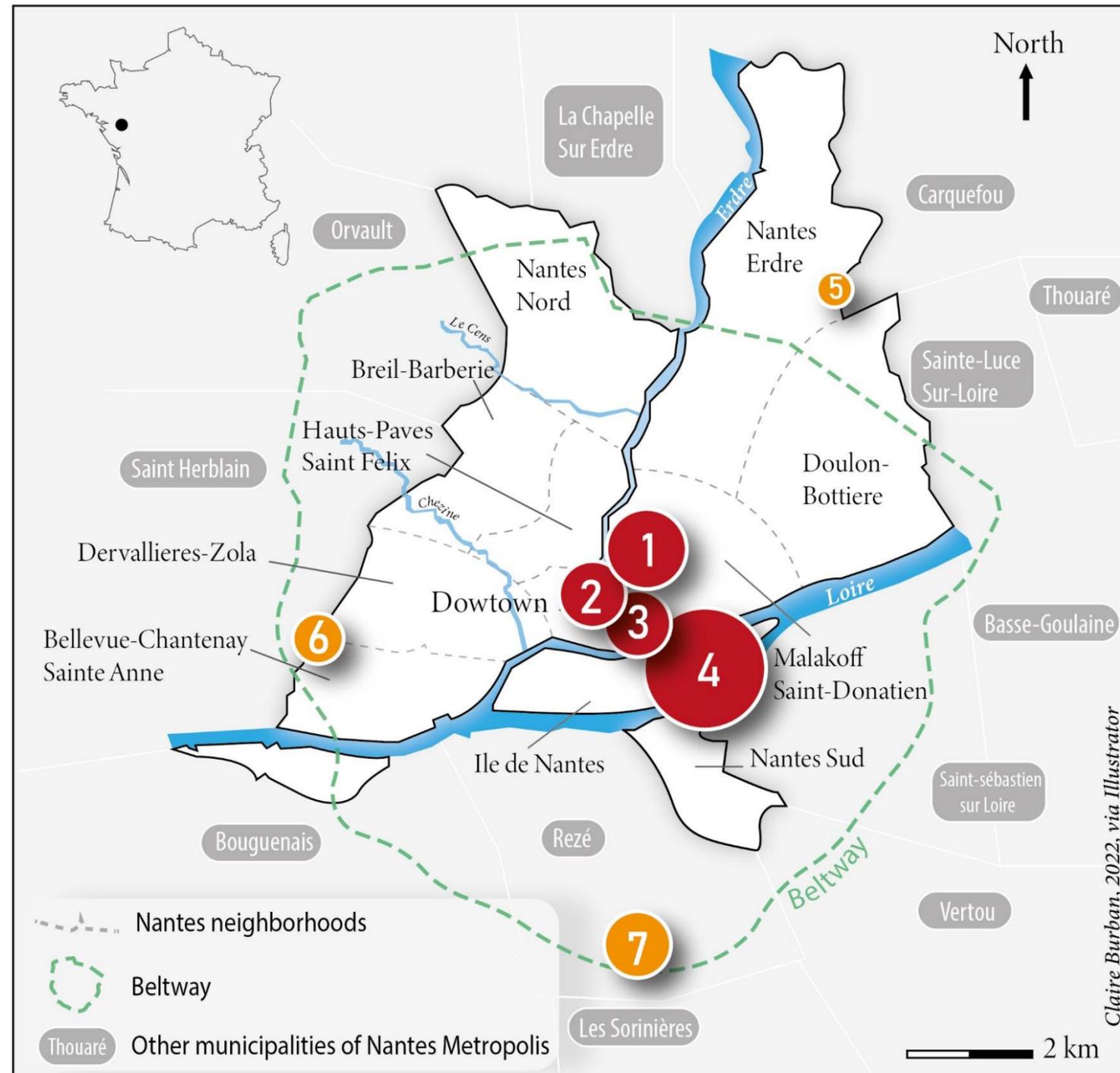
27 interviews conducted with Nantes food deliverymen between January and June 2022.

Observation sequences carried out at seven sites (as shown on the map). Four of them are located downtown, the other three are more peripheral.

