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# Encountering migrant-driven diversity: producing difference in Singapore

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# **Encountering migrant-driven diversity: producing difference in Singapore**

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## **Abstract**

Migrant arrival cities, many of which are located outside of European and North American contexts, are experiencing urban growth because of migrants coming from an ever heterogeneous array of backgrounds. The management of migrants at both the level of the state and the everyday is also changing as a response to these shifts. How difference has been conceived, regulated and experienced through encounters in everyday spaces of these arrival cities has been well-documented (Amin, 2012; Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2011). Building upon this body of work, this paper examines the co-production of urban space through managerial practices by the state and the diverse users of the space. I analyse how migrant-driven diversity is produced through pastoral discourses of care and control. Drawing upon qualitative data conducted before regulations at City Plaza, in a neighbourhood in the east side of Singapore, I locate the sites of co-production at the level of policy regulation and at the levels of everyday surveillance in shared spaces where branches of the state such as surveillance technologies, explicit rules on signboards, auxiliary police officers and different groups of new arrivals (i.e. “new migrants”) encounter one another regularly on weekends. I demonstrate that this production of difference from various stakeholders reinforces boundaries of civility through encounters, re-producing the desirable/non-desirable migrant. The arrival city is therefore marked by these diffuse generative forces that both subvert and reinforce dominant modes of belonging.

## **Keywords**

Migrants; public space; urban diversification; surveillance; encounters

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## Introduction

Migrant arrival cities, many outside Europe and North America, are experiencing urban growth driven by migrants of ever-more heterogeneous backgrounds. In response, migrant ‘management’ at state and everyday levels is also changing. The process and nature of arrivals are also deeply spatial with variations across cities and sites. Recent research on ‘arrival infrastructures’ in European cities foregrounds the vital importance of civic and social infrastructure in creating conducive conditions for diverse communities to flourish. They argue that the built environment, not just civic voluntary organisations, influences the depth of belonging in cities (Meeus, Arnaut, and Van Heur, 2019). This connects with the existence of weekend migrant enclaves in Singapore, particularly as these are spaces used by new arrivals who are limited in the public spaces they can access in the city. These spaces therefore become sites of possibilities, where migrants can socialise, pause, and renew themselves before re-starting their work week. Through an exploration of arrivals in Singapore, this paper extends this body of work on encounters and urban diversity beyond its primary focus on Europe and North America.

How difference has been conceived, regulated and experienced through encounters in everyday spaces of these arrival cities has been well-documented (Amin, 2012; Hall, 2015; Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2011) but remains incomplete. In this paper, the diversifying arrival city is characterised as one where the margins – which manifest in public spaces – are not always reinforced by the centre. Indeed, I argue that migrants, through their claims to and use of public space, recreate explicit and implicit state rules and norms of conduct that differentiate migrants. In this sense, migrants themselves reinforce their own marginality by reinforcing the centre. Conversely, the centre is thus reproduced at the margins. In the Singaporean case, weekend migrant enclaves are important spaces used by new arrivals who often marginalised in most shared spaces of the city. Enclave spaces therefore become material sites of possibilities, where migrants can socialise, pause, renew themselves before re-starting their work week. In this paper, I am speaking about female domestic workers in Singapore. At the same time, these spaces also become sites of encounters that also function as surveillance, where the “good migrant” is produced by the marking out of the deviant migrant whose behaviour is to be corrected. In these spaces then, low-waged migrants are not invisibilised. Instead, the weekend enclave is a site of quite intense visibility through

encounters not only with surveillance technology and actors of state agencies such as the police but also by other migrants in the community.

Drawing upon qualitative data conducted before Covid-19 regulations at City Plaza, in a neighbourhood in the east side of Singapore, I locate the sites of co-production at the level of policy regulation and at the levels of everyday surveillance in shared spaces where branches of the state such as surveillance technologies, explicit rules on signboards, auxiliary police officers and different groups of new arrivals (i.e., “new migrants”) encounter one another regularly on weekends. Different groups of new arrivals who use the open spaces at City Plaza are predominantly low-waged Indonesian female domestic workers and Indonesian male migrants who work on ships that dock in Singapore for a few days as well as Bangladeshi male migrants, who participate in social and economic activities which they can access. In sharing these spaces during pre-Covid19 times, these groups also engage in surveillance, recreating explicit and implicit rules of coexisting with one another as low-waged migrants in the arrival city. In so doing, I demonstrate that this production of difference from various stakeholders reinforces boundaries of civility (Ye, 2016) and consequently, produces difference through the desirable/non-desirable raced, gendered, classed and migrant body. Arrival at the margins is therefore marked by these diffuse, generative forces that both subvert and reinforce dominant modes of demonstrating belonging. This heterogeneity points to expansive and ambiguous ways which margins are engendered within the arrival city, challenging the often state-centric, dominant-group centred views of structuring diversity management. Migrants, through their encounters and use of public space, recreate explicit and implicit state rules and norms of conduct that differentiates migrants. In this sense, migrants themselves reproduce their own marginality by reinforcing the narratives of borderings from the centre, by also surveilling one another. Norms are reproduced at the margins through encounters with actors of state agencies, surveillance technology and fellow migrants. This also reinforces what Haggerty and Gazso’s point made in 2005 that surveillance is not centralised, but rather, is characterised by “*simultaneous processes of decentralization and centralization*” (page 174).

