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'Cute face and quiet … but her look don't match her personality': Commodifying flesh, shaping labour expectations and domestic workers' treatment in Singapore

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Abstract

While it is well established that domestic work has long been commodified, this paper builds on existing literature to show how employment agencies use the production of biodata to simultaneously, and strategically, homogenise and differentiate domestic workers in Singapore as racialised commodities. As such, and building on existing literatures on racialisation, bodily commodification, corporeality and domestic labour, this paper develops the concept of 'fleshly commodity' to convey domestic workers' positioning as racialised, captive, fungible and simultaneously homogenised and differentiated corporeal objects. Moreover, this paper will bring attention to the broader implications of the processes by which employment agencies market, fetishize, and then sell domestic workers. It does so by illuminating how recruitment practices shape the labour required/expected of domestic workers, before demonstrating how their living and working conditions and relations are also impacted. Through engagement with ethnographic data, this paper also demonstrates how domestic workers' humanity, personhood and agency continually contest and undo attempts to render them fleshly commodities.

KEYWORDS
biodata, commodification, corporeal, domestic work, flesh, migration

1 | INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth was an employment agent with whom I was in contact throughout the time I was in Singapore. She had supported many of the domestic workers (hereafter, DWs) who were living in the shelter in which I was both volunteering and conducting research, assisting those who were allowed to search for new employers. After walking into her agency one morning, having previously agreed to an interview, I asked Elizabeth if she would mind me recording our conversation. To my surprise, she responded very quickly, almost shouting: 'No you cannot and if you try, I will prosecute you later'. Feeling slightly taken aback by her reaction, I agreed to write down her responses and started to ask some questions. After a few minutes however, Elizabeth abruptly stopped me and declared that she would no longer support the

DWs at the shelter as they were causing 'too much trouble'. She stated that their demands were becoming 'too high', that they had 'too many friends' and that living in the shelter was making them 'too ambitious'. While initially surprised by Elizabeth's tone, I quickly learnt where her frustration was stemming from. Elizabeth explained that she had employed a shelter resident, Ei Phyu Soe, to support and care for her mother. She said that she had originally been helping Ei Phyu Soe to look for another employer, but after a few weeks of having her visit her agency, decided to employ her herself. Describing Ei Phyu Soe, Elizabeth said, 'she was very cute you see, cute face and quiet.' It transpired, however, that Ei Phyu Soe's employment had been short-lived, as 'her look don't match her personality'. Elizabeth added, 'she used her handphone too much ... and wasn't working well ... always answer back and defiant'. Elizabeth was angry that she was now required to pay for Ei Phyu Soe's air-ticket home, as she was terminating her contract.

Elizabeth was not the only employer or employment agent that admitted to me that a DW had been selected because of their appearance, perceived demeanour and/or bodily features/measurements. Rather, DWs in Singapore are regularly marketed, fetishized and sold by agencies who actively produce, construct and utilise these characteristics. This selection tactic was not always (unsurprisingly) successful, however, with DW–employer relations often being strained as a result of what was claimed to be a 'mismatch' between their expectations (employers' and DWs') and the reality of the working/labour relations. As was the case here, Ei Phyu Soe's 'cuteness' did not match her personhood (as Elizabeth experienced it).

Drawing on ethnographic research and cases like Elizabeth and Ei Phyu Soe's, this paper will discuss the ways in which employment agencies recruit, market/fetishize and sell DWs as, what I term, fleshly commodities: as bodies which are portrayed (or perhaps desired) to be without personhood. Specifically, I use fleshly, or flesh, to discuss a body stripped of humanity, as 'the temporal and conceptual precursor to the body' (Weheliye, 2008, p. 71). In using this term, I draw on the work of Spillers (1987), who suggests that the body is associated with those who are liberated, where the flesh is tied to captive subject-positions. Beyond the dehumanisation these processes entail, this paper puts forward fleshly commodification as a concept that captures the processes by which DWs, as labourers, are produced as both homogeneous and differentiated corporeal objects. This conceptual advancement builds on the work of scholars who have engaged with the ideas of racialisation, bodily commodification, corporeality and domestic labour (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Glenn, 1992; Grosz, 1994; Lan, 2006; Maher, 2004; Tadiar, 2004, 2012), as well as those who specifically focus on the roles of labour intermediaries and the experiences of migrant DWs in their host societies (Anderson, 2000; Constable, 2007, 2009; Lan, 2006; Maher, 2004; Pratt, 1997). Additionally, and expanding these bodies of scholarship, this paper also demonstrates the ways in which the specific categorisations of DWs are drawn into the consumer decisions of employers which, in turn, shapes the work expected of them, their living conditions and the relationship they have with their employer.

Significantly, the arguments presented in this paper were informed by ethnographic research in Singapore, which was largely centred in a shelter for DWs who were no longer willing/able, to live with/work for their employers. My initial aims had been to understand if/how DWs created spaces of belonging within their employers' home with the shelter being a site from which I had hoped to develop networks and move beyond. After several months in the field, however, and allowing the residents' experiences, interests and concerns to guide me and my research, rather than the other way round, my research interests and aims transformed. While my research network did eventually move beyond the shelter's walls – to courtrooms, hospitals, employment agencies, employers' homes and even karaoke bars, amongst many other sites – it remained a core focus of mine. With a dual positioning as volunteer and researcher, I ensured that the shelter residents were aware of my (changing) research aims, and only interviewed people who were comfortable sharing their experiences and that I grew to know very well; aware that my positioning might have otherwise made new arrivals feel they had to disclose information to me. As such, recruiting research participants was fairly straightforward, as relationships of trust developed naturally over time. In addition to ethnography, I also adopted arts-based methods, using drawing exercises and some focus group discussions to understand more about the residents' experiences in the homes from which they had left (Antona, 2019). Specifically, I asked residents to draw the homes in which they had been living and working, in any format, and to then talk me through their daily lives within them. Many residents drew simple floor plans or cross sections of these homes, often adding details that were of significance to them, such as the space where they slept and the positioning of CCTV. These exercises often spurred on storytelling and the enactment of events, with residents describing the intricacies of their movements through these spaces, the routines they developed, and particular moments or events that stood out to them. While the drawings themselves are not featured in this paper, the conversations they produced informed it.