68 deliverymen investigated during observation sequences

Questionnaire investigation as part of the research program SUBWORK (Raimbault, Heitz, Dablanc, Pillet, Rivière, Roux, Tranchant)

Waiting areas (workplaces) of Nantes deliverymen Comparative analysis of downtown and peripheral waiting areas



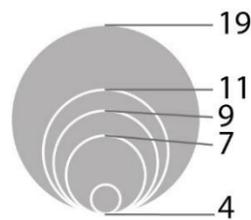
From downtown waiting areas favored by two-wheeler deliverymen

- Downtown waiting areas
- 1 Strasbourg street
- 2 Trois croissants street
- 3 Feydeau
- 4 Mall « Beaulieu »

... to peripheral waiting areas favored by car and scooter deliverymen

- Peripheral waiting areas
- 5 La Beaujoire (Mc Donald's)
- 6 Bellevue (Mc Donald's)
- 7 Mall « Océane »

Total number of deliverymen investigated during the survey : 68
distribution by location



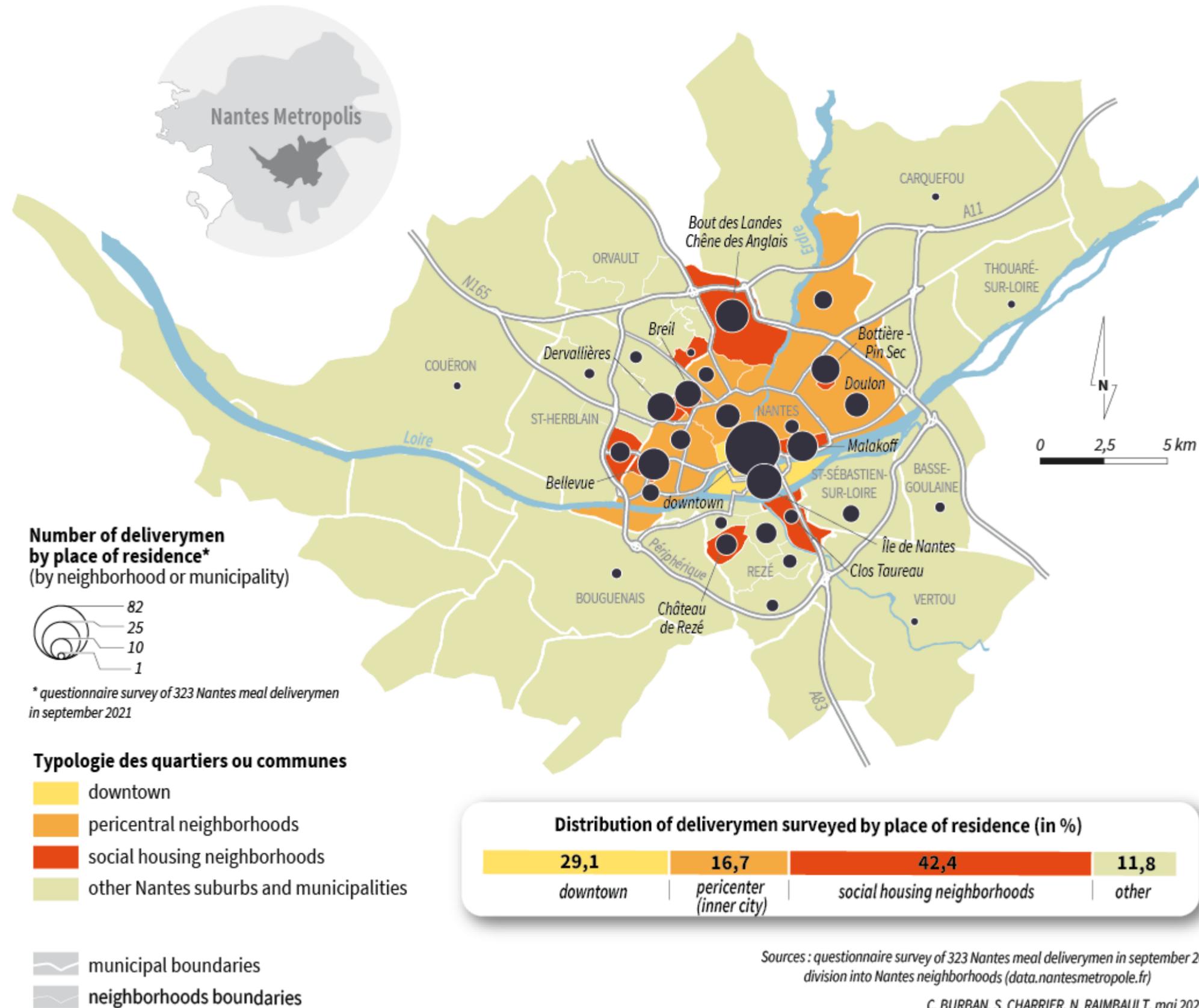
Claire Burban, 2022, via Illustrator

1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.1 Male, racialized and precarious workers : a subsistence labour