### **Differential inclusion in Singapore**

Migrant arrival in Singapore is historically marked by processes that are different and that differentiate. Indeed, as a post-colonial city-state, Singapore has always had to deal with

difference. During colonial times, race was the predominant mode of sorting difference as migrants arrived from Southern China, India, and various parts of the Malay Archipelago (Yeoh, 1996). There is, thus, a long-standing institutionalisation of multiracialism in Singapore (Lai, 1995). The post-independence government carried forward the multiracial framework of the “Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other” (CMIO) that still forms its basis of multiculturalism. Thus, while more recent European and British writings on diversity shine light on the potentials and problems of learning to live with difference on this side of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Singapore, like many Asian port cities, has, historically, already been developing ways to organise and manage diversity (Furnivall, 1948). There is, hence, a wider, older mode of diversity management that have been foundational to the formation of present-day communities in Southeast Asia (Goh et al., 2009; Lai et al., 2013).

The number of new arrivals today remains steadily growing. Unlike migration to Western European and North American contexts, migrants to Asian cities are primarily labour migrants, most of whom are administered as transient bodies (Asis and Piper, 2008). It is within this regional context that we situate migration patterns to Singapore today. Foreigners currently make up 33% of the total workforce in Singapore, numbering 1,427,500 in total in December 2019<sup>1</sup>. The majority of this growth continues to come from low-waged male and female transient migrants<sup>2</sup>, with growing numbers of high-status economic migrants, transnational marriage migrants, and university students. Inclusion into Singapore is differentiated by skill status and income, and is institutionalised by the issuance of a range of work passes, permits, and social visit passes, which determine economic migrants’ access to rights and entitlements. The uneven incorporation of foreigners is highly monitored by state agencies and restructured according to perceived needs of the economy. It is through these varied passes and criteria that various non-citizen-subjects in Singapore are multiplied and categorically reproduced. In this sense, the arrival city reorganises labour by multiplying the varied statuses of migrants. The margins of migration are therefore being reproduced as well. This reproduction of margins in the city are being reproduced by both formal and informal mechanism. While formal, state-driven multiplications generate politics of exclusion and inclusion, informal mechanisms through social codes and implicit rules enforced by migrants themselves also reproduce marginalisation as well. Set within the context of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>, date accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.population.sg/articles/population-in-brief-2019-what-do-you-need-to-know>, date accessed 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Singapore's diversification, differential inclusion here explains the application of governing practices that multiply and order, rather than nullify, belonging through diversity management. In this paper, diversity management is not only reinforced by the state, but by highly managed and marginalised groups themselves. The effect of this form of diversity management is the simultaneous inscription of both the centre and the margins. Arrivals at the margins is thus characterised by a diffusion of differential inclusion which is carried out by both state agencies and actors, as well as marginalised groups themselves.

### **Encountering new diversity in the arrival city**

Like Singapore, many other diversifying cities are experiencing encounters amongst people of different backgrounds. As new diversities arising from migration continue to both enrich and complicate the dynamics of urban community, there has been a renewed interest in the potential of the intercultural encounter for greater inclusivity. Indeed, the keen awareness of growing social diversity arising from migration in the contemporary global city has prompted a range of interest in coexistence, urban citizenship, and contact across difference and within a context of (super)diversification (Seidman, 2012; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002; Philips, 2015; Vertovec 2007). In describing the diversification processes in the global city, Sandbrook (2006) used the metaphor of the "mongrel city" to characterise "an emerging condition in which difference, otherness, multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity and plurality prevail", while Amin and Graham (1997) coined the term "the multiplex city" to describe the contemporary urban as "the co-presence of multiple spaces, times and networks of relations, tying local sites, subjects and fragments into globalizing networks of economic, social and cultural change". In cities that are thoroughly hybrid and which are sites of diverse stranger gatherings, it becomes all the more important for the politics of the impersonal where there is a respect for distance amongst strangers and where the sociality of the "familiar stranger" is a key part of the indifference to difference (Amin, 2012; Ye, 2015).

Geographical scholarship on the social and cultural texture of globalising cities has revealed a proliferating range of "contact zones" shaped by local-transnational encounters, which hinge on a number of registers including nationality, race, religion, language, class, legal status, gender, and sexuality (Binnie et al., 2006; Jarvis, Kantor, and Cloke, 2009; Lai, Collins, and Yeoh, 2013; Vertovec, 2015). A growing stream of research celebrates convivial coexistence through fleeting encounters. By fleeting, this refers to the casual, the

spontaneous, the not formalised (Brown, 2008; Halvorsen, 2015; Horgan, 2017; Wilson, 2016). These short-lived encounters in public spaces are important, given that the majority of our encounters with diversity occur within these situations (Lofland, 1998). By engaging the sharing of space through the ephemeral, space, in this body of work, is imagined as open and ever in genesis. I have found that this spatial genesis can be deeply fraught with the politics of differential inclusion (Ye, 2017; 2019). This politics may not simply be formalised through state-driven measures but also is reproduced through informal encounters between migrants themselves. The reproduction of margins is therefore embedded within the sharing of space by marginalised groups as well.

