

# Gendered disciplinary apparatuses and carceral domesticities in Singapore's labour-migration regime

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## Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that Singapore's labour-migration regime is unequal and bifurcated, with migrants that are categorised as *foreign professionals* afforded many more rights than those categorised as *migrant workers*. While migrant construction, process, and shipyard workers are expected to reside in dormitories or other shared accommodation, migrant domestic workers are mandated to live in their employers' homes, where their gendered bodies are confined and disciplined. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, in this article I demonstrate that Singapore's labour-migration regime is underpinned with a carceral logic that imposes bodily controls on domestic workers through policy, legal regulations, and practices which, I argue, constitute gendered disciplinary apparatuses. Moreover, by examining migrant domestic workers' everyday experiences, I suggest that different dwelling spaces – namely, employers' homes and shelters – can be conceptualised as *carceral domesticities*. Utilised by the state as carceral infrastructure, I show the ways in which these dwelling spaces become geographies of detainment and punishment, in/through which different actors become involved in disciplining intimacy, morality, and maintaining socio-racial order in the nation. Simultaneously, the carceral nature of the labour-migration regime produces forms of domesticity which relies on the containment of migrant workers.

## Keywords

Carcerality, home, domesticity, confinement, labour-migration, Singapore

## Introduction

I sat with Meri on a concrete bench in the shade, overlooking the coast where countless ships were visible in the evening's rosy haze. I'd known that Meri was feeling homesick and that she missed her children, but she seemed particularly melancholic as we sat together looking

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out across the Singapore Straits. Nearby, there were several groups of migrant workers talking loudly, some having barbeques, others laying on mats and singing along to music. The celebratory and excited energy of our neighbours felt jarring, as Meri's eyes gently glossed over and filled with tears. Meri sighed, pressing both eyes and wiping her tears away. After a long pause, she placed her hand on my knee and said "I just want this to be over now, this waiting, my life on hold, you know, I just want to hold my sons". I put my hand on hers and squeezed it tightly. I knew that I couldn't say anything that would help, so we just sat.

I had met Meri in the HOME (the Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics) shelter two months prior, when she arrived having fled physical violence in her employer's home. I had already been volunteering at the shelter for four months at this point, and had spent most weekdays supporting HOME by running activities, doing casework,<sup>1</sup> and fulfilling any other role that was required of me (which sometimes involved accompanying residents to employment agencies, medical appointments, or court). As an organisation which advocates for migrants' rights, HOME provides legal, medical, and emotional support for its shelter residents. While I was conducting fieldwork, the shelter was always filled with over 50 residents, with a huge amount of flux. When Meri first arrived at the shelter, as I had many times before, I explained who I was and my role as both a volunteer and researcher. I told her that I would happily include or omit anything she shared with me from my research, dependent upon her desires. While many of the other residents were quieter initially, Meri, who I learned was a 28-year-old Indonesian woman from a small coastal city in East Java, quickly asserted: "my story should be told so this [employer abuse and violence] can stop". Determined to leave Singapore and return to care for her two sons in Indonesia, at our initial encounter, Meri was insistent: "I am making this report and then I go... Singapore is not good for me".

Two months later, as we walked back to the shelter from the park, Meri expressed her anger at being forced to remain in the country while the police conducted their investigations. She stated, "firstly I am stuck there [in her employer's home] and now, I am still stuck [in the shelter and Singapore more generally]... before, maybe I could leave [the country], but now cannot even do that." This was not the first time Meri had commented on the confinement and entrapment she felt in Singapore. It was, however, the first time (though not the last) that I had heard her express that it was in the shelter that she felt her immobility the most acutely. As we reached the entrance, Meri left me with a set of rhetorical questions that lingered with me throughout the remainder of my time conducting fieldwork. She said: "whenever I am walking in here, I always think, why am I the one being punished? Why is it me that is not free?" While this was not the first time I had thought of the shelter as a site of entrapment, it was the first time I came to see it clearly as a carceral space and place of detainment.

Despite being vital to the functioning of the nation, the Singaporean state has come under scrutiny for the labour abuses that migrant domestic workers are subjected to (HRW, 2022). Terms such as exploitation, abuse, neo-slavery, violence, and unfreedom/unfree are widely utilised when commenting on migrant domestic workers' experiences, with the state, employers, and employment agencies also coming under scrutiny for their role in producing these conditions (Bal, 2015a; Huang and Yeoh, 1996, 2007; Ong, 2009; Parreñas et al., 2021; Yeoh et al., 2020). Despite this, the punitive and disciplinary nature of the labour-migration regime has not been conceptualised as carceral. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews both within and beyond the HOME shelter, in this article I demonstrate that Singapore's labour-migration regime is underpinned with a carceral logic. As I will come to explain in more detail, I use the term 'underpinned' with purpose, as it not only suggests that

something is reinforcing and foundational, but also brings to mind a structure which is both bracing and rigid. Beyond this, I contend that within this carceral labour-migration regime, the policy and regulations that govern the domestic worker population can be understood as gendered disciplinary apparatuses (Legg, 2011, 2014), while employers' homes and shelters are utilised as carceral infrastructure: through/in which intimacy, morality, and the socio-racial order of the nation are attempted to be managed. As I will come to show, and as Meri's account suggests, Singapore's labour-migration regime produces both the HOME shelter and employers' homes as *carceral domesticities*: geographies of detainment, dehumanisation, punishment, and gendered bodily control. Despite the shelter residents also attesting to the gratitude they had for HOME and their (conflicting) feelings of safety and homeliness, like their employers' homes, this was a site where state- and non-state actors were involved in (re)producing and maintaining a regime which functions by enforcing confinement.