Residential locations in working-class neighborhoods and downtown

An over-representation of deliverymen in social housing neighborhoods (42%) and also in downtown neighborhoods (29%) which may reflect emergency housing and squats.



Sources : questionnaire survey of 323 Nantes meal deliverymen in september 2021, division into Nantes neighborhoods (data.nantesmetropole.fr)

1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.1 Male, racialized and precarious workers : a subsistence labour

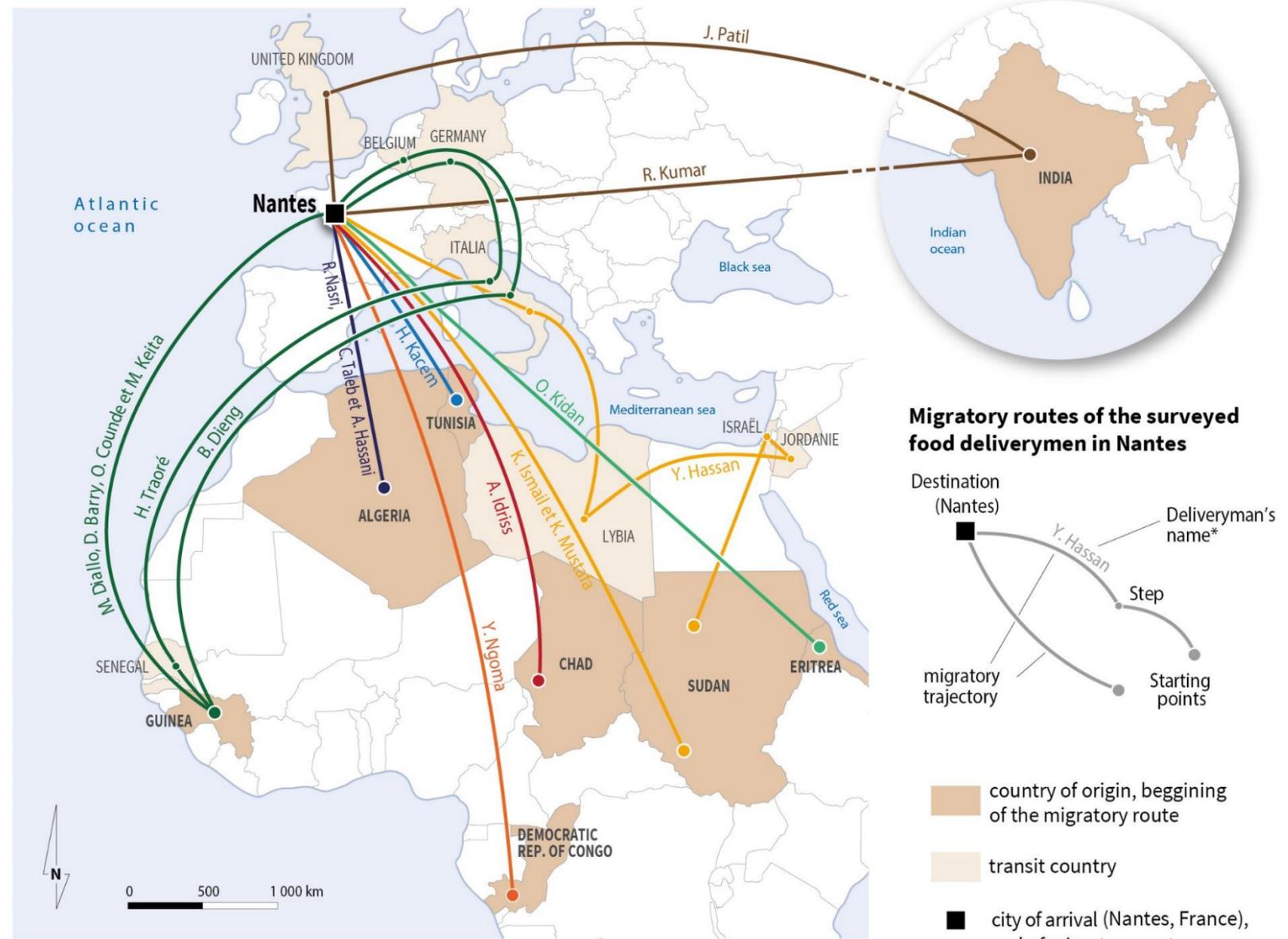
“Actually, being a meal deliveryman is just to make some money. Later on, we'll do something else, find a way to get the papers. Then we'll leave, you know! Find a real job. We're staying here in France! But you see, I'll give you an example : today, we work [silence] ... not 'for real.' Off the books. Some people work through temporary agencies with fake papers. Maybe tomorrow we'll do that, give fake papers to temp agencies. Find a real job because right now, it's a mess!”