Koch and Latham's (2011) ethnographic observations of the Prince of Wales Junction in West London further show the forms of sociality and togetherness through actions that "domesticate" public spaces. Crawford's (1999) garage sales on the front lawns in Los Angeles are another example of such shared places, mixing people up and representing a space of co-mingling. In her book, *City Publics: The (Dis)enchantments of Urban Encounters*, Watson (2006) proposes the notion of 'rubbing along' as a form of transient encounters between social subjects where recognition of different others through a glance or gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or private realm. In writing about the transformative potential of the market, Watson goes on to argue that a minimal level of encounter that comes through inhabiting the same space as those who are different from oneself, such as markets, can have the "potential to play a part in challenging racist discourses and stereotypes of unknown others. This is not the Habermasian notion of public space as a site for rational debate and communication; rather, it is the space of pedestrian rhetoric..., of weaving complexity and difference into the texture of mundane everyday life" (2009: 1582).

Public space, therefore, becomes a messy, chaotic site that is part of the fabric of daily urban life. Similarly, Wise and Velayutham (2014) also demonstrate that the enactment of caring for others in everyday spaces contributes to the buzz of the place. Very little antagonism or hostility to different others was expressed in these shared spaces, reinforcing their importance in challenging the fear of unknown others. In their study of urban green spaces, Neal et al. (2015: 475) show how public parks are not only sites for the "being together" of multicultural strangers but formative in the "bringing together" of these diverse

populations. This forms the active basis of “high affectivity” and “inclusive sociality” in particular towards marginalised groups, such as traders and shoppers with disabilities, and newcomers from other parts of Europe and Australia (Hiebert et al., 2015; Neal et al., 2013; Watson, 2009; Wise and Velayutham, 2014).

This body of work provides crucial insight into the transformative potentials of micro-encounters within diversifying settings. Yet, there is also a nascent body of work that addresses the structural context in which these encounters occur. This is the second significant strand of contemporary literature on encounters and urban diversity, which underlines that monitoring measures are limited in bridging differences and providing feelings of safety and comfort in shared spaces (Amin, 2012; Fincher and Iveson, 2008). Space, in this understanding of diversity, is much more ambivalent. This strand of work that takes structure into consideration highlights that pre-existing social and spatial inequality can heighten intolerance, setting the stage for discriminatory treatment in everyday spaces (Matejskova and Leitner, 2011). Physical proximity of diverse populations in spaces such as buses, parks, and public squares also has the potential to generate hostility as much as conviviality. Nayak’s (2017) work on British Bangladeshi young women demonstrates that routine interactions are negotiated through topographies of power and inequality. In exposing the racist violence that unfolds in mundane British mobilities and spaces, Nayak (ibid.) reminds us of the tension and rupture, which point to the inequalities that are compounded through encounters. Exploring diversity in Australian cities, Fincher and Iveson (2008: 211) note that planning for encounters is more likely to be successful if it involves a “light touch,” rather than the micromanagement of individuals.

There is, however, nothing predetermined about public space (Ruddick, 1996). Indeed, as Doreen Massey (2005) reminds us, public space is itself produced through its daily negotiations and struggles. *Genuine* public space is neither romantic nor empty but is instead, embedded with heterogeneity and *made* through relational and conflicting social identities and social relations (ibid.). The enforcement of “oughtness” is reproduced from the margins as well. In this case, from state actors and agencies, as well as amongst migrant users of public spaces. The margins are, therefore, variegated spaces, encapsulating the messiness of urban dwelling, where processes of exclusion and inclusion coexist. The margins are where difference is both emphasised and downplayed.

There is, thus, a form of “bounding” of centre and margins where the two are inherently tied to each other through their ongoing co-production. This form of bounding also makes reference to Robinson’s (2006) conceptualisation of the “ordinary city” which rejects the categories of economic hierarchy in a global order, and with this rejection, the relegation of seemingly less prominent or less valuable cities and citizens. Indeed, there are diverse urbanisms taking place, highlighting the day-to-day messiness of city-making. It is this messiness that also characterises the de-centred arrival city where a whole range of encounters, socio-cultural bonds, ways of governance, regulation, and surveillance can coexist amongst the convivial and the hostile. As Landau and Freemantle’s (2016) work in informal settlements in peri-urban Kenya and South Africa reminds us, a functional form of togetherness in such ordinary urban settings can require little sense of shared identity or enduring bonds. Urban conviviality in Rongai and Katlehong is rooted in a usufruct, utilitarian extraction, that is, people interact on a daily basis through a “largely instrumental ethics: oriented towards accessing and extracting the “fruits” of urban space while simultaneously ... enacting life elsewhere (ibid.: 933). Much of this is a response to the informal ways in which people arrive in these two peri-urban neighbourhoods and also, in response to the absence of coherent state interventions (ibid.). In Singapore, state interventions are not only present but also broadly accepted by long-time residents and new migrants as legitimate. Nevertheless, the centre is diffused to the extent that it is the marginalised new arrivals who reproduce difference in shared spaces. Furthermore, marginalisation here is not understood through social exclusion or expulsion (Sassen, 2014). But rather, is constituted through differential inclusion, where conditions of inclusion are reinforced by a host of various stakeholders, including marginalised communities themselves.

