



## Geographies of Bodily (Dis)Possession: Domestic Work, Unfreedom, and Spirit Possessions in Singapore

Laura Antona

To cite this article: Laura Antona (18 Mar 2024): Geographies of Bodily (Dis)Possession: Domestic Work, Unfreedom, and Spirit Possessions in Singapore, Annals of the American Association of Geographers, DOI: [10.1080/24694452.2024.2310106](https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2024.2310106)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2024.2310106>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 18 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Geographies of Bodily (Dis)Possession: Domestic Work, Unfreedom, and Spirit Possessions in Singapore

Laura Antona 

*Department of Geography & Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

Singapore's labor-migration regime has come under much scrutiny for the ways in which it unequally positions employers vis-à-vis their migrant "workers." One domestic worker, Rosamie, described the work permit she was issued as a "curse," as it bound her to her employers as property, leaving her vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Drawing on ethnographic research, this article argues that multiscalar geographies of bodily (dis)possession are produced by Singapore's labor-migration regime, which shape migrant domestic workers' everyday lives. By engaging directly with the concepts of possession and dispossession, this article reveals the ways in which migrant domestic workers are themselves rendered bodily possessions in Singapore; with the state, employers, employment agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and ghosts all involved in creating this dynamic. Indeed, as I demonstrate, the permanence, freedoms, and authority of both employers and (shelter-based) ghosts stood in stark contrast to the disposability, unfreedom, and powerlessness that domestic workers (particularly those residing in shelters) often experienced and felt. I also explain how domestic workers' lack of autonomy and bodily (dis)possession was (re)produced at different geographic scales: within the nation, individual dwelling spaces, and the body. *Key Words:* *bodies, (dis)possession, domestic work, spirit possessions, unfreedom.*

Susan looked at me with a tear in her eye, stating softly, "And now it's my time, time for another mission." I put my arm around her, seeing how difficult the news had been for her. She shrugged and sighed, clearly feeling ambivalent. After a few deep breaths she quietly said, "It's okay, I enjoy my life here, but I will enjoy my life there also." I was certain she was trying to convince herself of this more than me.

Like all migrant domestic workers in Singapore, Susan was aware that she had no rights to remain in the country indefinitely and that she would one day have to return to the Philippines. Beyond her fiftieth birthday, the conditions of her work permit meant that Susan was only eligible to renew her contract with the same employer until she turned sixty, when she would have been required to leave the country, regardless of her ability or desire to work (Ministry of Manpower [MOM] 2024b). Despite knowing this, Susan, who was fifty-one at the time, had not been emotionally or practically prepared for the news that

she had just received: Her long-standing employers no longer needed a domestic worker. Despite knowing that she had secured a more prosperous status and retirement through her migration, Susan felt uneasy about her return.

In the weeks following this interaction, and prior to her departure, I asked Susan if I could interview her to learn about her experiences in Singapore. As I had spent the majority of my time conducting ethnographic research in a shelter that provided refuge to domestic workers who were no longer willing or able to live with their employers,<sup>1</sup> I was interested to hear more from a domestic worker who had been in the country for more than three decades and, as far as I was aware, enjoyed her working life. In this interview, Susan professed to being very happy in her current employment and explained how much she loved volunteering with the shelter organization on her weekly day off. She also explained that although happy with her decision to work abroad, her life in Singapore had not always been as

---

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Initial submission, April 2021; revised submission, April 2023; final acceptance, August 2023

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR Laura Antona  [l.f.antona@lse.ac.uk](mailto:l.f.antona@lse.ac.uk)

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

enjoyable. Having worked for diplomats and several other wealthy families, Susan recounted an occasion where she was told by a former employer, a senior politician, that she was being moved to work for an ambassador who had enjoyed her cooking upon visiting their house. With a complex mixture of disdain and pride, she said, “They give me to them,” acknowledging her objectification and that she was something that could be gifted. Susan also told me about the family that employed her when she first migrated to Singapore in 1984, and with whom she had a much less favorable experience. While caring for a young baby, cooking, cleaning, and being left responsible for six dogs, Susan explained that her female employer would shout abusively at her daily. Having had many freedoms stripped from her, and after describing a moment where she was physically assaulted, she said of employers more generally, “They possess you.”