- Chakib Taleb

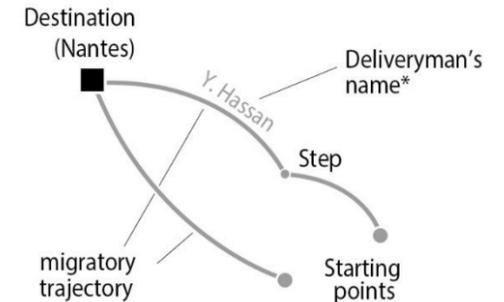
1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.1 Male, racialized and precarious workers : a subsistence labour

Migration routes from the northern half of the African continent



Migratory routes of the surveyed food deliverymen in Nantes



country of origin, beginning of the migratory route
 transit country
 city of arrival (Nantes, France), end of migratory route

*To preserve anonymity, names have been changed

Source : stories of interviews conducted with Nantes food deliverymen between January and June 2022

- 98 % of Nantes platforms delivery workers are men
- 78 % of them are under 29 years old
- 76 % of them are not French
- Nearly 8 out of 10 deliverymen earn less than the gross monthly minimum wage

Distribution of the 18 surveyed deliverymen according to their country of origin



1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.2 The spatial dimension of labour control

1. Assignments of deliveries

"At first, I delivered by bicycle. But we noticed that the faster we go, the more the company [Uber] earns, and the more we earn too. So, the faster you deliver, the more additional orders you get. And the faster you go, the more the company [Uber] profits, and you also make money.

(...)

It takes much more time! Imagine! You're on a bike, and you take a 10 km delivery? You're going to be exhausted, you do 10 km [one way], and 10 km back. At the end of the day... that's it too! The faster you go, the more the company [the platform] earns! **They give you a first order, you have a second order waiting for you, and there's a third order. By the time you finish delivering the first one, you come back, it's going to take time, but you'll go faster!"**

-Mahmoud Diallo

1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.2 The spatial dimension of labour control

2. A wage based on the distance and time traveled for deliveries

"Claire Burban: How are your income calculated?

Abakar Idriss: I think it's per kilometer. Sometimes when we receive two orders, it's not the same... If I get three kilometers for four euros, and there's a second order right next to it, they won't pay another four euros. They'll pay just two euros [additional for the second order]."

1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.2 The spatial dimension of labour control

3. The margins and percentages taken from the tips given by customers
4. The decrease of the number of deliveries
5. A wage unilaterally imposed by the platforms



These five facets reflect the opacity of platforms

1. The « invisible hand » of the algorithm. How workplaces are constrained and controlled by the platform

1.3 Constraints and insecurity of movement due to technical problems with digital tools

"Mahmoud Diallo: [Referring to the neighborhood where the interview takes place, where he lives, and where he usually waits for his orders] Bah yeah, I know it! I don't waste time, you see. **Sometimes the GPS breaks [emphasis on "breaks"] our heads! Sometimes the GPS, ah! it even kills us!** Sometimes, you're there [Mahmoud points to a spot on the table], and you have to deliver there [points to another spot]. And what does the GPS do? It gives you the route, it tells you "you have to go, return, come back". Eh! [Laughs]

Claire Burban: You go round in ten minutes. [Laughs]

Mahmoud Diallo: Ten minutes for nothing! Do you know what I mean?