### **Spatialising low-waged migrant arrivals**

While it is true that there is social and economic segregation of especially low-waged labour migrants from other urban dwellers in Singapore, the reasons for diversification and sheer density of the city-state also mean that there are increasingly diffuse geographies of these workers. Differentiation is, hence, a politico-spatial practice even during pre-pandemic times. Migrant-driven diversity is changing the public and private spaces in the arrival city. This diversity is organised and negotiated at the city level, in workplaces, public spaces, and at the household level (Lai et al., 2013). There is a growing range of low-waged labour migrants to Singapore who are on the work permit system, living and working in private and public

spaces of Singaporean life. These are predominantly migrants from the region on two-year permits that are subject to renewal, depending on the employer. Being on the work permit, these migrants have little to no access to citizenship, and they are not allowed to bring their dependants and spouses to Singapore (Yeoh, 2006). The majority of new arrivals to Singapore, like in many other Asian cities, are not meant to be integrated or naturalised the way they might be in Western Europe or North America. Arrival is thus characterised by transience. Women on this permit are mainly from Malaysia, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand, working in a range of low-service sector work such as nail and hair salons, factory floors, food and beverage, and janitorial services. There are currently also about 1,000 licensed migrant female sex workers in Singapore (personal interview with *Project X*<sup>3</sup>). There are about 261,800<sup>4</sup> migrant women in paid domestic work as live-in maids whose numbers have been steadily increasing in the last 5 years, given the low birth rates and aging population. Similar to domestic workers in Hong Kong (Constable, 1997), arrival spaces for these new, differently included female labour migrants are therefore also within the private spaces of Singaporean life.

The majority of men on the work permit are from Bangladesh, Mainland China, and India, and are employed in construction and shipyard work. Employment of foreigners are regulated through the framework of “traditional/non-traditional source countries” by the Ministry of Manpower<sup>5</sup>. About 200,000 of these men live in large-scale purpose-built, privately operated, and highly securitised dormitories<sup>6</sup> that are located around the periphery of the country. These dormitories are often equipped with amenities such as communal kitchens, laundry and bathrooms, supermarkets, barber shops, basketball courts, gymnasiums, and automated teller machines (Ye, 2013). 12 to 20 men share a bedroom. There is close-circuit television surveillance throughout the dormitory while entryways are regulated by security guards and digitised resident cards. To live in these spaces is also to live apart from other Singaporean residents. Nonetheless, there remains a substantial number of workers who live in factory and school-converted dormitories and Housing Development Board (HDB)

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<sup>3</sup> *Project X* is a Singapore-based NGO that serves trans and cisgender sex workers.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>, date accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/sector-specific-rules/construction-sector-requirements>, date accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/coronavirus-covid-19-foreign-workers-big-read-dormitories-12718880>, date accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020

flats amongst Singaporean residents<sup>7</sup>. This mode of living is part of their work conditions that locals reject. Similar to other urban Southeast Asian areas such as Batam and Bangkok, dormitories become calculated spatial forms of differentiated migrant incorporation, which discipline labour and stratify inclusion in everyday life (Kelly, 2003; Rigg, 2016). Their acceptance of particular wages, work and living conditions forms part of the inequalities that resonate with labour migrants globally as well (Anderson, 2010; May et al., 2006; Collins and Bayliss, 2020). Their marginal experience is premised upon differential inclusion where, their positions are, as Espiritu argues, “deemed integral to the nation’s economy, culture, identity and power – but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing” (2003: 47). In this sense, there is an ambiguity to migrant positionality in the city where they are at once central yet marginal.