This paper's findings are, then, a result of the interviews, arts-based research and informal engagement I had with the shelter's residents; DWs still in employment; the staff/volunteers at the shelter; migrant rights activists; and employment agents. In total, I formally interviewed 45 different DWs (29 of whom were shelter residents), many of whom I interviewed multiple times, as well as eight of the shelter's staff/volunteers, three activists, four employers and six

employment agents. Given that many of the residents had active legal cases in Singapore (at the time of my research and after), there are certain details of their experiences that I have chosen not to write about, to maintain their confidentiality and anonymity. I have also only included the year that my fieldnotes and interviews were conducted in, rather than exact dates, and all the names included in this paper are pseudonyms.

2 | THE COMMODIFICATION AND RACIALISATION OF DOMESTIC LABOUR AND LABOURERS

There is extensive research that engages with processes of racialisation, which can be understood as both political and legal projects of racial categorisation, as well as discursive processes that attribute racial meaning by deploying 'symbols, language, and images to convey group-based stereotypes' (Lan, 2006, p. 16). These practices not only become embedded within societal structures but can result in the erasure of difference and the homogenisation of certain populations (Fanon, 2004). These are processes central to contemporary racial capitalism, with tensions persisting, as Wang (2018, p. 100, emphasis original) argues, 'between those who claim that capitalist processes tend to *homogenize* subjects, and those who hold that capitalism operates through *differentiation*'. Significantly, racial differentiation has been used to produce hierarchies of human and non-human persons (Gilmore, 2002; McKittrick, 2013), naturalising divisions of labour by mapping racialised differences between bodies onto different forms of work (Robinson, 1983). Migration has also always been intimately entwined in this, as it is a means by which people, and thus labour, are deterritorialised, producing further racialised and differentiated strata within labouring classes (Lunn, 2000). As such, Liang (2011, p. 1818) has argued, racialised stereotypes and ideologies of femininity come together to depict migrant women from the global south as 'desirable workers who are docile, cheap, and disciplined'.

Beyond this, there is also expanding literature on the ways in which DWs experience racialisation. Pratt (1997), for instance, explains that white European nannies in Canada could expect a significantly higher salary than those from the Philippines, with a DW's racial categorisation additionally feeding into class differences between employers. Similarly, Bakan and Stasiulis (1995) highlight how the intersection of a DW's race, nationality and religion results in their hierarchisation, impacting both their remuneration and the kind of work that they are likely/able to perform. Bakan and Stasiulis (1995, p. 318) argue that the racialisation of DWs involves the construction of a 'fictive, universal nonwhite, female, noncitizen Other whose biological and ostensibly natural makeup ascribes her as inherently appropriate for private domestic work'. Writing of the US context, both Glenn (1992) and hooks (1990) have explained how the reproductive/caring labour of wealthy white families was most often performed by Black women, both during periods of enslavement and also as paid 'domestics' in the continuum of slavery as racial capitalism. As Glenn writes (1992), white female employers were positioned in opposition to their employees, with their bodies being allowed a degree of freedom from certain forms of 'dirtier' reproductive labour.

With a focus on domestic labour in Taiwan, Lan (2006) suggests that the racialisation of migrant workers occurs in three core ways: through policy/legislation produced by 'receiving' states, during recruitment processes; and during migrant workers' encounters with citizens and employers. She argues that the 'otherisation' that migrants are subjected to is stratified, as white-collar labourers are welcomed into the social fabric, while Southeast Asian manual and domestic workers are subjected to social exclusions. The inferior positioning of migrants from Southeast Asia is, however, (sadly) not surprising, as histories of white supremacy and colonisation in the region have produced the biopolitical stratification of people, based on racialised and gendered intersections and hierarchies, serving to diminish the population's worth (Zhang, 2014). Stoler (1995), for instance, writes of the threat that DWs seemingly posed in colonial Indonesia. Drawing specifically on practices of wet-nursing, Stoler describes the fear that surrounded children being suckled by Javanese women, with their bodies being viewed as oppositional to white women's 'purity' and 'cleanliness'.

The politics surrounding racialised and gendered bodily difference is central to feminist academic enquiry. Moving against essentialism and the idea that bodily difference can be explained as 'natural', much of the early scholarship done by constructionist feminists was, for instance, concerned with demonstrating the ways in which the bodies are discursively produced/constructed; socially, culturally, or otherwise (Colls, 2011; Grosz, 1994). Indeed, writing of corporeality, both Grosz (1994) and Slocum (2008) have argued that both race and gender become material through the body and the ways in which they are differentially impacted by the historical and contemporary relations of power that produce them (Radcliffe, 1999). Moreover, Grosz (1994) asserts that corporeal beings also involve 'an interiority, a self-reflective subjectivity' (Radcliffe, 1999, p. 216). As Slocum (2008, p. 854) explains with relation to corporeality and race:

> Groupings of bodies do things and are 'done to', becoming racialized in the process ... bodies are not only inscribed; they actively participate in the material production of themselves and other bodies. Race takes

> shape out of the physical gathering of bodies in which phenotype matters in its connection to material objects, practices and processes.