### **Carcerality and immigration: Intersecting regimes**

It has long been established that carceral and migratory regimes are intimately connected, with immigration detention/removal centres preeminent examples of this. Indeed, carceral geographers have demonstrated the importance of the 'punitive turn' (Cassidy et al., 2020; Moran, 2015; Moran et al., 2018) and the relationship between punishment, carcerality, and immigrant deterrence, control, and removal (Loyd et al., 2012; Moran et al., 2016; Mountz et al., 2013). While largely US- and Euro- centric, there has also been important scholarship which explores the practices and processes of colonisation, and the ways in which punishment, discipline, and carceral governmentalities have shaped societies historically and contemporarily (Legg, 2014, 2023; Radics, 2023; Sen, 2000, 2012). However, Cassidy et al. (2020) point to the significant and somewhat surprising theoretical and empirical gaps at the intersection of carceral and labour geographies. They suggest that labour geographers' engagement with carcerality and punishment can offer important (and currently lacking) insights into embodied and everyday labour experiences. In an effort (at least in part) to address this void, in this article I suggest that our understanding of Singapore's labour-migration regime is enriched by attending to its carceral underpinnings. As forementioned, I use the term 'underpin' (or underpinned/underpinning) with purpose, as it denotes both reinforcement and something which is foundational: a structure or system, which is bracing, rigid, and stabilising, despite often being hidden and ignored. While labour-migration in Singapore has been conceptualised as unfree and punitive (Yea and Chok, 2018), its carceral underpinnings have been inadequately explored. By exposing this, I draw attention to the gendered disciplinary apparatus that govern migrant domestic workers in Singapore, while also demonstrating how employers' homes and shelters are both utilised as infrastructure, rendering them *carceral domesticities*. Indeed, specific forms of domesticity are simultaneously produced, with employers' homes and shelters becoming sites of population control, where migrant workers are regularly confined and punished.

While the term carcerality is widely used in academia, there is some ambiguity around its meaning. For Tapia (in (French et al., 2020) ), carcerality is a term that "captures the many ways in which the carceral state shapes and organizes society and culture through policies and logic of control, surveillance, criminalization, and un-freedom". Beyond the creation of "policies and logic", the processes of shaping and organising, to which Tapia refers, see states develop carceral-/penal-infrastructure: prisons; detention centres; camps; and borders. These 'walls' and 'cages' (Loyd et al., 2012) are said to warehouse populations (Alexander, 2010; Herivel and Wright, 2003), with Gilmore (2007: 13–14) explaining that four

(conflicting but overlapping) theories provide “explanations for why societies decide they should lock people out by locking them in . . . retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, or incapacitation.” While utilising imprisonment for retribution and to incapacitate, the Singapore Prison Service still enforces both corporal and capital punishment while stating its mission to be one of ‘correction’ or rehabilitation. As geographers have demonstrated, however, carcerality and carceral conditions operate on a spectrum (Hamlin and Speer, 2018; Moran et al., 2018). Building on Foucault’s concept of the carceral continuum, for instance, Hamlin and Speer (2018) suggest that carcerality is enacted across an array of sites, in different ways, and at different ‘intensities’. As such, we can understand varying built forms and spaces as carceral, with public housing (Hamlin, 2020) and day labour/employment agencies (Peck and Theodore, 2008) brought to the fore as physical and social infrastructures of carceral regimes.

Despite containment and immobilisation remaining central tenants of imprisonment, carceral geographers have explored the relationship between carcerality and both mobility and migration (Gill, 2009; Martin and Mitchelson, 2009; Moran et al., 2012; Turner and Peters, 2017). From studying the movement of incarcerated or detained people (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2014; Moran et al., 2012, 2016), to exploring how maritime governance allows for migrants to be held outside of juridical order (Dickson, 2021), scholars have demonstrated “the expansive function of mobility within carcerality” (Dickson, 2021: 2). Immigrants have also been criminalised in wide-ranging ways and contexts. As Douglas and Sáenz (2013) explain, the development of immigration law in the US was inextricably connected to race and racism, as it sought to restrict access only to people deemed (racially) desirable. In addition to restricting immigrants from entering the US, De Genova (2018: 23) also comments on the ways in which deportation was developed as a means of racial exclusion:

... provisions for the deportation of ‘undesirable’ migrants were only enacted as a means of enforcing the explicitly racist Page Act of 1875 . . . deportation was first enacted not against all non-citizens . . . but rather as a technique for the exclusion of a particular, expressly racialised, and racially denigrated category of transnational human mobility.

While it has transformed over time, punitive immigration policy and anti-immigration rhetoric continues to see immigration enforcement intimately entwined with race, racialised exclusions, and criminal justice in the US. Utilising the term ‘crimmigration’ to describe “the convergence of the criminal justice and immigration enforcement systems”, Armenta (2017: 82) argues that contemporarily, the states’ power emerges through the routine and sometimes mundane practices of different actors, such as targeted traffic stops. These practices are, of course, also gendered. Working-class, non-white, immigrant men make up the majority of contemporary deportations in the US (Golash-Boza, 2009). This was not always the case, however, as non-white immigrant women’s reproductive capacities were viewed as a social threat in the 1990s. As such, Golash-Boza (2009: 273) argue that: ‘the gendered construction of immigrant danger has shifted. The new danger is masculine, one personified by terrorist men and “criminal aliens”.’

Beyond the US, many contemporary migration regimes utilise punishment to criminalise not only migrants, but also brokers and other actors involved in facilitating migration. For instance, as a response to reports of the abuse of migrant domestic workers in Singapore, and to tackle concerns about trafficking, the government of Myanmar not only banned its citizens from migrating to take on this labour between 2014 and 2019, but simultaneously criminalised the brokering of this migration (Deshingkar, 2021). Meanwhile, once in Singapore, migrant workers can be deported by their employers and

then ‘blacklisted’ (and barred from future entry to the country) for violating the conditions of their work passes. As I will come to show, the nature of these violations and the regulations governing different immigrants are gendered, racialised, and classed. Indeed, the very threat of permanent removal is argued to discipline migrant workers, as employers can suppress insubordination, compel compliance, and even coerce their employees to sign documents which authorise low salaries or poorer working conditions (Bal, 2015; Yea and Chok, 2018). Where agencies and brokers were targeted by punitive migration policy in Myanmar, employment agencies and other non-state actors are also used to enforce immigration control and removals in Singapore. Wise (2013) highlights the role of ‘repatriation companies’, for instance, suggesting that despite their use of violent and unlawful practices being known, they continue to conduct governmental- and employer-approved deportations. She writes,

it is common knowledge that these agents are frequently engaged by unscrupulous employers to dispatch workers whom they can no longer afford to pay, who threaten to complain and pursue back pay, or who are seeking funds to treat work-related medical injuries. (Wise, 2013: 438)