This ambiguity is also embedded within spaces in the city. Indeed, aside from residential spaces, the intricacies of migrant geographies are also reflected in their use of the city’s public spaces for leisure. Public spaces remain sites where both long-time residents of multicultural make up must coexist and interact with newcomers in highly prosaic and constantly evolving ways (Lofland, 1998). Part of the spatial manifestations of these changes is the emergence of migrant enclaves. Traditionally, the literature on migrant enclaves has privileged permanent migrants who settle in their receiving society. While this may be pertinent in European and North American cities, migrant enclaves in Asian cities are necessarily shaped by migration pathways that are characterised by transience (see for e.g., Muniandy, 2015). Yeoh and Huang (1988) discussed how Filipina workers subverted the use of public spaces in Orchard Road on weekends. Geylang, a neighbourhood in the East of Singapore that for a long time was designated by the state as a “vice zone” (where sex work could legally operate), is also changing as new Mainland Chinese migrants move in. Little India has, since colonial days, been seen as a site for the South Asian community. More recently, new arrivals from Bangladesh and India have transformed it to a popular weekend migrant enclave where restaurants, money remittance services, and retail shops cater to this population. The Paya Lebar area, popular with Indonesian domestic workers discussed in this paper, is another example of such an enclave that is marked by permanent temporariness.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/coronavirus-covid-19-foreign-workers-big-read-dormitories-12718880>, date accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Housing Development Board flats are state-subsidised housing.

Aside from these more obvious migrant enclaves, low-waged new arrivals are also using public spaces at times that other Singaporean residents do not. I have written elsewhere about the use of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations as weekend socialising spaces for Bangladeshi male migrants (Ye, 2015). It has been argued that physical spaces like parks are essential for the development of supportive social networks that facilitate belonging amongst marginalised migrants in the receiving society. Rishbeth and Rogaly (2018: 284) point out that for those excluded in the city, ‘such as those marginalised by unemployment, ill-health, loneliness, overcrowded housing and/or racisms’, accessible outdoor spaces can foster atmospheres of recovery – bringing respite and hope. The authors further point out that through the routinised negotiations of claiming and sharing space, diverse users of space can become more comfortable with difference (Rishbeth and Rogaly, 2018). In multicultural Singapore, Wise and Velayutham’s (2014) work has shown that living in close proximity in high density public housing means that there is intensive use and sharing of spaces such as corridors, parks, and playgrounds. This form of unspectacular coexisting produces possibilities for mundane intercultural habituation. These spaces of encounter are, however, cut through by “migrant status where the racialised embodiment of temporary migrants marks them out as non-citizens with only a tentative and provisional entitlement to inhabit public space”, in turn reducing the possibilities of encounters with local citizens (Aquino et al., 2020: 4).

### **Producing difference through the migrant moral risk**

Indeed, low-waged migrants’ claims to space are not uncontested and have been increasingly securitised upon assumptions of their morality. The making of the arrival city is, as suggested by Collins (2012), produced through the intersections of transnational mobilities of migrants and local constraints of these migrants. Cresswell (2005) explains that moral geographies are social codes that regulate which people, things, and practices belong in which spaces, places, and landscapes, positing that the examination of moral geographies highlights the often taken-for-granted relationships between geographical orderings and notions about what is just and ideal (2005). This production of place through moralising emerged in Yeoh and Huang’s piece, where they studied how the weekend enclave of Lucky Plaza that is popular with migrants from the Philippines is seen as filthy, crowded, and rife with sexual immorality and violence (1998). In 2008, Singaporean residents of the upper middle-class neighbourhood of Serangoon Gardens protested the conversion of an old school campus to a migrant worker

dormitory. Other than fearing decreasing property prices, many argued that migrants would pose immoral and security threats to residents. To appease these residents, the state built a fence and included recreational facilities within the dormitory compound. The dormitory also switched plans from housing South Asian male migrants to housing Malaysian and Mainland Chinese migrants<sup>8</sup>. Following the Little India Riot in late 2013, all public areas in Little India are now liquor-free zones, with heightened police patrols and CCTV surveillance<sup>9</sup>. The Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar, the new town in which Little India lies, said in 2016<sup>10</sup>:

Pre-riot crowds have returned to Little India. Congregations of such high density are walking time-bombs and public disorder incidents waiting to happen. It is important that we do not take our eyes off this matter lest we want history to repeat itself.

While she apologised later on for these comments, steps were taken by state agencies to ring fence common areas such as playgrounds and void decks of the neighbourhood's HDB flats. Early in April 2020, a former cabinet minister also apologised for his comment that "it takes a virus to empty the space", referring to the open green spaces in the new town of Kallang<sup>11</sup>. These encounters in some cases, or fear of potential encounters in others, highlight the "red line of toleration" as Povinelli argues (2011: 93). As Doreen Massey reminds us, the spatiality of diverse public places is not only formed through a "myriad of quotidian negotiation and contestation" but further, "through the *practicing* of place, negotiation is forced upon us" (2005: 154). The securitisation and policing of public spaces frequented by low-waged migrants are normalised through the state-driven gaze that produces migrants as unsavoury or criminal (Round and Kuznetsova, 2016; De Genova and Roy, 2020). These examples demonstrate that these are urban dwellers with constrained mobilities. As I have argued elsewhere (Ye, 2017), the management of migrants exceeds the state and is also carried out in quotidian ways in shared spaces. It is these pre-pandemic forms of spatial cleansing and ordering that normalise the low-waged migrant as a risky body in need of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20080906-86231.html>, date accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/little-india-riot-government-accepts-all-8-recommendations-from-the-coi-0>, date accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/mp-denise-phua-apologises-describing-large-crowds-little-india-walking-time-bombs>, date accessed 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/yaacob-ibrahim-apologises-facebook-remark-foreign-workers-gathering-near-kallang-mrt>, date accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020

disciplining. Rather than sharing of space as necessarily indicative of urban conviviality and shared bonds, there are boundaries, selections, and enclosures embedded within public spaces (ibid.). The limits of coexistence are both implicit and explicit. Aside from explicit rules and regulations enforcing what should and should not be done in public, there are also everyday, tacit rules of conduct which new arrivals must adopt to be considered a good migrant (Ye, 2017; 2018).