Building on the arguments of Grosz (1994) and others, geographers have furthered understandings of corporeality by thinking about how it relates to: medical care/procedures (Davies, 2006); race and racial divisions (Slocum, 2008); embodiment and public health (Evans et al., 2011); consumption (Valentine, 1999); touch/haptic geographies (Bonner-Thompson, 2021); and national identity (Radcliffe, 1999), amongst other subject matters.

More specifically, the corporeality of DWs, and the intimacy of the labour they perform has also been a point of academic, and particularly geographic, interrogation. Yeoh and Huang (2010), for example, argue that the sexualised danger DWs pose is rooted in their physical proximity to/within the home. Beyond this, they also allude to DWs' bodily differences and the fears that can be associated with their racialised distinctions. While the bodies of women from Southeast and South Asia have become associated with domesticity in Singapore, their corporeality remains a point of household and national tension. This is further exemplified by the legislation which enforces six-monthly medical screenings for pregnancy and infectious diseases for the DW population (Yeoh, 2004).

There is extensive scholarship that highlights the ways in which domestic work, as a form of intimate labour, has long been commodified, existing within the market and across international borders (Anderson, 2000; Constable, 2007, 2009; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Lan, 2006; Parreñas, 2001; Schwiter et al., 2018). With this, domestic labour has also been extensively transnationalised, with migrant labourers being essential to contemporary capitalism. There has been distinct scholarship on the ways in which DWs themselves, as bodies and bearers of labour power, have also experienced this process. Some of the most pertinent examples of this lie in the global histories of enslavement and colonisation, and their relationship to the body. Within regimes of slavery, captive bodies, or flesh (Spillers, 1987), were rendered essential commodities that were circulated globally (Jackson, 1999). As Harney and Moten (2013, p. 92) write, modern logistics were:

> Founded with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak ... founded in the Atlantic slave trade ... From the motley crew who followed in the red wakes of the slave ships ... to one-way tickets from the Philippines to the Gulf States or Bangladesh to Singapore, logistics was always the transport of slavery, not 'free' labor.

Both within and outside of systems of slavery, it is widely argued that migrant DWs experience dehumanisation and forms of bodily commodification, both while performing domestic labour and through recruitment processes (Anderson, 2000; Killias, 2018; Tadiar, 2004, 2013). Indeed, there has been some, if more limited, attention given to the role of private organisations (or individuals) in the commodification of DWs. Ho and Ting (2021), for instance, write of the role of employment agents in Myanmar, and how they utilise both formal and informal migration channels/practices. While migrating to work as a DW was technically illegal in Myanmar prior to April 2019, Ho and Ting (2021) argue that informal brokers were able to navigate this, leveraging their knowledge of the migration industry, and their social capital, for financial gain and to maintain a supply of DWs to Singapore. Writing of the 'maid trade' in Southern California, Maher (2004, p. 55) argues that labour brokers treat 'migrant workers as commodities' by using sales/marketing strategies of 'offers' and 'replacements', and writing that 'The profit of this industry rests ... on commodified identity insofar as agencies "sell" particular nationalities of women as brand-name domestics, charging more for nationalities that are locally reputed as superior'. Rather than writing of more clearly defined labour relations, then, much of the scholarship on domestic work either explicitly or implicitly discusses DWs as commodities circulating through global economies. As Tadiar (2004, p. 115) writes, migrant DWs are sold as labour commodities, 'paid not for a specific skill but for their embodiment of a variety of functions and services'. Like other scholars (Pratt et al., 2017), Tadiar (2012, 2013) also engages with the framing of DWs as disposable, with 'receiving' states utilising a 'use-and-discard' approach to migrant labourers (Yeoh, 2006) and demonstrating this to be paradoxical as they remain a population whose labour is fundamental to the reproduction of their host societies.

The ways in which migrant DWs are rendered 'purchasable' entities situates them differently from others performing the same labour. Not only are their bodies valuable as purchasable/exchangeable commodities within global markets, but they become sites of exploitation, extraction and accumulation. While DWs are, therefore, corporeal possessions, or 'neo-slaves' (Ong, 2009), it is important to note that academic writing has also complicated perspectives further. There has been extensive focus on DWs' resistant practices, for instance, and the ways in which they are able to reclaim their humanity despite their unequal societal positioning (Constable, 2007; Pande, 2012). Yeoh and Huang (1998) have written of everyday strategies used by DWs in Singapore, for example, and the ways in which they push the boundaries of what their employers deem 'permissible' activities on their workdays. Indeed, despite acknowledging DWs' propensity to be viewed

as inanimate commodities, Tadiar (2012) also complicates understandings of their agency and life-making/livelihood strategies, writing that 'as devalued, racialized feminine labor', Filipina labour reproduces itself both inside and outside of home, 'through activities of enjoyment' that allow them to engage in their own 'freeing'. Moreover, she argues that these activities/moments corrupt the production of Filipinas as waged DWs.

Rather than being simply definable as disposable 'neo-slaves', then, DWs have numerous and complex societal positionings that are in constant flux. While it is evident that they experience distinct processes of racialisation and commodification that result in their subjugation, what is less apparent is exactly how the racialisation and commodification of DWs shapes their societal positioning and their experiences when working. Building on this scholarship, this paper will now draw on the ways in which recruitment practices use racial and other bodily characteristics strategically, tactfully homogenising and differentiating individual DWs and rendering them corporeal objects and fleshly commodities.