The intersections of carceral and migratory regimes have, then, given rise to different disciplinary and punitive apparatuses, institutions, infrastructures, and spatial forms. Often conceptualised as sites of exception, detention centres, islands, camps, and even ships have been explored as sites where refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants deemed ‘illegal’ are forced to reside, some of which become dwelling spaces for many years or whole lifetimes. These sites not only immobilise and confine people but they, like prisons, are infrastructures of rehabilitation, deterrence, and punishment (Aksyutina, 2012). In Singapore, it is argued that in the “post-colonial legal framework” both crime and race have become entangled with immigration laws. As the Immigration Act enshrines, those found guilty of illegal entry to Singapore are “liable to a jail term of up to six months and a minimum of three strokes of the cane” (ICA, 2022, online). Beyond deterrence and punishment, these sites of detainment also seek to discipline immigrants and maintain socio-racial order in the nation. Indeed, beyond its stringent laws which effectively criminalise protest in most forms, the Singaporean state actively intervenes in attempts to maintain a CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) ethnic schema. In the name of multiculturalism and multiracialism, the state utilises policies to shape demographics, determine where and how Singaporeans (and non-Singaporeans) live (see: Chua, 2003; Heng and Devan, 1995; Oswin, 2010, 2019) and impose quotas to determine who is granted permanent residency and citizenship. As Radics (2023: 108) writes:

[f]or Singapore, a nation whose legal system was constructed by the British precisely to suppress dissidence and extract wealth through imported labor, strict migration policies and punitive measures to discipline diverse populations are historically ingrained.

As I will now demonstrate, having maintained an economic development strategy that relies heavily on labour-migration, the Singaporean state’s continued concern with socio-racial order has resulted in a punitive labour-migration regime, which relies on gendered disciplinary apparatuses and the (re)production of carceral domesticities. Notably, the findings in this article are informed by both ethnographic research which I completed in Singapore in 2016 and 2017, and interviews and informal conversation that I have carried out in the years since.<sup>2</sup> As indicated, the HOME shelter became the centre of my ethnographic research; a fairly small site that houses approximately 700 domestic workers each year, mostly from the

Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar. With lengths of stay ranging from a few days to several years, the majority of the shelter's residents had experienced abuse of varying kinds (workplace, emotional, verbal, physical, sexual, or otherwise). A minority of the residents had themselves been accused of abuse, theft, or other actions that had led to their removal from their employers' homes. The shelter was also a site from which I was able to network from, and which led me to meet employers, employment agencies, lawyers, health care practitioners, religious leaders, lawyers, activists, researchers, and domestic workers who were still in employment, amongst others.

## **Domestic workers, disciplinary apparatus, and Singapore's carceral labour-migration regime**

Singaporeans must realise and accept as desirable the need for more of the able and the talented to come to work in Singapore... We have to make these people feel welcome and wanted, so that they will make Singapore their permanent home... Instead of getting high quality men; we have imported over 150,000 unskilled workers... Instead of importing first-class brains, we have imported unskilled brawn. (Lee Kwan Yew – Singapore's first Prime Minister after independence – 1982)

It is argued that Singapore has a bifurcated labour-migration regime, with levels of assumed skill (and the gendered, racialised, and classed assumptions that this entails) determining how immigrants are incorporated into the nation (Yeoh, 2006). While the state has an inclusive approach to migrants defined as foreign professionals (Rahman and Kiong, 2013; Yang, 2022), with routes available for them to attain permanent residency, transience is enforced for those described as foreign/migrant workers. As the extract from Lee Kwan Yew's 1982 speech (above) reveals, actively recruiting migrants that are considered to be skilled has long been a state strategy to promote economic development. As this speech also reveals, those migrants described as talented, or 'brains', have long been set in opposition to migrant workers, who are here described as 'unskilled brawn'. As Poon (2009: 83) writes, "[i]n contrast to the welcome and flexible freedoms extended to foreign talent in Singapore, the state subjects low-wage foreign workers to stringent regulation and disciplinary control."

Despite being essential to the social and economic functioning of the nation, the 1,000,000+ migrant (domestic, construction, shipyard, and factory-/process-) workers in Singapore are only able to migrate on temporary contracts, which can be renewed for short periods until state-enforced age limits are reached. Their disposability (De Genova, 2002; Pratt et al., 2017; Tadiar, 2013; Wright, 2006) and temporary status are legally enshrined, with financial levies used to control their numbers and ensure Singaporeans are preferentially employed where possible.<sup>3</sup> Unlike migrant professionals, migrant workers are also unable to move with dependents and cannot change employment without signed permission from their employer (Pareñas et al., 2021). Employers can also take their employees to the airport to 'repatriate'/deport them more or less at will.<sup>4</sup> This is a disciplinary apparatus (Pareñas et al., 2021) which, as Ong (2009) argues, effectively renders employers into border agents, as they can control migrant workers' (un)freedom and (im) mobility. Despite being employed to work in Singaporeans' homes – and to facilitate others' home-making – migrant domestic workers' transient status creates barriers for them to make home on their own terms.