Susan was not the only domestic worker who expressed a feeling of being “possessed” while working as a migrant in Singapore. Rather, a feeling of bodily (dis)possession was a sentiment I heard echoed by many others, with employers, employment agencies, and the state all being mentioned as actors that created this dynamic and experience. Indeed, it has been argued that employer-sponsored labor-migration regimes—which are akin to the widely condemned *kafala* systems of the Middle East (Transient Workers Count Too 2020)—reinforce and (re)produce employers as owners and employees as objects or possessions (Varia 2012; Pande 2013). By volunteering at the shelter, spending time with domestic workers still in employment, and interacting with employment agencies, the police, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM),<sup>2</sup> the courts, embassies, hospitals, and clinics, I was able to see the ways that domestic workers in Singapore experienced their bodily objectification and (dis)possession even after leaving their employment. This occurred both in routine encounters—when shelter residents would regularly register their presence with the police, for instance—and in more surprising events, when spirit possessions rendered the shelter geography of bodily (dis)possession.

As such, in this article I argue that multiscalar and multifaceted geographies of bodily (dis)possession are produced by Singapore’s labor-migration regime, shaping migrant domestic workers’ everyday lives. By focusing on four different sites—the nation,

the employment agency, employers’ homes, and the shelter—I illuminate the ways in which domestic workers experience this (dis)possession, as their owner shifts between employment agencies, employers, the state, and, for some, ghosts. As a term deployed by domestic workers that I conducted research with, I use *possession* as a conceptual device to draw together spaces, processes, relationships, bodies, and modes of being.

To situate this concept and the article’s core arguments, I initially draw together postcolonial, critical race, and feminist geographic scholarship to create a framework that considers the ways in which both spaces and bodies can be (dis)possessed, with different forms of ownership being tied to unequal relations of power. Following this, I demonstrate how Singapore’s contemporary labor-migration regime creates a system where the possession of a work permit results in a domestic worker’s bodily (dis)possession at different scales and in different sites. I also elaborate the ways in which domestic workers experience life as possessions, with their employment agencies and employers taking on the role of possessor. As such, I explore how employers’ homes and the Singaporean nation itself both become geographies and scales of this bodily (dis)possession for domestic workers. I also draw on my research in shelters to show the ways in which the state and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) intervene to take on new modes of control when domestic workers’ employment is no longer tenable. Finally, I discuss the presence of ghosts in the shelter where I conducted significant ethnographic research, contending that spirit possessions became an embodied, imagined, and lived manifestation of a collective feeling of disenfranchisement and unfreedom, while also explaining the ways in which the bodies of domestic workers also transformed into geographies of (dis)possession.

Despite workers being framed as possessions, throughout this article I bring attention to the multiple and complex ways in which domestic workers enact agency, both by conforming to and resisting this status at different (and often strategic) times. Following the work of feminist political economists in particular, I do this to demonstrate that the bodily (dis)possession that domestic workers experience is not absolute, but instead exists on a continuum of exploitation and unfreedom (Skrivankova 2010; Strauss 2012; Fudge and Strauss 2014;

LeBaron 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2015; Yea 2015). As Susan's experiences reveal, domestic workers could both know of and accept their positioning as possession, and still forge alternative futures.