3 | THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES AND PRODUCTION OF BIODATA IN SINGAPORE

The Singaporean state has long utilised the recruitment of migrant DWs to fulfil reproductive labour shortages. Today, DWs in Singapore are required to be migrants from one of 13 'source' countries (MOM, 2021a), although the vast majority migrate from Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar. The fact that this form of labour migration is restricted to certain people is a demonstration of just one of the mechanisms by which bodies – gendered, racialised and 'foreign' – are distributed in a hierarchy which maps directly onto different forms of labour in this context. While this form of migration is necessary for the functioning of Singapore's economy and society, DWs (as migrant 'workers', as opposed to 'professionals') have no right to remain in the country once their employment contracts have terminated. Indeed, the state operates a use-and-discard migratory regime that maintains racial order in the nation, rendering DWs a disposable population (Bal, 2016; Liow, 2011; Yeoh, 2006).

With over 245,000 DWs living and working in Singapore in December 2021 (MOM, 2021b), employment agencies have become key profiteers in the debt-financed migration system that prevails within the nation. As Lindquist (2017, p. 214) writes, these forms of private recruiters 'have been of particular importance in Asian migrations since the colonial era'. While some employers recruit their employees independently, the vast majority use employment agencies to support them through the entire process: from 'sourcing' a DW, to completing the necessary paperwork associated with their migration and managing their journey to Singapore. To maintain a steady supply of DW candidates, nearly all of the agencies that I interacted with either managed additional agencies in migrant 'sending' nations or partnered with other organisations. In both contexts, agencies 'perform a vital role in ... recruiting, screening, training, and placing migrant workers' (Liang, 2011, p. 1815), actively producing DWs through these processes. As Killias (2018, p. 145) writes, 'the process of becoming a "maid" does not take place overnight'. Through these processes, agencies are able to profit from both employee and employer (for detail, see Goh et al., 2016), often charging (or indebting) DWs with their exorbitant fees (Bal, 2016). As important intermediaries within the migration industry, employment agencies, or 'brokers', play a critical role in inscribing 'the text of policy into migrant workers' lives' (Wee et al., 2020a). As Wee et al. (2020a, p. 994) argue, as 'bureaucratic interpreters, employment agents in Singapore translate policy text into tacit advice and private contracts, working within and alongside the interstices of the state to coproduce a governance regime that oversees migrant domestic workers.' Moreover, employment agencies become the stage for 'choreographed' encounters, that is, interactions that are both designed and performed by all of those present (Wee et al., 2020b).

Upon searching for a new employer, whether arriving at an agency in a 'source' country or in Singapore, one of the first things required of a prospective DW is the completion of their 'biodata', a term used to describe a collection of personal and bodily information about each hopeful candidate. Despite it having been argued that this form of representation dehumanises DWs (Killias, 2018), the Singaporean state mandates that agencies provide this, suggesting it can help the employer in making their employee selection (MOM, 2021c). Alongside a photograph, an agency will initially provide prospective employers (and often anyone who searches online) with some variance of a candidate's: name; 'type' (details of which will follow); nationality; date and place of birth; height; weight; religion; marital/familial status; educational attainment; and the airport they would need 'repatriating'/deporting to.

Unlike a CV or tailored job application, the kinds of information provided (such as a DW's height, weight and photograph) and the ways in which it is presented (on a website where you can narrow down your search by ticking boxes to rule in or out certain 'characteristics') are an indication of the processes by which DWs are objectified and differentiated (Liang, 2011). Indeed, Tyner (1999) discusses the production of biodata by agencies, arguing that to remain competitive they produce viable 'products' and cultivate what the buyer demands. Tyner (1999, p. 199) explains that the 'cyber-commodification' of DWs allows employers to purchase more than just the power to command another individual's

labour power, however, but also 'a specially cultivated "image" to match their perceived affluence'. In their research, Wee et al. (2020b, p. 114) found that biodata offered 'categorical and diagrammatic ways of approaching the prefigured encounter with different migrant women as stranger, as other, and as less'.

Despite there being some academic focus on the importance of employment agencies within the migration industry, the ways in which the bodies/flesh of DWs are both racialised and then hierarchised is significant, as it goes on to have wide-ranging impacts thereafter, yet remains under-explored. As I will show in the next section, the categorisations DWs are subjected to through the production of their biodata not only strips them of their humanity (Ong, 2009; Pratt et al., 2017; Tadiar, 2004) but renders DWs fleshly commodities, that is, captive, fungible and strategically homogenised and/or differentiated corporeal objects that can be marketed and sold.

4 | PRODUCING FLESHLY COMMODITIES

After several months in Singapore, I decided to go into an agency independently. While I had interacted with agents on several occasions by this point, I had never been into one asking for formal interviews. Having initially found many agents unwilling to speak to me, after persisting, I found that three key pieces of information seemed to dominate an employer's choice of DW: their nationality, 'type' and bodily appearance.

The cost of a DW was, for the most part, determined by their nationality. Filipina DWs typically commanded the highest salaries, whereas DWs from Myanmar and India received the lowest. Agencies would also have special offers for how many 'replacement' DWs were allowed dependent upon the nationality of the worker being employed. While an employer always maintains the ability to end their contract with their employee at any time, these offers allow employers to substitute DWs with no additional costs, reinforcing the idea that DWs are fungible, forming part of a disposable, surplus population from which value can be extracted (Pratt et al., 2017; Tadiar, 2012, 2013).