The moral order in public, and consequently, the moral migrant is thus distilled through these sanctioned, taken for granted socio-cultural codes of conduct. The effect of such codes is the formation of the moralised subject. Subjectivities, including migrant subjectivities, are produced through these historical and ideological articulations of space (Hoekstra, 2019). There are constant tensions, struggles, and disquiet over how things *ought to be* in such spaces, revealing dynamics – norms, acceptable and legitimate codes of conduct – that shape the nature of specific diverse, shared spaces. These spatial orderings of urban diversity hierarchise in place to which people are subject. Space is hence *productive* of differences, rather than merely a reflection of them. This is a critical point to an appreciation of the spatial power and the subject-forming potential of such experiences (Clayton, 2009). Coexistence in a diverse city in this sense is marked *relationally* by broader structural inequalities, spatial subversion and selective incorporation (Elwood et al., 2016). Thinking about coexistence as relational, rather than an entity, allows us to think about the nature of coexistence. Furthermore, migrant-driven diversification is highly differential when we recognise that other groups of migrants such as high-income migrants and marriage migrants are not monitored the same way as low-waged migrants.

### **Making migrant public space in Paya Lebar**

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted before Covid-19. This meant that migrants could still socialise in groups on their days off of work. Aside from participant observation, I also conducted interviews with migrants in person, on-site. I often walked around or sat on the grass with my research assistant as well as a key migrant respondent. It was the company of my key respondents that signalled to other migrants that I am neither police nor a patrolling civil servant. The site of study for this paper is in Paya Lebar, in the eastern part of Singapore. City Plaza is one of the main shopping malls in the area. It was once a mall for Singaporeans with goods and services catering to their

tastes and demands in the 1970s<sup>12</sup>. It is now a retail space predominantly for low-waged Indonesian female domestic workers, with shops relevant to their needs, selling items at prices that they can access. There is a wide range of shops selling Indonesian dishes and groceries, remittance services, phone cards, tour agencies and clothing. Staff in these shops are mainly Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese men and women. There are Mainland Chinese women employed in nail salons and shops selling bathroom products. City Plaza is quiet on weekdays, aside from a lunch crowd from the surrounding offices that make their way to the different food courts in the mall that sell inexpensive dishes. It is on Sundays that the mall is abuzz with Indonesian women shopping and remitting funds.



Figure 1: Migrants sitting outside of City Plaza, using railings and trees as part of the furniture. Photo taken by author.

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<sup>12</sup> See the City Plaza web site, <https://www.cityplaza.sg/>



Figure 2: Migrants under the MRT (subway) tracks near Paya Lebar. Photo taken by author

The ways in which migrants claim and use spaces here are informal, yet, routinised and unspectacular. These claims can also be marked by what Bayat (2010) frame as active and passive use of space, where the former refers to using space in ways that are prohibited by authorities such as informal vending. They socialise along the covered walkways, open grass patches and corridors surrounding City Plaza (see Figure 1) as well as under the tracks of the nearby Paya Lebar MRT station (see Figure 2). These sites would be busy with migrants from across the Indonesian Archipelago moving, sitting and standing in clusters. Mixing here is expressed in “material, structural and spatial dimensions” and in aggregate, is integral to the practices of re-making the city (Wise and Velayutham, 2014: 408; Hall, 2015). Sitting on plastic sheets that they bring, they socialise over picnics, Face-Time with family and friends back in Indonesia, play musical instruments, sing into portable microphones, and sell *nasi* and *bakso* for SGD\$5.00 a bowl. These informal vending of food is very public and highly visible. Groups sometimes merge in fleeting ways. Migrants may recognise a friend while walking past a group and may stop to chat. Migrants who regularly visit Paya Lebar on Sundays at the same time may recognise one another over time. Bantering between groups is common, as are non-verbal interactions through waves, nods of heads, and sidelong

glances. Aside from Indonesian women, there are also Bangladeshi men outside City Plaza. These men are either waiting for their dates or hoping to meet a romantic potential they had earlier encountered over social media such as Facebook. While not surveillance per se, these men often keenly observe the movements of the women there out of romantic interest. I have also observed older Chinese men sitting here with young Indonesian women. My respondent, Fitri, explains:

*These uncles are boyfriends. Actually sometimes better to have uncles than (young Bangladeshi) guys. Uncles only want to hug and kiss and talk, no need to go hotel but will give money. But these young guys always want to go hotel.*