Notably, this article was developed following extended ethnographic research in Singapore, which was centered in a shelter for domestic workers. Many of the residents arrived at this shelter following experiences of violence and abusive working conditions, and a minority had themselves been accused of abuse or theft. By volunteering at the shelter, I was able to both participate in its everyday life and interview residents, volunteers, and staff. I also interacted with, and interviewed, domestic workers still in employment, in addition to employers, activists, employment agencies, and state employees.<sup>3</sup>

### Framing (Dis)Possession: Of Bodies and Space

"Possess" and "possession" were terms domestic workers used either directly or indirectly without much thought in interviews. Like Susan, other domestic workers not only referred to themselves as possessions—"they take me," "they give me," "they possess you," and so on—but they also referred to the state, their agencies, employers, and ghosts as their possessors. Designating both the state of ownership, unfreedom, or control ("I have possession of ...") and an object, belonging, or asset ("I have these possessions"), I use possession as a conceptual device to consider how domestic workers are situated in Singapore. I use this term in conjunction with the opposing term, *dispossession*, which in geographic scholarship most commonly refers to the forced removal of possessions, property, land, or people. As Davis (2011) acknowledged, both taking possession and dispossessing are active processes that have geographies. As I come to show, although subject to much academic inquiry, there is little geographic scholarship that unpacks the processes by which bodies themselves can become (dis)possessed, nor that details the ways in which multiscale and multifaceted geographies of bodily (dis)possession are produced.

When related to the ownership or conquering of space (land, territory, buildings, etc.), both possession and dispossession are concepts that have remained central to geographic scholarship. There has been

extensive writing on the role and impact of territorial possession, with a particular focus on the taking of land by colonial and imperial powers and transforming it (Said 1994, 1995; Fanon 2004; Gregory 2004; Weizman 2007; Harris 2008; Nally 2008; Davis 2011; Elden 2013). Many of the territories claimed by the British Empire were even referred to as possessions—as with "English Overseas Possessions," for instance—with the notion of ownership inscribed in this titling. As Said (1994) argued, "the actual geographical *possession* of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about" (93, italics added). As Rossiter (2007) stressed, the process of colonizing or possessing required continued practices of maintenance. Taking possession of territory was not a one-off action but rather an ongoing process that required continued effort, with attempts being made to produce compliant colonial subjects (Stoler 1995). Although violent, the process of taking and occupying territory, land, resources, and populations by colonial powers was and is not without resistance. Rather, these practices continually (re)produce(d) resistance and anti- and decolonial struggle (Comaroff 1985; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Gopal 2019). For Nally (2008, 731), practices of dispossession by colonizing powers are, therefore, inherently biopolitical, enabling some nation states to extend their own rule to extract labor, value, and resources of all forms, and producing uneven global development.

The ability to take possession of space and the bodies that inhabit it is not limited to the scale of a nation, however, nor does it have to be a process enacted by nation-states. Drawing on Harvey's (2003) theory of accumulation by dispossession, much urban and Marxist geographic scholarship has also highlighted the processes and modes of governance that produce urban dispossession (Harvey 1978, 2012; Shin and Kim 2015; Gillespie 2016; Lees, Shin, and Morales 2016; Tilley, Kumar, and Cowan 2017; Kenney-Lazar 2018; Moreno and Shin 2018). In their edited volume *Geographies of Forced Eviction: Dispossession, Violence, Resistance*, Brickell, Fernández Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan (2017), for instance, highlighted the connection between forced evictions, housing struggles, and dispossession. Indeed, while speaking about dispossession of space at different scales, scholars focused on urban dispossession are ultimately engaging with discussion of unequal relations of power between people and places.

Alternatively, postcolonial-, critical race, and feminist theorists have been at the fore in bringing attention to the histories, legacies, and processes by which bodies become possessions (Robinson 1983; Spillers 1987; hooks 1990; Glenn 1992; Tadiar 2004, 2013; Wilson 2005; McKittrick 2006; Ong 2009; Harney and Moten 2013; Domosh 2017). Indeed, some of the most pertinent and apparent examples of this are in the global histories of slavery and indentured servitude. By taking possession of bodies, or flesh (see Spillers 1987), slave owners violently and forcibly took command of the labor of others to extract, torture, and violate at will. This act not only served to grow the power, influence, and wealth of certain people—most often White Western Europeans and North Americans—but also paved the way for a global system of racial capitalism that still largely benefits White bodies, White spaces, and the minority world at the expense of all others (Robinson 1983).