National and racial stereotypes were also deployed in several other ways. All the agents I spoke to, without exception, stated that Filipina DWs were seen as the most intelligent group, while DWs from Myanmar were described by agents as being less intelligent, submissive, easier to manipulate and/or requiring more 'managing'. As one agent declared in an interview, 'maids from Myanmar are more obedient and, umm, not very smart *lah* ... they are easier to control and cheaper as well'. Despite Filipinas being viewed as accomplished workers, their 'value' was, ironically, premised against their knowledge of the industry and their potential to make greater demands because of this. Rather, and as a more recent migrant population, DWs from Myanmar were seen to be less likely to know their rights, their 'value' being in their obedience.

Rather than ever explicitly stating that employers held ethno-racial/national preferences or disdain, agents instead spoke of the linguistic capabilities of different populations, and their 'cultural traits'. While English (or other) language abilities are understandably of great importance to employers, it was clear that employment agencies were also using nationality as a marker for racial identity, creating a racialised hierarchy in the process. To complicate these processes further, agencies would distinguish some ethnic differences, but not others. Indian nationals from the state of Mizoram, for instance, were most often advertised as Mizo, rather than Indian, aligning them with DWs from Myanmar and differentiating them from other Indian DWs. As such, agencies select when and which forms of racial/ethnic/national differences they want to use, and which to homogenise.

Agents would also discuss the importance of a DW 'type', with the terms 'fresh', 'ex-Malaysia', 'ex-Singapore' or 'transfer' being used widely. Together, these framings became symbols, representing the intersection of a DW's age, migratory history and their level of independence/malleability:

> I asked the agent about why an employer might want an older or younger DW ... She said, 'as an employer you might feel more comfortable leaving a very young child with an older helper', while younger DWs tended to be 'fresh' which appealed to some employers as: 'with a fresh one you can start from the beginning. They don't come with old habits ... They won't compare other employers with you too, so can be better'.
>
> (extract from my field notes, October 2017)

The term 'fresh' also had clear virginal associations and denoted youthfulness. With the sexualised danger of DWs and their corporeality having been highlighted (Yeoh & Huang, 2010), the ability of employers to 'start from the beginning' and purchase more malleable flesh was suggested by several agencies as being favourable.

One of the starkest ways in which DWs were processed into fleshly commodities was, however, through the fetishizing of their bodily appearance. After asking directly about the need to detail a DWs height and weight, one agent explained how she felt this was an important indication of their ability to perform certain forms of labour:

> If you had a house where you needed things cleaning up high, if you wanted the ceilings cleaning … you would need to know someone's height. And if someone had to care for an elderly person you might need to know their weight and if they were capable of lifting them.
>
> (extract from my fieldnotes, October 2017)

I was told by more than one agent that a DW's height was important because living spaces are generally small in Singapore, and employers may need their DW to sleep in a small space. Worryingly, another agent suggested to me that someone might choose a lighter DW so that they would need to feed them less.

Beyond a DW's height and weight, agents universally agreed that one of the most important selling points was a DW's photograph. Nevertheless, this was also the thing they seemed the most uncomfortable discussing with me. One agent, Mr Goh, addressed this directly, explaining that it was most often a female household member that would choose a DW and that a photograph was essential for them. He stated that they would want an employee who 'appeared clean but that was not threatening to them and their marriage'. More straightforwardly, he said, 'they don't want someone too, umm, too attractive *lah*'.

Maher (2004) (writing of the Californian context) suggests that selecting a DW in an agency is like picking a particular fruit, with all candidates being viewed as 'uniformly subservient'. In Singapore, however, employment agencies utilised practices of homogeneity and differentiation simultaneously, marketing DWs as both easily replaceable and as distinct or tailored commodities to suit the needs/desires of different employers. For instance, employers could choose within DWs' national-racial groupings, and then narrow down their candidates further by considering whether they were 'fresh' or experienced. Finally, and guided by an employment agent, they can narrow down further by ensuring they are selecting an appropriately sized DW with a desirable appearance. If employers had any remaining concern about their selection, employment agencies can then reassure employers by offering free replacements, re-homogenising DWs and demonstrating an ample supply of fungible, corporeal objects; that is, of fleshly commodities. As such, agencies utilise strategies of homogenisation and differentiation simultaneously, to produce a more personalised, if still ultimately replaceable, commodity. Indeed, Wee et al. (2020b, p. 115) suggest that the materiality of biodata allows for both agents and employers to 'verbally express implicit assumptions about what would constitute an ideal domestic worker candidate'.

To explain further, while Wang (2018) and Robinson (1983) both argue that racialised differentiation, rather than homogeneity, is essential to capitalist accumulation, they are both writing about the emergence of capitalism at a global scale. Indeed, writing against more traditional Marxist understandings that highlight capitalism's homogenising tendencies, Wang argues that racial difference allows for the hierarchisation of workers and the creation of different categories of labourer; from whom more or less can be extracted. Indeed, Shah and Lerche (2020, p. 720) also argue that 'capitalism articulates with and reinforces gendered, racialised and classed oppression as – through labour migrants – difference is mobilised for accumulation'. With its own contextual and historical intricacies, racialised differentiation is certainly also central to the functioning of the Singaporean economy, with racial order and hierarchies being meticulously curated and managed in both the citizen and migrant populations (Bal, 2016; Velayutham, 2017). While at one level, then, DWs are homogenised – as a group of women of specific nationalities that are deemed suited to domestic labour – they are not (to follow Maher's analogy) like one kind of fruit. Rather, practices of racialised (and other) differentiation simultaneously take place as DWs are marketed, fetishized and sold as corporeal possessions.