In addition to the generic legislation governing migrant workers more broadly, domestic workers are then subjected to additional gendered bodily controls. They are required to live in the homes of their employers, where “adequate” food, “acceptable” accommodation, and “adequate” rest are to be provided (Attorney-General’s Chambers of Singapore, 2023, online). Moreover, while all migrant workers are required to undergo medical examinations before their work passes are issued,<sup>5</sup> domestic workers are also obligated to undergo pregnancy testing every six months. First legislated in 1986, domestic workers found to be pregnant are not only forced to leave Singapore, but can then be blacklisted, preventing them from entering Singapore again. Moreover, the Employment of Foreign Manpower Regulations specifically state that while employers are required to obtain medical insurance to cover accidents and workplace injuries, it cannot include “any psychiatric or nervous or mental disorder”; “any sexually-transmitted disease”, or “any pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, sterilisation, menopause, or any complication arising from any of these conditions” (Attorney-General’s Chambers of Singapore, 2023, online). As such, within Singapore’s ‘cimmigration’ regime (Armenta, 2017) the state has adopted a medico-legal strategy, which sees pregnancy criminalised (Cheang, 2021); an act/outcome which is determined to be deserving of punishment. The implementation of this policy not only compels domestic workers to self-police but also enlists employers in the removal of domestic workers’ liberties. Until January 2010, employers were liable to lose the S\$5000 security bond that they are required purchase if their domestic worker were to get pregnant (MOM, 2011). While this fine no longer stands, it is argued that employers’ concerns about the potential of a domestic worker becoming pregnant prevail, contributing to their continued bodily surveillance (Constable, 2020). As Poon (2009 : 83) explains, these “bio-policing measures . . . restrict reproduction and produce specific forms of embodiment.” Reflecting on the experience of a shelter resident who she learnt was pregnant, a HOME volunteer, Marley, expressed her despair with what she referred to as an “excessively harsh” policy. In an interview, she stated:

I don’t get it, I mean, isn’t it enough that they [pregnant domestic workers] can’t stay in the country even if they wanted to? Sometimes it’s a Singaporean’s baby, or they’ve been assaulted, you know? I don’t understand why it’s not case by case. For Kristine [a shelter resident], she didn’t want to be pregnant . . . why can’t she then come back in future? Why punish her?

The concern over migrant domestic workers’ potentially reproductive bodies is even further enshrined in legislation, which states that they “shall not be involved in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities, including breaking up families in Singapore” (Attorney-General’s Chambers of Singapore, 2023, online). This not only frames domestic workers as a risk to the individual family unit but also (re)produces and legitimises employers’ anxieties over the moral, social, and sexual conduct of their employees, both inside and outside of their working hours (Poon, 2009). This, again, renders domestic workers vulnerable to increased surveillance and disciplining measures (Paul, 2017), while also making it difficult for many domestic workers to build a sense of security and home on their own terms. This legislation and societal anxiety produce specific forms of domesticity that normalises the bodily control, confinement, and surveillance of domestic workers in domestic space. As Yeoh and Huang (2010) importantly note, while policy and employers’ (resultant) ‘ground rules’ together produce forms of domesticity that confines and ‘fixes’ domestic workers’ bodies to specific time-spaces and postures, practices of resistance and negotiation are always present.

By controlling marriage, pregnancy/birth, and disciplining intimacy, the Singaporean state is able to maintain population control and socio-racial order within the nation, which are, as forementioned, long-standing concerns. This approach also ensures that the state bears no burden for migrant domestic workers' current or future personal/social reproduction. As such, while migrant domestic workers are employed to support Singaporeans in meeting their own reproductive and caring labour needs, they are, as Constable (2020: 3492) writes, "discursively and legally constructed as 'just workers' and not as reproductive or sexual beings". Moving beyond this, I would contend that the policy and legislation that frame domestic workers as disposable and in need of bodily management can be conceptualised as gendered disciplinary apparatuses (see: Legg, 2011, 2014). Encompassing a range of practices, institutions and actors, the bodily management of domestic workers not only allows the Singaporean state to regulate and control socio-racial order of the nation, but to maintain and reinforce gendered, ethnic/racial, and classed norms and power dynamics. Moreover, these disciplinary apparatuses also reveal just some of the ways in which Singapore's labour-migration regime can be understood as being underpinned by a carceral logic. The punitive nature of the policy and legislation governing domestic workers not only relies on self-policing and surveillance but also draws on the carceral logic of deterrence and retribution when transgressions do occur (Gilmore, 2007). These facets are both foundational and rigid, as the state's economic approach and aspirations rely on a labour-migration regime that also meets its demographic aims and does not interfere with the socio-racial order of the nation. While obscured, another important facet of this carceral underpinning is in its efforts to shape and mould the behaviours and actions of migrant workers. This can be understood as an effort to rehabilitate (Gilmore, 2007).

Having established some of the ways in which Singapore's labour-migration regime is underpinned by a carceral logic, I now turn unpacking the everyday experiences of migrant domestic workers while they are either in employment or living in shelters (when living and working in their employers' homes is no longer viable). In so doing, I demonstrate that employers' homes and shelters are both experienced and constructed as geographies of confinement, surveillance, and punishment, as sites which incapacitate. Moreover, I argue that these sites can be conceptualised as infrastructure of a carceral regime and can, therefore, be understood as *carceral domesticities*.

### **Geographies of confinement, surveillance, and punishment: The production of carceral domesticities**

Many of the domestic workers I spoke to in Singapore referred to their employers' homes as prison-like. More explicit statements such as "it's like I am a prisoner"; "you know, I am locked in there, cannot get out"; "I think even the *amah* [her employer's mother], she feel like it's like a jail too" featured in interviews, alongside comments which pointed to feelings of entrapment and confinement, and/or the punishment embedded within these sites: "that place, they always shouting at me to do better, but how? I do everything my best already... I just need to get out, can't stay trap there anymore". After a few months of volunteering with HOME, and as I developed friendships and relationships of reciprocal care and trust, the residents started to share their feelings about the shelter. Somewhat surprisingly to me at the time (though not upon later reflection), the comments that residents made about the shelter mirrored those about their employers' homes. While most residents acknowledged feeling safe and cared for, many also attested to simultaneously feeling trapped and as though they were being punished. Like Meri, some residents drew



direct comparison between the two dwelling spaces, while others clarified certain distinctions: “here [the shelter] I am stuck but not like in my employer, here I still feel OK, feel safe, not like there”.