Despite the retraction of many colonial empires and formal systems of enslavement, these violent forms of territorial and societal possessions have enduring “afterlives” (Hartman 2016) and continued presence (McGrath 2017). There is evidence that diverse forms of indentured servitude and enslavement live on today globally (International Labour Organization 2024), with migrant domestic workers also being framed as a population that experience neo-slavery by some theorists (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Tadiar 2004; Ong 2009). Many employer-sponsored labor-migration regimes position domestic workers’ employers as their guardians or sponsors (or *kafeel*, as they are referred to in *kafala* systems) and, in so doing, grant them exceptionally high levels of control. As such, it is argued that domestic workers are left highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Gardner 2010; Varia 2012; Pande 2013; Ahmad 2017), with Tadiar having suggested that they are:

paid not for a specific skill but for their embodiment of a variety of functions and services which they are expected to provide at the beck and call of their employers ... Not free to sell their own labour-power but instead themselves sold “as bearers of that labour power” by others.

Moreover, within their recruitment process, domestic workers are also subjected to dehumanization, leading many scholars to argue that they are corporeal objects, or possessions (Maher 2004; Lan 2006;

Liang 2011; Killias 2018; Antona 2022). As McGrath (2017) aptly pointed out, however, the term neo- (or new) slavery leads to the oversimplified idea that slavery has reemerged after ending, rather unfree labor having never ended but rather transformed across space and time.

Although incredibly important, much writing on enslavement (whether contemporary or historical, and whether intentionally or not) creates a dichotomy between those whose labor is free and those whose is not. Feminist political economists have made important contributions to disrupting this dichotomy, by framing laboring conditions as existing on a continuum of exploitation and (un)freedom (Skrivankova 2010; Strauss 2012; Fudge and Strauss 2014; LeBaron 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2015; Yea 2015). Building on Marx’s writing, Strauss (2012) suggested that when related to labor, “freedom” refers to individuals’ abilities to sell their labor power:

In this sense freedom means the ability to sell one’s labour, to enter into a contract with a purchaser of labour, and to receive an agreed wage. This was a form of freedom when compared to, for example, serfdom or slavery, but Marx was clear that commodified labour under capitalist relations of production was and is not truly free labour. (Strauss 2012, 139)

Further to this, Strauss (2012) suggested that due to its “privatised” nature, domestic labor blurs the boundaries of free and unfree even further. Most often taking place in the home, even when domestic work is waged, it remains racialized, feminized, devalued, and exploitative, as it “reproduces people and not capital or money” (Strauss 2012, 145).

There has, however, been important scholarship that demonstrates that while experiencing violent and almost all-encompassing unfreedoms, enslaved laborers still enacted agency and resistance in different forms. hooks (1990), for instance, wrote that marginality can be understood as a crucial place of radical potential and resistance for “oppressed, exploited, colonized people” (150). There has also been considerable scholarship on the modes of resistance that domestic workers enact, even in contexts where they enjoy relatively little freedom (ConsTable 1997; Yeoh and Huang 1998; Pande 2012). Possession is, then, centrally about unequal relations between people, with some more able to accumulate, command, manage, discipline, extract, violate, and control than others.

## Possessions: Enacted by Spirits

Beyond writing that draws on the role of people and institutions taking possession of space and bodies, there has also been academic attention given to the (dis)possession of space and bodies by ghosts, spirits, or both.<sup>4</sup> Having received more attention from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and religious studies than geography, ghosts, spirits, and hauntings are imagined and constructed in varying ways, as both metaphors and tangible beings that can be shaped through religious and cultural lenses, and as a means by which something that has left the living world can become visible or legible again (Gordon 1997; McEwan 2008).