While claims that DWs experience bodily commodification hold true (Maher, 2004; Ong, 2009; Tadiar, 2004), then, the ways in which this process takes place through strategic processes of homogenisation and differentiation is of significance because, as I will come to show, it goes on to shape DWs' experiences in employment. While some distinctions are understandable concerns for employers (when it comes to their experience level or linguistic capabilities, for instance), markers such as a DW's age, height, weight, marital status, appearance or nationality do not predetermine these capabilities. Rather, these distinctions only reinforce DWs' positioning as an object that can be purchased; as fleshly commodities.

5 | THE FLESHLY COMMODIFICATION OF DOMESTIC WORKERS AND HOW THIS SHAPES THEIR EXPERIENCES IN EMPLOYMENT IN SINGAPORE

Having already established how DWs are rendered fleshly commodities, when they then enter employers' homes – no longer two-dimensional images, a list of categorisations and (potentially) a voice or figure from an interview – their humanity and personhood often do not match the perceptions that were created of them. Moreover, as Chok and Fordyce (New Naratif, 2018) argue, the process of recruitment in Singapore, and the debt that this system relies upon, also become the conditions for future exploitation. Taking cue from this argument, and to extend existing scholarship which tends to stop its analysis at the employment agency (Maher, 2004; Tyner, 1999; Wee et al., 2020b), I will now show how the processes by which DWs are rendered fleshly commodities come to have broader impacts, and (as Chok and Fordyce suspect) create further exploitation. To do this, I will use two ethnographic vignettes to build an analysis, which demonstrates how the labour practices, living conditions and employee/employer relationships of DWs are impacted by their fleshly commodification.

5.1 | The making of unrealistic labour expectations

Aye Mya Phyu moved to Singapore in 2017 to work for a couple and care for the male employer's elderly father who resided with them. Not knowing that he had dementia when she moved from Myanmar, Aye Mya Phyu was shocked when she realised that she would be caring for someone with significant health needs. During interviews and informal conversation, Aye Mya Phyu described her working day to me. She would wake at 6:00 AM to make the couple breakfast before they left for work. After this, she would spend the day completing what cooking, cleaning and laundry she could while caring for the elderly man whom she called *Ah Kong*. She said that she initially enjoyed working for the family but was physically exhausted at the end of each day as she was required to wash and feed the elderly man, and to help him move from his bed to the sofa, kitchen or bathroom. Aye Mya Phyu said they would also go for short walks some days, taking the elevator down from the ninth floor of their apartment block. She described her work as both tiring and difficult which, when I asked her to elaborate on, she clarified was because of the nature of the man's dementia. She explained:

> ... different days, different mood. You see sister, I never look after [someone] like that ... do not know what to do ... it very, very difficult. I tired too all the time ... hard to move him, always move to the chair, to the bed, walking, walking ... my body hurt a lot.

I asked Aye Mya Phyu if she complained to her employers about her bodily aches, but she said that her employer would get angry if she did and threaten to terminate her contract: 'She always scolds me and say she can take me back to the agency ... I worry because I need my salary and my agency be angry too'.

Across the 9 months Aye Mya Phyu worked in this household, the elderly man's dementia worsened, and he started to physically assault her. Initially this resulted in Aye Mya Phyu having items thrown at her but ended with her being threatened with a knife (thankfully her employers were at home). When she told me about this event, Aye Mya Phyu laughed saying, 'it's not his fault, he's just a crazy old man'. She said that she did not blame him for what happened but felt that she had to leave for her own safety, fleeing to the shelter in which we sat having this conversation. She explained that while she had tried her best to make her employment work, carefully managing her employer's moods and needs, she had known her limits. Rather than feeling that her need to leave was because of her own inadequacies, she confidently told me that she was certain no DW could have cared for this elderly man, suggesting his caring needs were too great for one person.

Several months later, Aye Mya Phyu found a new employer through an agency and was excited to leave the shelter. Within only a few weeks, however, I was receiving daily messages, saying that she wanted to leave this household because, again, she was being expected to perform labour she felt unable to. After sending several photos of another elderly man that she was expected to care for – a man with barely any mobility, weighing 88 kg, and who she had to move on her own – Aye Mya Phyu explained that she had asked her employer if she could be replaced. Aye Mya Phyu said that this question had caused tensions with her employer, who told her that she would not find anyone more suitable, continually referring to her as 'big'. After a few more weeks, however, Aye Mya Phyu decided to contact her employment agency. Rather than allow her to move immediately, Aye Mya Phyu told me via text messages that 'they scold me though ... tell me I stay and try ... they tell my ma'am that I should not cause problem'.

Through dialogue, it became clear that Aye Mya Phyu had been employed (at least in part) on both occasions because of her appearance and the figures presented in her biodata. As she explained it, she felt that she had been chosen because both sets of employers felt a larger person would be more suited to the kind of caring labour they required. Rather than predetermining if Aye Mya Phyu had the skills or physical strength to do this kind of work, however, in both instances, her fleshly statistics were used to presuppose this. Following repeated requests to end her contract early, Aye Mya Phyu was told by her latest employer that she would have to cope: 'my employer say that I am the biggest one they will find'. Despite this, a few months later, and knowing much more about how she could get support, Aye Mya Phyu was able to negotiate her way out of her employment contract, and eventually was employed again by a family with two young children.