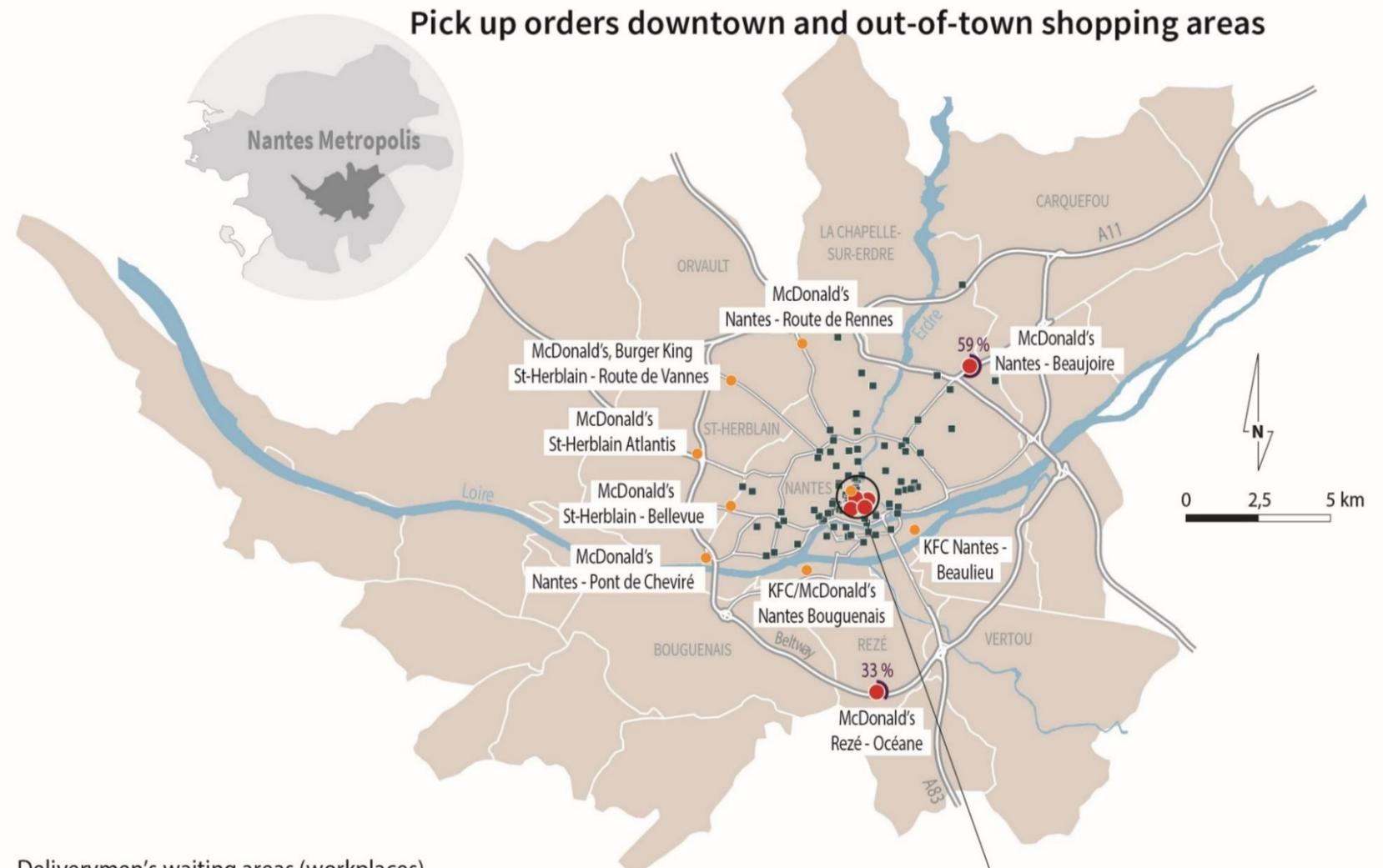
Claire Burban: Yes. I imagine you're like, "But that's impossible".