Alongside specific theorizations about specters and the development of hauntology (see Derrida 1994; Fisher 2012, 2014), across disciplinary scholarship there has been extensive interest in how spirit possessions relate to histories of colonialism, contemporary capitalism, labor, health, and suffering (Ong 1987; Gordon 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; McEwan 2008; Bear 2018). Indeed, colonialism, racism, enslavement, and globalization are often, metaphorically, argued to “haunt” societies today (Gordon 1997; Myers 2006; Mukherjee 2019; Hollan 2020), with “ghosts and ghost stories ... deeply embedded in the cultural politics of postcolonial modernities” (McEwan 2008, 29). Although this metaphorical use of the term does need to be understood distinctly from the ways that individuals who claim to have “real” experiences of hauntings use it, the framing is still widely used to comment on the legacy of traumatic societal events and experiences. Writing about Lusaka’s colonial legacy, for instance, Myers (2006) suggested that “history continues to haunt this place with the spectre of late colonialism’s exclusionary democracy and domestication of difference” (305).

Drawing on ethnographic research in the state of West Bengal and focusing on people’s lived experiences of “actual” hauntings, Bear (2018) explained that ghosts “provide both explanation for, and generate agency around, experiences of hidden contemporary male suffering.” Writing of male laborers’ hardship, Bear argued that ghosts become a way of understanding how both work and economic growth ultimately rely on deterioration and death: “[t]hey are sensory evidence that labour can be destructive of life.” In a very different context, Ong (1987)

highlighted how spirit possessions can become tied to exploitative labor practices, focusing specifically on their role in shaping the agency and resistance practiced by female factory workers in Malaysia. In her writing, Ong (1988) explained how, in this context, factory owners’ belief that spirit possessions could be explained as female “hysteria” resulted in “the cold ministrations of modern medicine, rather than the increased social support they [the factory workers] sought” (39). From being (dis)possessed by spirits in the first instance, female factory workers continued to experience their bodily dispossession, as factory owners then took control of them.

Geographic scholarship has also given some attention to the role of spirits in possessing and shaping space. Comaroff (2007), for instance, highlighted how ghostly activities halted urban developments in Singapore, with construction delays causing mounting costs and, in some instances, the depreciation of the value of housing. He also connected female migrant labor to these hauntings historically. Indeed, Comaroff (2007, 63) highlighted that Singapore is considered by some to be “the most haunted city on earth,” with ghosts featuring prominently in the popular imaginary. Additionally, Parsons and Brickell (2020) wrote about the role of animist spirits in shaping the everyday working environment in brick kilns in Cambodia, and Beban and Work (2014) described how a single event of a spirit possession in Cambodia resulted in state officials returning five hectares of land to a local temple that had otherwise been appropriated and approved for development. (Dis)possession can, then, be enacted by spirits at different scales and in different ways, shaping social relations, urban and rural environments, and labor relations and practices. Significantly, spirit possessions also bring attention to the body as a scale and geography, and as the location of identity, emotion, and experience.

Building on this existing body of scholarship, this article will now demonstrate the ways in which (dis)possession has become a central tenet of Singapore’s contemporary labor-migration regime and will expose the multiple scales and ways in which this shapes the everyday lives of migrant domestic workers. Although (dis)possession enacted by living and nonliving entities is discussed distinctly in academic literature for the most part, I illustrate how these processes can be connected and experienced together.

## Bodily (Dis)possession within Singapore's Labor-Migration Regime

Migration has long been viewed as a tool for economic growth and development in Singapore, during colonization and after independence (Koh 2003; Yeoh and Willis 2005; Yeoh 2006; Haila 2016; Oswin 2019). Despite the necessity of migrant labor for the economic and social functioning of the nation, and the popularized understanding that nearly all Singaporean citizens today have a relatively recent migratory history (Chua 2003), the labor-migration regime in Singapore remains unjust (Poon 2009; Yea 2015; Oswin 2019).