5.2 | Shaping employee–employer relationships and domestic workers' living conditions

I met Jay at the shelter, where they were residing after filing a case against their employer. Jay had told me that they did not identify as either female or male (and used the pronouns they/them), but felt that getting a job as a DW was the easiest way to earn a reliable income, with few opportunities for them in the Philippines. Upon arrival in Singapore, however, in addition to domestic labour, Jay was also made to work on their employer's small construction site. Like Aye Mya Phyu, Jay was unable to perform the duties requested of them, but they were ridiculed as a result and experienced verbal and emotional abuse. As Jay explained, 'the work always very tiring and I couldn't lift the things they wanted ... They also say I no good at housework ... no good at either [kinds of work] ... they comment always, mocking [me] ... my clothes even'. Jay also said they were continually 'scolded' and that 'everything I do [is] wrong ... if I talk, don't like, if quiet, don't like also'.

In addition, Jay explained that they were often expected to sleep on a sofa on the balcony of their employer's household; the rain, insects and bodily discomfort all causing a great deal of suffering. When I asked for further details on Jay's sleeping arrangement, they explained that they had not always been expected to sleep outside but were previously told to sleep on the sofa in the living room. After time, and with their worsening relationship, Jay said that their employer would make comments about their appearance, smell and cleanliness, using these as reasons why they would be required to sleep outside. Jay was not allowed to take a day off until their debt was paid off (4 months after they began working for their employer). It was only at this point, when Jay had a regular weekly day off, that they were able to seek support from other DWs they knew and, eventually, flee their employer's home.

Both in conversation and in an interview, Jay explained to me that they felt having short hair, and appearing more masculine, was likely the reason that their employers initially selected them. As Jay elucidated, 'they chose me because it's expensive to employ a construction worker and this way I can clean a bit too'. While it was outside of the remit of their work visa (and therefore was found to be illegal deployment when reported), Jay ultimately felt they were selected as an employee because their photo suggested they had a more masculine gender identity. When I asked Jay if they felt that having a more masculine appearance shaped their living environment, they said 'my employer see me as lower, so don't care about me ... they always shout at me, tell me if I don't work well that they will send me back Philippines'.

Despite hearing these threats and admitting to their low self-esteem because of their treatment, Jay remained tenacious and told me that even if they were required to leave Singapore, they would not return to the Philippines and instead move to work in Malaysia or Hong Kong. While unsure if the ill-treatment they received was solely because of their appearance, Jay was certain that it was of central importance to their relationship, simply saying 'it always is, right sister, always people caring about this'. Jay also added that that while it wasn't the case in their employment, they felt that other DWs who were more masculine-presenting and who had relationships with women (those they described as 'tomboys') were often selected so that a female employer would feel more comfortable. Jay explained: 'if tomboy then employer don't feel jealous, sometimes can have good relationship because they not worry'. Jay alluded to another DW we both knew, who later confirmed that they never felt discriminated against in their employment, and who said that their employer would not only treat them with great respect but would also ask about their love life, saying, 'they saw me who I am ... they respect me ... sometimes they ask me "where's your beautiful girl" ... she wants me to be at peace with them and be comfortable with them'.

5.3 | How recruitment practices impact domestic workers once in employment

The accounts shared by Jay and Aye Mya Phyu were just two examples of the broader impacts that processes of fleshly commodification can have. Both DWs were selected by their respective employers with specific types of domestic and (in Jay's case) non-domestic labour in mind; their racialised bodies/flesh deemed the most suitable for this kind of labour (Liang, 2011; Robinson, 1983; Santiago-Valles, 2005). Where many other DWs I got to know had more standard domestic/caring work to complete each day – cleaning, cooking, caring/supporting children, elderly relatives and/or pets – the medical, caring and physical labour expected of Aye Mya Phyu and Jay in all three of the households mentioned was thrust upon them with purpose and, in their opinions, because of the way they looked. Indeed, with so many other people trying to migrate to Singapore each year, if photographs had not been shared, nor details of Aye Mya Phyu's weight and height, it is unlikely that they would have been selected for these roles. Aye Mya Phyu, for instance, had no qualifications or experience that would have suggested she was more able to manage the labour expected of her than any other DW. While photographs and bodily measurements were unlikely the only considerations of their respective employers, both Aye Mya Phyu and Jay felt that these attributes were significant to their employers and the expectations they had; the labour expectations of employers being shaped by the process of fleshly commodification they underwent.

Outside of these households, there were many other examples of employers' labour expectations stemming from DWs' fleshly commodification. Ei Phyu Soe (who was introduced in the introduction of this paper), for instance, had been employed for much more straightforward caring labour (to clean, cook, and support Elizabeth's mother, who had no significant medical/physical needs), but had been expected to work quietly, subserviently, and all while appearing 'cute'. Elizabeth's expectations were not fulfilled, however, as Ei Phyu Soe had been (in her opinion) 'defiant' and not worked in the desired way. Despite having experience as both an agent and employer, Elizabeth had clearly projected racialised and stereotyped expectations onto Ei Phyu Soe, believing that her looks determined how she behaved and worked. Indeed, as an individual, Elizabeth represented both the marketing and fetishizing of DWs, as well as the expectations that those practices bring about. Singaporean employers and employment agencies both, then, reproduce the fleshly commodification of DWs.