Just as carcerality and migration are inextricably linked, so too is carcerality and the domestic sphere. Prisons, camps, and detention centres are all, for instance, sites where homemaking takes place (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Hammond, 2004; Stoller, 2003). Feminist geographers have also demonstrated that home can be experienced differentially (Brickell, 2012; Meth, 2003). hooks (1990), for instance, highlights the dehumanisation and violence that black women experienced when working in the homes of white families, while their own ‘home places’ were sites of liberation and restoration, where care and resistance were fostered. While home is often simplistically assumed to be a site of belonging and safety, then, it can also be a site of (invisibilised) labour, fear, isolation, and confinement which can be associated with violence, displacement, and/or loss (Meth, 2003). For these reasons, ‘home as prison’ is a widely understood metaphor. In Singapore, while domestic workers’ experiences of oppression and violence in their employers’ homes has been widely addressed, the unequal power relations within these sites continue to be masked by the rhetoric that they are “one of the family” (Huang and Yeoh, 2007).

Of course, the houses and homes can also be sites of state imprisonment. House arrest, electronic monitoring, and geo-locating technologies are able to extend carceral space (Gill et al., 2018), with homes/housing utilised as carceral infrastructure. While acknowledging that the ‘intensity’ of the carceral experience and peoples’ (un)freedoms and bodily suffering differs vastly across the spectrum of different carceral sites (Hamlin and Speer, 2018), I now demonstrate how the Singaporean labour-migration regime produces employers’ homes and shelters as carceral domesticities: as geographies of confinement, surveillance, and punishment.

## **Employers’ homes**

I met Richelle through her cousin, Marilyn (a shelter resident), on a Sunday in late April. I had been invited to attend a barbeque for a friend’s birthday celebration so arrived with some muffins, unsure of exactly what to expect. It was a hot day, even by Singaporean standards, so I was relieved when I saw Marilyn was sitting with a group by a barbeque pit under a huge tree that was casting shade widely. Upon my arrival, and before introducing me to the person whose birthday we were there to celebrate, Marilyn excitedly called Richelle over to introduce us to one another. Richelle was younger than her cousin, aged 24, and was initially very shy. She spoke quietly, raising her hand slowly to wave gently as she said, “nice to meet you”.

While the celebrations were ongoing, I sat on a plastic woven mat with Richelle, as she told me that she had moved to Singapore only five months before. She had made the difficult decision to leave her six-year-old daughter, Rosa, in the care of her mother, with the hope of providing her with a “better future”. She explained that since her arrival, this had only been the second time that she had been allowed to leave her employer’s home. She clarified, “before I get my salary, cannot have [a day] off”. After working for over 4 months without a salary in order to repay the debt she owed her employment agency, a common practice in Singapore, Richelle expressed how happy she was to have finally remitted some money and to have gained a weekly day off. Smiling, she affirmed, “I feel a big weight is off me now”. She also, however, expressed her anxiety, as she was nervous about navigating around Singapore and ensuring she would get back to her employer’s home in time for her curfew. Hearing this, Marilyn shook her head and tutted loudly in objection. Richelle

looked back at her and shrugged. Marilyn then revealed that Richelle had already missed the church service they had planned to attend together that morning, as she was making her employers' breakfast. Marilyn was frustrated that Richelle was also expected to return by five, in order to have time to prepare dinner. At this point, our conversation was interrupted by an announcement that the food was ready.

As we stood and were each handed a white paper plate and some plastic cutlery, Richelle pointed at a cake which had been baked in a disposable tray. Smelling the slice she cut for herself, she said, "now I can really feel a taste of home. I was so sick of always eating bread and tau kwa [*a kind of tofu*]". A few hours later, as I was getting ready to leave, I overheard Richelle and Marilyn talking about bus stops and routes. It was only three o'clock, but Richelle was feeling anxious. Insisting that she would prefer to be back early so that she could keep her employers happy, she decided to leave when I did. As we walked away, she sighed, affirming, "it's better like this, then she [*her employer*] won't be angry. Then [*if she is late*] my week will be more difficult".

Richelle was one of many domestic workers that I met who both had a curfew on their 'day off' and had not been given a day off until her debt had been repaid. Indeed, I met employers and employment agents who also attested that these practices were not only common but, in their eyes, reasonable. As one agent confirmed in an interview:

If employer need them to make breakfast, need them to get the children ready, or whatever they need, then not too much to ask anyway . . . . They still going out, going to get rest, they can feel happy about that . . . salary deduction, some employers say off day is OK, but some don't . . . I suggest they don't actually . . . plenty of time later. (interview with employment agent, 2017)

Richelle was also one of many domestic workers who referred to their working conditions being rendered more 'difficult' if they angered their employers. While she was not specific about these difficulties, I learnt of domestic workers having their day off and phones taken from them for missing curfews. I also learnt of punishments and workload increases being imposed when cleaning was performed 'inadequately', an employer felt a domestic worker to be speaking in an undesirable tone, or for a myriad of other minor infractions. Meri (the domestic worker introduced at the opening of this article) had, for instance, told me that her employer once confiscated her phone when she had overcooked their dinner, and stopped her being allowed to use the household washing machine when she shrunk an item of clothing. She explained, "then my body really hurt, always scrubbing and washing, even my hands always so sore."

The fairly mundane interactions between Richelle and Marilyn at the barbeque demonstrated just some of the unfreedoms and stresses that domestic workers are subjected to. Unable to control their time (even on their day off), confined to their employers' homes for extended periods, and unable to even choose what they eat, domestic workers experience a range of spatial, temporal, and bodily controls within and extending from their employers' homes. Indeed, many of the conversations I had with domestic workers on their days off were centred on their employers' homes. At the barbeque, Richelle, Marilyn and their friends' conversations about family, intimate relationships, bodily aches and pains, foods that were missed, and their favourite places to visit all seemed to circle back to their employers' homes. Conversations about their children would lead on to discussion about their employers' families. Foods were missed because of the often arbitrary and sometimes cruel restrictions that were placed upon them at mealtimes. And the bodily aches and pains they highlighted were often a result of uncomfortable sleeping arrangements or grueling manual labour requirements.