Migrants here are often dressed up for their one day off a week. Many women are in *hijabs*, although some are also dressed quite sassily in cut-off shorts, fishnets, and off-shoulder blouses. As one migrant told me, “this is our one day off. When we come here, we want our minds to be free and we want to wear what we want”. Dressing up in ways that may appear inappropriate during their work day is one way in which migrants mark their leisure time at Paya Lebar. There are also migrants who present as non-binary, embodying more masculine selves. This diversity of gender expressions has been noted by Aquino et al. (2020) in their study of informal leisure practices by migrants in Kallang, a neighbourhood located in the Eastern part of Singapore. There is an informal economy adding to the bustle of this space in Paya Lebar. Migrants sometimes engage in online buying and selling of clothes and food. Indonesian sellers and customers meet in these public spaces near the MRT station to try out items for size or to hand over money for the purchase. There are occasional Bangladeshi men, winding their way through the groups of people, selling electronics such as mobile phone cables, portable chargers, and earphones.

Space here is also reconfigured through its ingenious usage. Trees and shrubbery become part of the furniture of these grassy spaces. Aside from using their shade, migrants hang bags of food from tree branches to keep them off the ground. Couples sometimes sit behind low bushes for some privacy. Groups of friends lay down to nap on their picnic sheets under the canopies. Aboveground tree roots are used to secure bottles of dipping sauce and plastic bags so they are not blown over by the breeze. Benches and even the metal cages of CCTV technology are used as additional table and shelf space for

migrants to rest their cups and bowls. Walls, pillars supporting the MRT tracks above, railings, fences, and tree trunks are used as back rests. It is easy to figure out which spots on the open spaces are especially popular with migrants – the grass no longer grows. Bahasa Indonesia is widely spoken and sung – there is always music from speakers the migrants bring. By about 3 or 4pm, there will be spontaneous dancing by some migrant women, moving to the music. Some migrants, both men and women, who are sitting around them will watch, while the dancers sometimes move in unbridled ways, orienting their bodies outwards, keenly aware that there is an audience. Amin and Graham (1997) have argued that effectively designed urban spaces promote the sharing of space, animating our cities and allowing social life to flourish for different social groups. In thinking about the arrival city from here, it is clear that enclaves for transient migrant workers such as Paya Lebar is an important site of sociality. The entire mood of the place is, for the most part, convivial, although I have seen fights breaking out between groups of female migrants. These were quickly resolved by other migrants stepping in to break up the fight. After the fight, onlookers went back to their activities with their friends. Paya Lebar is where, as an Indonesian migrant respondent told me:

*Indonesians will come on Sunday, even if in the morning they go to Botanic Gardens to take photos or Kallang to play volleyball first. They will still come to Paya Lebar after. Also the bakso (sold) here is the best. It is Indonesian taste. Other places in Singapore don't have...*

While these forms of claiming space is a routinised way in which low-waged migrants re-immense themselves in “their familiar culture”, it is also a form of reproducing themselves to be living amongst strangers for the rest of the week.

### **Pastoralizing migrant surveillance through civil encounters**

Perhaps because this is a low-waged migrant enclave, surveillance is extensive here. There are frequent patrols by the auxiliary police<sup>13</sup>, officers from the National Environment Agency (NEA) and many CCTVs located throughout this enclave. Enclaves are, therefore, not just

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<sup>13</sup> In Singapore, the auxiliary police are security officers that are under the auspices of the Police Force Act and are licensed to carry fire arms.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190704105616/http://policehumanrightsresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Police-Force-Act-Singapore-2004.pdf>, date accessed 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021

places where minority communities can flourish as sites of migrant entrepreneurship (Portes and Sassen-Koob, 1987; Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). Migrant enclaves can also be places where marginality is enforced through the intertwined relationship of sociality as heightened *and diffused* surveillance. There has been much written about the surveillance and policing of low-waged arrivals in the city. The Singaporean NGO, Transient Workers Count Too, has reported how much more often low-waged migrants are caught and fined<sup>14</sup>. Kitiarsa (2014) wrote about how Thai migrants to Singapore have faced economic and judicial challenges. Loong's (2018) account of how Bangladeshi migrants struggle against state-driven scripts of insecurity in Singapore's Little India demonstrates how these crucial labouring bodies are never fully belonging. This branch of work contributes to wider global studies of the migrant-security nexus (Huysman, 2011; Topak, 2014; Müller, 2011; Noxolo, 2014).

In much of this work, the “vulnerability of migrants and the unbalanced nature of encounters between migrants and the state highlights how state power manifests at an everyday level, suggesting that insecurity is not unique to migrants without documents, but is present in all encounters between migrants and the state” (Innes, 2021). I would argue, however, that surveillance is not one directional. As much as it can be produced through the everyday through the police, border patrol, and a host of surveillance technologies, surveillance can also be reproduced by migrants themselves. Surveillance can take on the pastoral role of care amongst migrant communities through banal encounters. These forms of surveillance are pastoral in that through the enforcement of compliance, migrants are also protecting one another from further state action. In this sense, it is through surveillance practices in migrant enclaves where the centre is being reproduced at the margins.