Beyond the ways in which employers' labour expectations were shaped by employment agents, both Jay and Aye Mya Phyu's relationships with their employers were also impacted by this. In Aye Mya Phyu's case, initially, the presence of an agency and their replacement policies trapped her. Being employed/sold as a fleshly commodity left her fearful that she would be without a salary if she complained, silencing her when she showed herself to be more than a corporeal object. Even in the next home in which she was employed, and with more knowledge about how to get support in Singapore, the presence of an employment agency continued to shape Aye Mya Phyu's relationship with her second employer. Indeed, when she said to them that she was unable to manage the labour being expected of her, her agency 'scolded' her and vindicated her employer.

Likewise, Jay's relationship was shaped by the ways in which she was rendered a fleshly commodity by her agency. Feeling that they were selected almost entirely because of the way they looked, Jay felt that their employers' unrealistic expectations were fuelled at the employment agency. Despite not knowing if their agency knew about the construction work that they were expected to complete, Jay still felt that they were culpable in their suffering. In an interview, of their employment agent Jay simply said, 'even they don't know it all [the construction work and being expected to sleep outside], they should check employer, check they good people … They say take handphone, passport, no day off until more than 4 months … they also no good sister'. Even knowing that other more masculine-appearing DWs had very positive relationships with employers, Jay felt that they were likely selected by women (employers) who would feel less jealous of the presence of these DWs; the photograph used in their recruitment being something Jay felt predetermined a DW's relationship with their employer. Objectified and dehumanised by her agency, Jay also felt that their living conditions were also, then, shaped by the process by which they were sold/employed.

While unique in its specificity, Jay was not the only DW whose appearance and/or bodily size went on to shape their living conditions. Indeed, as previously outlined, employment agencies themselves admitted that employers select employees based on these credentials, so that they can feed them less or ask them to sleep in smaller spaces. As Roman, the one employment agent I met who was trying to reshape recruitment practices in Singapore (who, for instance, refused to detail a DW's height and weight), also asserted:

> It's pretty ridiculous right, … for the weight, there are two reasons … the first one is about the food, some people think that if the girl eats less, it's better because it's cheaper. And the second, it's about the bed,

someone that's just 40 kg say, they can fit in a certain kind of bed ... the height as well. But for that concern, if the employer asks, I kick them out pretty quickly now.

It is clear, then, that the ways in which a DW is rendered a fleshly commodity does have a lasting impact, shaping employers' labour expectations, DWs' living conditions and employee/employer relations. Having been marketed and sold as captive and fungible corporeal objects, many employers then go on to treat them as possessions (Ong, 2009). While all DWs in Singapore are ultimately going to be used and discarded (Bal, 2016; Liow, 2011; Yeoh, 2006), as they form a disposable population (Pratt et al., 2017; Tadiar, 2012, 2013), this does not happen equally.

Despite DWs' disposability being one facet of their positioning in Singapore, Aye Mya Phyu's second employer's revelation that she did not think she would find another DW as 'big' as her was pertinent. Disrupting employers' power, a DW's personhood, skills and/or bodily attributes can also, as it did in Aye Mya Phyu's case, demonstrate their in-disposability and importance to the functioning of a household. Despite being reduced to fleshly commodities, Jay and Aye Mya Phyu's employers were ultimately presented with people (Anderson, 2000), employees whose personhood was often jarring and uncomfortable. For Elizabeth, reconciling Ei Phyu Soe's actual personhood with her previous perceptions of her was not possible. She was selected because she was perceived to be cute and quiet – *captive, flesh, non-human* – but then became a 'problem', as she was always more than just flesh. While employment agencies' role in producing DWs as fleshly commodities does, then, have wide-ranging impacts, their human presence in many ways became a form of resistance. Once in employment, DWs reveal themselves as corporeal subjects beyond the flesh.

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that DWs in Singapore are rendered fleshly commodities, that is, racialised, captive, fungible and simultaneously homogenised and differentiated corporeal objects. Moreover, it has demonstrated how employment agencies fetishize and then sell DWs to employers, using language and pricing schemes that create a racialised hierarchy within this population. Indeed, employment agencies simultaneously homogenise and differentiate DWs to both sell them as tailored but fungible corporeal objects. The process of fleshly commodification described in this article is not, however, specific to the migration industries or the sale of DWs. Rather, many other populations undergo processes of racialisation, dehumanisation and fetishization by labour intermediaries, with the potential for damaging consequences as there are for DWs in Singapore.

Beyond this conceptual contribution and building on the work of scholars who have focused on recruitment practices and domestic labour, this paper has also demonstrated some of the broader impacts of DWs being marketed, fetishized and then sold as fleshly commodities. By providing employers with a photograph of DWs, and details such as their height and weight – information that has no bearing on an individual's actual ability to perform domestic labour – employment agencies shape the expectations that employers have; employee–employer relations; and DWs' living conditions. These findings have important implications, as they demonstrate that the tactics deployed by employment agencies (or brokers) can have lasting, negative, material implications. Just as it has been argued that guest-worker (or *kafala*) schemes, debt-financed migration and structurally violent policy/legislation create the conditions for abuse and interpersonal violence, so too can employment agency practices. Indeed, the details that agencies use to market DWs, or any other population, shape their futures, as they (re)produce the grounds for specific forms of exploitation and violence. The nature of the details given to employers needs to be re-evaluated, as a person's race, appearance and size is being used to determine the amount that they are fed, the place they are able to sleep, and the precise work that is expected of them. It is important for the practices of employment agencies and other brokers to be further interrogated, then, as they play a profound role creating the terrain in which DWs live and work.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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