A few months after the barbeque, I interviewed Marilyn, who explained that when she was first employed in Singapore, she, like Richelle, had not been given a day off for four months. She explained that once she had been given a day off (only two days per month), she had also been given a curfew. She said, “seven [*pm*] at least, and can leave anytime in the morning, but sometimes they leave lots to do”. When describing an ordinary working day, Marilyn explained that she would be expected to wake by 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast for the five household members and to get the children’s clothes and school bags ready. At this time, she was allowed to eat three biscuits for breakfast, shaking her head in disdain as she stated, “only three, what does she think, I am same like a baby?” Marilyn would then spend the day cleaning, washing their two cars, washing their clothes, and cooking for them in the evening. Marilyn would go to bed each evening at about midnight. When I commented how little sleep she was getting, she surprised me as she explained, “it’s OK for me to sleep five hours, it’s enough, but [I] has to keep waking some nights, to give the organic medicine, then it’s not OK”.

In addition to this exhausting daily routine, Marilyn was asked to go to the market three to four times a week, to buy groceries. This was a time she looked forward to, a moment of peace outside of her employers’ four walls that she described as “time where I am free”. On these outings, she said that she would often stop by a small stall to buy herself some food. Always hungry, she occasionally took the opportunity to buy some food. She would also try to bring snacks back to her room but explained that she would have to be careful, hiding them under her arm and then pillow as there was CCTV in her employer’s home, a technology which disciplined through the potential of constant employer surveillance. As such, Marilyn’s employers’ home became a geography of confinement and surveillance, where she was subjected to a myriad of unfreedoms that most other employment would/could not impose. Indeed, being required to live with her employers meant that Marilyn’s employers determined what and when she ate, and where and for how long she slept, all while her labour was being observed (or at least was potentially being observed). In the same way that prison life is structured by time (Sparks et al., 1996), and as control is exercised through ‘time-discipline’ (Foucault, 1979), Marilyn’s home/work life was too. Marilyn’s employer not only managed all the hours she worked (and even her sleeping time on some occasions), but they also controlled the time on her days ‘off’, dictating when she could return and attempting to govern where she went: “they always tell me not to go some places, only church, send money, see friends in place close-by.” This was not unusual. Benilda, another shelter resident, said that her employer not only imposed curfews but also explicitly banned her from certain areas of the city-state (shopping centres, bars, and a district they deemed unacceptable for her to visit). Meanwhile, her employer’s 30-year-old son attempted to control her clothing. She explained:

Because I really like to wear string vests and shorts but he don’t like . . . I always bring [a change of clothes] in my bag . . . I change in Lucky Plaza . . . then when I come back, I wear short and string vests . . . that’s why he’s angry. That’s why on Monday its ‘blah blah blah’ . . . ‘the vests not nice to [on] you, the shorts not nice to [on] you’ . . . he says like that. But because it happens longer and longer I become stubborn and just wear dress and skirt, then he, he have always a problem . . . (interview with Benilda, 2017)

When I discussed these kinds of experiences with HOME employees, volunteers, and other migrant rights activists, they all mentioned the laws and policy that govern the employment of domestic workers as key factors which contribute to the conditions within employers’ homes. Just as pregnancy testing is linked to the heightened control and surveillance of domestic

workers (Constable, 2020), employers' responsibility to "not knowingly permit" their employee to be engaged in "immoral or undesirable conduct or activity" (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, 2023, online) also produces all-encompassing and constraining bodily control. Indeed, Benilda suspected that her employer (and employer's son) was both jealous and fearful that she was either meeting a boyfriend or "doing things they think is bad." This not only led to their attempts to control her actions but also to punish her when they felt that she had been transgressive: "when I do like that [wear clothing deemed inappropriate] then he shout more, take hand phone sometimes . . . it's the reason he hits me too."

Comments ranging from Richelle's concern about her employers being 'more difficult' if she were to miss her curfew; to Meri's complaint of the bodily pain that resulted from her shrinking an item of her employer's clothing; and to Benilda's assertion that her physical assault was due to her employer's son's disapproval of her clothing (on a day she was not even being paid to work in their home), exposed just some of the ways in which punishment became central to domestic worker's everyday labour experiences. Of course, beyond the more routinised and mundane ways in which punishment was utilised by employers (confiscating mobile phones, removing day-off privileges), and without wanting to minimize the significance of these actions, conducting ethnography in the HOME shelter meant that I also heard cases of horrifying sexual, physical, and verbal violence. These various punitive actions uncovered the ways in which employers' homes were rendered geographies of punishment and containment. Moreover, it is clear that within these sites of effective imprisonment, particular forms of domesticity were (re)produced, as domestic workers are viewed as transient bodies to be extracted from, and unable to build home or domesticity in their own terms.

## Shelters

Rosamie was one of the two residents that I saw enter the shelter twice. The first time I met her, I learned that she had moved to Singapore on a tourist visa, escaping an abusive relationship with the hope of gaining employment in an administrative role. After several weeks searching for a job with no success, but determined not to return to the Philippines, Rosamie sought the support of an employment agency. After only a few days, she was employed as a domestic worker by a wealthy Filipino family. Unfortunately, however, after months of verbal abuse and exhausting working conditions, her female employer physically assaulted her. Shortly after this event, Rosamie found support and refuge in the HOME shelter.