The migrants I interviewed do not view their encounters with state and private enforces as oppressive. Even though they are using space not meant for them, they view surveillance technology and encounters with police as “very good also for the police to help. Sometimes people fighting, easy to just get police to come or check CCTV” (Intan<sup>15</sup>, Indonesian domestic worker, 11 years in Singapore). Another migrant shared with me that “as long as I don't do anything wrong here, I have nothing to worry”. This sense of safe visibility, of being legible to police surveillance, speaks more broadly to

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<sup>14</sup> <http://twc2.org.sg/2015/06/20/caught-spitting-and-a-life-may-be-ruined/>, date accessed 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021

<sup>15</sup> All names have been changed to protect their identity.

their legitimate belonging to these Singaporean spaces. Being at ease with surveillance reinforces their differential inclusion that is, at once, legitimate and marginal.

Another migrant I spoke to manages the space by co-opting the official line to “follow the rules because this one Singapore law” (Nur, Indonesian domestic worker, 9 years in Singapore). Another migrant who spoke to me shared that “Singapore law, migrant worker(s) must follow. Otherwise, very hard for us”. These are sentiments I often heard that, more strategically, “teach” other migrants how to behave so that they can continue using the space. Misbehaviours, such as playing music too loudly, will be chastised by a fellow migrant and the offender will be asked not to repeat this behaviour if they wish to continue being in the space with their friends. This demonstrates how the micropolitics of everyday coexistence is organised through the intertwined processes of judgement and continuous re-enactment of appropriate conduct (Ye, 2016). These migrant spatial practices hence manage co-migrants *and* spaces by renegotiating *and* reinforcing borders with these public spaces. The pastoralisation of new arrivals also emerges through encounters within the migrant community. It is this “village-level surveillance” that enforces obligations of using this space (McKay, 2020: 323). Through the enforcement of obligations, migrants are managing the space by managing one another in the community. Using this space legibly is, therefore, to be open to forms of surveillance that are not necessarily state-enforced. Instead, there is an education to how to use space taught by other migrants.

Using this space legitimately is also conditional upon certain lines of civility. There is situating of difference enforced by other migrant users through “tacit rules of interaction” in everyday spaces, which establishes dominant orderings of who is behaving and who is not. It is the “calculated processes of inclusion” that relies upon the “rituals of everyday contact with diverse others” to normalise a form of “selective incorporation where acceptance is dependent upon people learning and subscribing to established norms and values” (Ye, 2019: 487–489). There is, hence, an order to legitimately and informally claim this space. In recreating this ordering, migrants are themselves reinscribing their own marginality. Furthermore, this ordering is vital to the reproduction of margins *and the centre simultaneously*. It is these “small acts of cunning” that are short of confrontational and enable the routine use of this space by migrants (Foucault, 1991: 139). As much as these shared spaces are sites of possibilities as mentioned early on in the paper, there is an instrumental dimension to such pastoral forms of surveillance. They allow migrants to continue using

these spaces for their purposes. Recognising the profound ways in which civility shapes space through its quiet yet pervasive ways enables us to think through how seemingly banal everyday encounters within the migrant community can also regulate and monitor. It is important to situate these organising principles embedded in the everyday through broader structural contours as this allows us to interpret the diversifying nature of public space more broadly (Ye, 2016). The “proper” use of space is not only filtered through the level of the state but further, is often implicit and finely regulated in tacit ways that are interwoven with sociality in urban public spaces.

## **Conclusion**

Processes of arrival are as spatial as they are ordinary. While expectations of proper behaviour have long been imposed on urban inhabitants, these expectations are increasingly extended to and reproduced by new arrivals. This story of coexistence in Singapore and, more specifically, Paya Lebar, demonstrates how public spaces and diversity are constituted through processes of ongoing conflict and negotiation. It is also clear that differential inclusion continues to play a key part here where migrants who misstep, such as playing music too loudly, might be called out, corrected, and reminded of the stakes of using the space. This is also to say that there are boundaries reproduced through tacit rules of civility that mark offenders while simultaneously protecting members of the community from the monitoring gaze of the state.

This sense of “oughtness” in how space should be used is not only reproduced by a centrally informed state, or even long-term residents against new arrivals (Ye, 2016). Arrival at the margins is characterised by the reinforcement of boundaries in diffused, pastoralised ways by migrants in their attitudes towards surveillance and one another. In so doing, they are reproducing their own marginality by co-opting rules of engagement through practices of sociality that perpetuate the centre. The enclave is not an exceptional space, nor are migrants exceptional. The slipperiness of surveillance foregrounds the ambiguities of encounters and surveillance in the diversifying city. This illustrates the messiness, the heterogeneity of social reproduction in the arrival city, as driven by migrants’ claims to space.

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