Mahmoud Diallo: No, it's not possible! Even me back then, with the GPS... **But the GPS is killing me! The GPS killed me so much. You could have taken five minutes, but now you can take thirty!**

2. A production of workplaces doubly constrained by supply and demand

2.1 Workplaces production

- Supply-driven production of workplaces



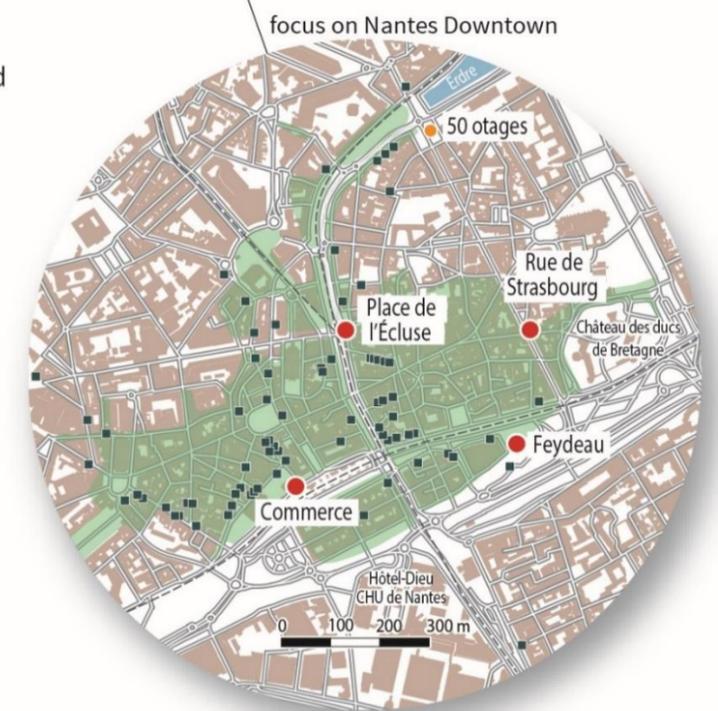
Deliverymen's waiting areas (workplaces)

- main 33% percentage of deliveries made by car when significant
- secondary (the rest of deliveries are made almost exclusively on motorized two-wheelers (scooter) or not-motorized (bicycle))

- restaurants (in Nantes only) identified as working with meal delivery platforms

■ Nantes pedestrian zone prohibited for the circulation and parking of motorized two-wheelers with thermal engine (except between 7:30 am and 11:30 am, municipal decree of march 8, 2021)

- built-up zone
- tramway line
- main road network
- municipal boundary
- main hydrographic network