Following a turbulent few months, Rosamie was granted permission to find a new employer while the police continued to investigate the 'case' against her first employer. This new period of employment did not last long, however, and she re-entered the shelter only three months later, unable to cope with working in a household where she did not get on with her employer. As Rosamie explained it to me, her second employer had also sensed that their working relationship was not tenable so had allowed her to leave in a straightforward manner. Despite Rosamie's desire to leave the country by this point, she was required to remain in Singapore, living in the shelter while the police continued their investigation into her initial abuse claim. Two months later, and nine months after she first reported this incident, Rosamie felt desperate as she was unable to earn an income in the shelter and, therefore, was unable to remit money to her son. In an interview, she explained that she felt both trapped and helpless:

Rosamie: We [*herself and the rest of the shelter's residents*] need to go out, to get out of this situation, because Singapore's became like our prison. We are like a prisoner.

Author: You feel trapped?

Rosamie: Yes, we cannot work, we cannot go home... We feel more, umm... unfortunate. Because we are just like, we survive in our everyday lives because of the donation and everything, when if you are in your home countries, like, you can survive because you are working, or you have your own... So, it's very hard for me, and not only for me, for us, for all of us [in the shelter]... the reason why they came to Singapore is to work. It's to provide for the financial situation of their family. And now they're stuck here.

Author: Yeah, and so do you feel somehow stuck in the shelter?

Rosamie: Yes, and not only in the shelter, even if I'm staying outside, I can still feel that I'm trapped. Because in Singapore, it's like a big prison for us. It's like we're a prisoner of one big prison. (interview with Rosamie, November 2017)

Rosamie not only spoke of feeling confined to the shelter but also to Singapore more broadly, casting the whole nation as a carceral space in which she was immobilised. Feeling that she was the one being punished for her employer's actions, later in this interview Rosamie also revealed that she had spoken with the police officer responsible for overseeing her case and had asked if it could be dismissed, so that she could leave the country. In Rosamie's understanding, this was not possible. Rosamie felt trapped by her circumstances and as though she was being unfairly detained. In one of the four interviews I conducted with Rosamie, I asked her more explicitly if she felt the shelter to be akin to a prison or detention centre. She explained:

In the Philippines, if you are apprehended for some, whatever case, you are going to be put directly into jail. And the jail is so a scary place. Here at least [*in the shelter*], the government give you the chances to live a decent life, to stay in a decent place, more decent than the prison. And it's because they don't want the responsibility. Of course, if they were going to put us into their own prison, their own jail, then they are going to spend money. (interview with Rosamie, 2017)

While acknowledging the material differences between the shelter and the conditions of a prison or jail, in a conversation earlier this year (2023), and having left Singapore over four years ago, Rosamie reaffirmed that she still felt that the shelter was a place where she was being both punished and confined while under the state's surveillance. Feeling both frustrated and angered that she was unable to work or live freely, she said on numerous occasions that she felt she was being treated "like a criminal", a particular injustice as she maintained that her employer had "actually acted with criminal behaviour." Indeed, while Rosamie was subjected to confinement in the shelter, her employer was able to live freely. While she was punished and left unable to earn an income, her employer was able to continue working.

While Rosamie never felt particularly comfortable at the shelter, viewing it as a place where she was being detained but, at least, free from concern of physical abuse, many of the other residents felt differently. Several residents told me that the shelter was more comfortable than many of the other places that they had lived, with many more referring to it endearingly as a place of belonging, homeliness, and security. When comparing the HOME shelter to another one that she had stayed in, another resident, Khin Aye, a 29-year-old woman from Myanmar explained:

First time... when I see they [*the other residents*] can wear any clothes... that's the first thing that I saw, it's like for me, really your free... then also... I saw so many plugs... You know it

means, free to charge the phone...It means they don't control you...And then also the staff...they say "don't call me ma'am, call me sister". That thing also made me really like, wow... Even in meeting, they are not sat on a chair if we are on the floor... So, it's like, that's how they show us, I am same as you. (Interview with Khin Aye, 2017)

While both shelters that Khin Aye resided in functioned to provide her with refuge while her police case was being investigated, materially and socially they were very different environments. Likewise, I heard discussions about the conditions of shelters in embassies, with one resident describing one of these sites as "too small" and "very controlling". Despite their differences, all shelters were required to report the details of all of their residents to the state. This was a means by which all migrant domestic workers could be accounted for when they were not living in the homes that they were assigned to, when they were 'out of place'. This was a process which allowed the state to both categorise them (issuing them with a special pass if their employer had revoked their work pass), and to ensure that someone else (an NGO, embassy, religious organisation, or otherwise) was now taking responsibility for the domestic worker and their whereabouts. In other words, when the state required a migrant worker to stay in the country for an investigation or to resolve an employment dispute, shelters become state-approved holding spaces from which migrant domestic workers were often forcibly removed from the country. As such, these kinds of shelters functioned simultaneously as a space of refuge and detainment, where non-state actors became involved in migration control and were responsible for their residents' accommodation and wellbeing, as well as their whereabouts, medical (pregnancy) checks, and visa status. As Khin Aye and many other residents attested to, however, beyond being a place where they were contained and punished, the HOME shelter was also a place they felt, even if temporarily, 'at home'. Here, again, Singapore's labour-migration regime produced another domesticity of containment and punishment, where home-making practices took place but still outside of the residents' own terms.

Like Tazzioli and Garelli's (2020) discussion of Lesbos being transformed into a space of containment but with various circuits of mobility running through it, these shelters contain their residents while acting as nodes where regimes of forced (im)mobility are embedded. They also constitute carceral space, as the state controls, oversees, and continues to organise migrant bodies from these sites. Indeed, while the residents of the HOME shelter were not ever locked into the building (unlike some other shelters I heard of), on weekdays they were unable to come and go entirely freely and curfews were imposed on all days. As such, and like employers' homes, the state relied on shelters as carceral infrastructure, as geographies which allowed their labour migration regime, and therefore their economy, to function.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have exemplified just some of the ways in which Singapore's labour-migration regime is, firstly, underpinned by a carceral logic which regulates bodies through gendered disciplinary apparatuses and, secondly, maintained by utilising domestic space as geographies of confinement, surveillance, and punishment. While exploiting employers' homes and shelters as carceral infrastructure, the state plays an active role in shaping these 'private' spaces socially and materially. Indeed, state policy and legislation, like employment agencies' practices (Antona, 2023), play a role in producing particular forms of domesticity that confine, punish, and prevent domestic workers from making home on their own terms. While geographic scholarship has long acknowledged that homes can be

sites of labour, incarceration, and violence (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Gill et al., 2018; Hammond, 2004; hooks, 1990; Meth, 2003; Stoller, 2003), there has been less academic focus on the ways in which punishment and carcerality intersect with different geographies of labour (Cassidy et al., 2020). This article begins (at least in a small way) to address this void and to demonstrate the ways in which employers' homes, as spaces of work (waged, non-waged, productive, and reproductive), become sites of punishment for migrant domestic workers, where their labour, rest time, and bodies become subjected to heightened surveillance and scrutiny.

It is important to note that the feelings of unfreedom and entrapment that many migrant workers described during the core period of my fieldwork in 2017 were only worsened with the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Despite being lauded initially for its response to the pandemic, in April 2020 Singapore made international headlines as the conditions within the dormitories inhabited by migrant workers were subjected to international scrutiny. Confined to hot, unsanitary, and crowded rooms for extended periods, the residents of these dormitories described them as prison-like. Similarly, several domestic workers that I spoke to about their experiences of the 'circuit-breaker' (or lockdown) measures, commented on the increased bodily surveillance and restrictions that they were subjected to. Significantly, however, many domestic workers also attested to very little having changed for them, as they were working in households where they were already intensely monitored and given very limited, if any, time outside of their employers' homes (Antona, 2022). The widespread confinement of populations to domestic spaces during this period raised international concern about the broader mental and physical health/wellbeing ramifications of the pandemic, yet this was the norm for many migrant domestic workers in Singapore (and beyond). This not only exemplifies the ways in which domestic workers' lives are heavily confined ordinarily, and the carceral conditions embedded within Singapore's labour-migration regime, but it also reveals both the disregard and invisibilisation of migrant domestic workers' everyday living and working experiences. While the pandemic produced new forms of domesticity for many of us, homes were already geographies of labour, confinement, and social control for many migrant domestic workers. As an activist stated in a conversation early in 2023, long after the COVID-19 restrictions had eased in Singapore, "you would have thought that people would now empathise with domestic workers more, they know a bit what it's like to be stuck inside, but no, now everything has been forgotten again". Whether or not this is a collective amnesia, or a widespread devaluing of certain lives, domestic workers continue to report a return to life as it was before the pandemic.

It is also important to acknowledge that while NGOs, activists, and scholars continue to urge the Singaporean government to make positive changes to migrant workers' living and working conditions, this would be unlikely to fundamentally transform the labour-migration regime. Despite providing refuge, care, and support, the HOME shelter has itself become a geography of confinement and punishment for many. Indeed, like other activists, NGOs, and migrant rights organisations, staff and volunteers at HOME continue to advocate for better living and working conditions while necessarily operating within the legislative and policy framework provided by the state. Without diminishing the importance of policy and legislative reforms (which do make day-to-day life better for migrant workers in Singapore in significant ways), they do not fundamentally challenge the carceral underpinnings of this regime and the exploitation and unfreedom it (re)produces (Yea and Chok, 2018). Having identified the ways in which carceral domesticities are produced, it is clear that more consideration needs to be given to how a system which confines, punishes, and then disposes of racialised and gendered migrant bodies can be unravelled and profoundly

transformed. As such, I would suggest that further engagement with the writing and practices of abolitionists is needed, as this movement seeks a complete end to systemic violence (Gilmore, 2002) and an alternative, emancipatory future.

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### Notes

1. Casework involved: (1) offering domestic workers who were still in employment advice about their (legal and other) rights and options; (2) following up with the ongoing ‘cases’ of the shelter residents. The shelter residents could have active legal cases or, more often, have lodged complaints that were taken up as ‘cases’ (as formal investigations) by state actors (most often the police or Ministry of Manpower, dependent upon the issues declared). While the majority of the shelter residents with ongoing ‘cases’ had themselves reported misconduct or abuse by their employers, there were also residents who were themselves accused of stealing, or a variety of other abuses/misconduct.
2. Across 2016 and 2017, I interviewed 45 different migrant domestic workers (29 of whom were HOME shelter residents), many of whom I interviewed on multiple occasions. I also interviewed HOME staff and volunteers, employment agents, employers, and activists. Interviews and informal conversation with domestic workers (current and former) have also informed this article. Beyond my engagement with HOME and the shelter residents, my research was also informed by domestic workers who I met independently. As such, this article is informed by my experiences at diverse sites – ranging from churches to basketball courts and karaoke bars. To note, while I was a volunteer at HOME, the arguments and opinions presented here are my own. The names included in this article are all pseudonyms and the exact dates that interviews or events took place have been removed, to ensure the anonymity of my research participants.
3. In 1982, the Singaporean government introduced levy, with the stated purpose of reducing the ‘foreign’ workforce. In a press release, the Ministry of Labour stated: “The government’s plan over the next 10 years is to cease reliance on foreign workers . . . Since foreign workers will not become part of our permanent workforce, there is no need for them to contribute to the CPF [Central Provident Fund] . . . However, . . . [this] will lower the cost of employing foreign workers . . . the cost of employing foreign workers must not be less than that of employing Singaporeans. Hence, it is necessary to impose a levy . . .” (Ministry of Labour, 1982).
4. Employers bear the costs of ‘repatriating’ migrant workers and are required to give them “reasonable notice” of this (Attorney-General’s Chambers of Singapore, 2023, online). The ambiguity of this phrasing means that employers feel that it is their prerogative to forcibly remove migrant workers if desired, often using the threat of this as a disciplining strategy (Parreñas et al., 2021) and often giving their employees more or less no notice when doing so.
5. In these examinations, migrant workers are screened for tuberculosis, HIV, syphilis, and malaria, a process which then has to be repeated every two years. This is not a requirement for foreign professionals.



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