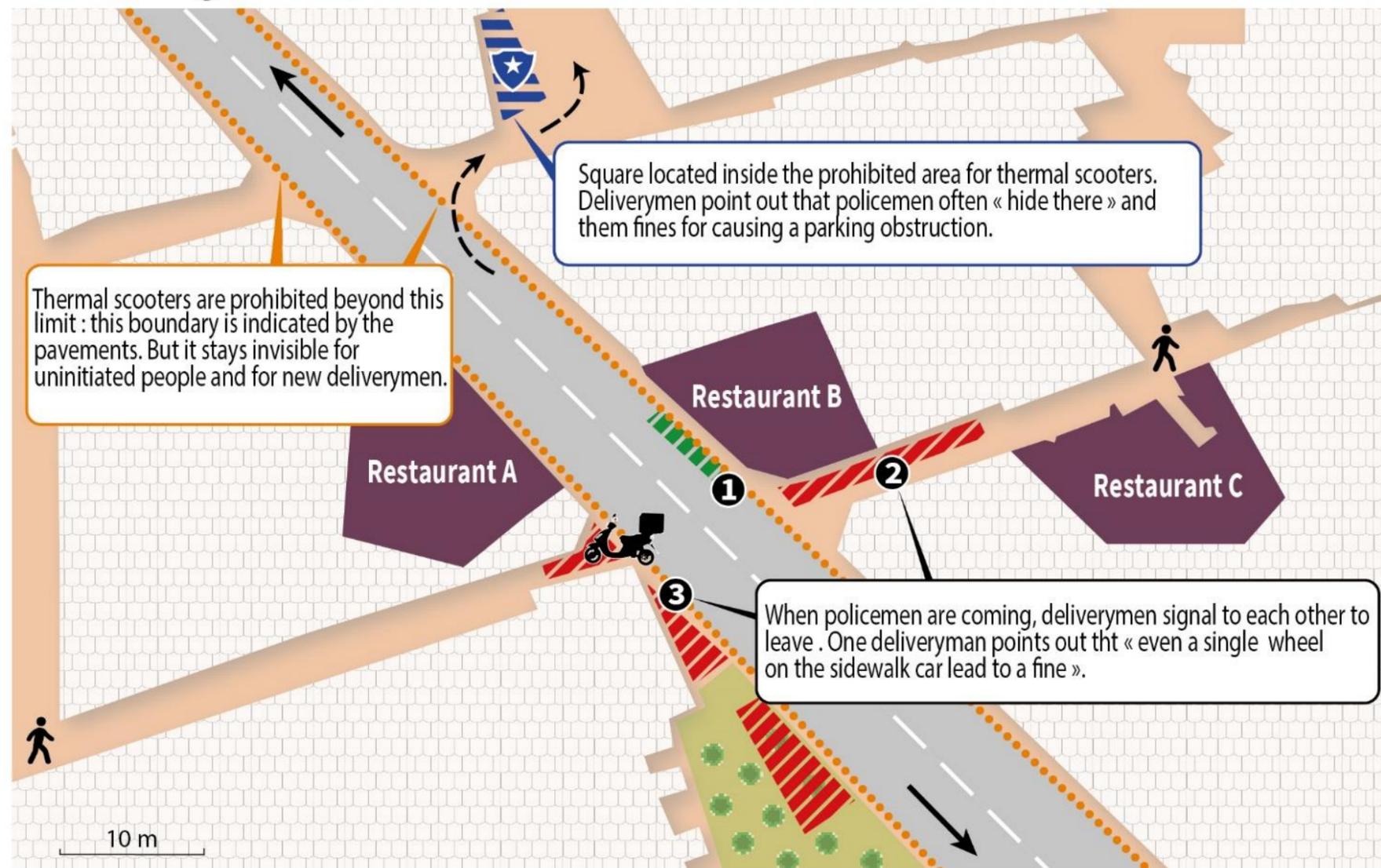


2. A production of workplaces doubly constrained by supply and demand

2.2 Workplaces : overcoming material, legal and subjective constraints

Plan of a street that cross Nantes downtown.

A strategic workplace close to the restaurants but underneath constraints



Spatial constraints in the downtown area

- Nantes pedestrian street closed to traffic and parking for thermal scooters (except between 7:30 a.m and 11:30 a.m, municipal decree of March 8, 2021)
- tree-filled square occupied by the terraces of nearby cafés : depending on the time of the day, deliverymen are relegated to other areas of the square
- built-up area
- the only authorized routes in and out of downtown

Spatial plan set up by deliverymen in response to constraints

Spatial appropriation of waiting areas by deliverymen (on thermal scooters)

- allowed **1** Some deliverymen park on the edge of the invisible border
- prohibited **2** Other deliverymen park alongside the restaurant ...
- 3** ...or at the corner of one of the square's shop

Shortcuts

Even if thermal scooters are prohibited and police presence, deliverymen often use a shortcut that allows them to be closer to downtown restaurants and to have a « better chance to ring », which means to obtain a delivery

Sources : ethnographic survey conducted between january and june 2022
C. BURBAN, S. CHARRIER, mai 2023

2. A production of workplaces doubly constrained by supply and demand

2.3 Workplaces and practices constrained and dependent on demand

"Mahmoud Diallo: And sometimes, too, the customer may call you "change of address".

Ah!

(...)

In fact, you know how they do it? To pay us less, not to pay Uber more, what do they do? (...) They live a little further away. They look, and they see that if they place the order [with their address], they're going to have to pay us five or seven euros. So they place the order, they put the address right there [next to it], and that way they pay less. When they put the address next to it, they don't say anything! We validate the order and we're on our way. And when we're on our way, they watch us [move around] on the app. Once we've arrived, they call us up: "ah, we made a mistake, the address we put in isn't the right one, so I apologize, I made a mistake. Is it possible for you to give me the order at another address?". So you have to go to the other address. All that!"

3. Labour geography of the working-class in urban centers : a comparative perspective between Nantes and Marseille

- A comparative investigation between two particularly precarious working-class fractions : **platforms meal deliverymen** and **cleaners**.

What are the socio-spatial labour conditions of these two groups that work in urban centers?

- **Urban centers** : where employment is highly concentrated, a reserve of jobs for the working-class. At the same time, the working-classes are being driven out of the heart of large cities.
- A comparative survey between two of France's main and most valued metropolis : **Nantes** and **Marseille**.

What does this disjunction between workplaces and residential housing produce for the working-class in terms of inequalities ?

In contemporary cities, how do employers use space to dispatch and control the workforce ?

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