In this context, migrant workers' (who are largely employed in domestic, construction, manufacturing, shipyard, and entertainment labor) experiences are distinct from those who are categorized locally as foreign talent (or professionals, and who are employed in highly paid and widely valued and respected employment). Indeed, although both groups are required to migrate within an employer-sponsored visa regime, foreign professionals are issued an employment pass (EP), allowing them to move with their families (or "dependents") and with relative freedom to change employment once in the nation-state. Foreign workers, however, are issued a work pass (WP), which does not allow them to move with their families, nor live where they choose. Whereas construction, manufacturing, and shipyard workers are generally accommodated in dormitories, domestic workers are obliged to live with their employer, who is required to provide "acceptable accommodation," as well as provision for their "upkeep and maintenance ... including ... adequate food and medical treatment" (MOM 2024a). As such, the living and working experiences of individual domestic workers are heavily dependent on their employer, as the employers decide where they sleep; what and when they eat; if, when, and for how long they rest; and how much contact they can have with their family and friends. Further to this, once a domestic worker has been given a WP, they are then ineligible to work in Singapore in any other capacity, the permit acting as a permanent (gendered and racialized) sorting of individuals. The stark differences in the experiences of foreign professionals and workers has led Yeoh (2006) to argue that Singapore has a bifurcated labor-migration system.

The bodily controls that an employer has over "their" domestic worker are, however, far more extensive still. Not only are domestic workers required to be tested for certain infectious diseases and pregnancy every six months (MOM 2024c), but the state has enshrined concerns related to their social conduct, stating that they "shall not be involved in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities, including breaking up families" (MOM 2024a). Writing of this, Verma (2011) suggested that despite their essential role in Singapore, these policies demonstrate the sexual and social threat that domestic workers pose to their employers and the nation. Interestingly, she also suggested that employers' fears of domestic workers' potential sexual and social deviance can become articulated in accusations of sorcery or black magic, with concern that the power to control and manipulate would see a reversal in roles.

Like *kafala* systems, Singapore's sponsorship scheme creates the conditions for an infantilizing, oppressive, and controlling relationship, with domestic workers often being stripped of their passports and sometimes even their mobile phones. Employers of domestic workers are not only able to "repatriate" (or forcibly remove or deport) at will, but they are also responsible for approving whether their employee is able to change employers. Domestic workers are required to obtain a signed "declaration form" (referred to locally as a "transfer letter") from their employer if they want to move to a new employer, with the power imbalances within this relationship often meaning this is something that they are unable or unwilling to do.<sup>5</sup> These forms of bodily control are argued to be the reason for domestic workers' susceptibility to abuse and exploitation (Gardner 2010; Varia 2012; Pande 2013; Ahmad 2017).

Anya, a volunteer at the shelter, described the employer-signed transfer letter as one of the core issues she felt existed for domestic workers:

This transfer letter thing, it's the worst thing ever. This is like a voucher that says I [an employer] own you for two years and if you don't do what I want, then I just tear it in pieces and off you go. ... And then, with this letter, she [a domestic worker] can go to agencies, and some agencies are even evil enough to take this letter from her, so then it means that they then own the helper. (Interview with Anya, December 2017)

Rather than the employees having the freedom to shape their own futures, the Singaporean state gives those powers to employers, allowing them to both

extract and consume the fruits of this labor, and to then prevent domestic workers from working in the country again. Even when a domestic worker is able to stay in Singapore for a longer period of time, the state ultimately enshrines their lack of future in the nation. As Susan's case exemplified, despite contributing to Singapore for more than three decades, her disposability (De Genova 2002; Tadiar 2013) ultimately manifested materially, as she was forced to leave the nation. Illustrating the state's use-and-discard approach to migrant workers (Yeoh 2006), this system creates dependency, as domestic workers' future migratory and working opportunities are heavily controlled.

Rosamie, a former domestic worker that I met in the shelter, shed light on the bodily controls associated with the WP, and the entrapment she felt the labor-migration regime produced:

The helper job is not my first preference of job, right, it just so happened that it's the only choice at that time. And I learned that, it's like a holy work permit, it's like a curse. There are lots of discrimination. If you are holding the work permit, even if you have the qualifications or whatever, you cannot upgrade to whatever career you want. ... There's always a lot of discrimination. (Interview with Rosamie, November 2017)

Unlike most of the domestic workers I met, Rosamie had not moved to Singapore with the intention of taking on this employment. Instead, she had entered the country as a tourist and had hoped to find administrative work, with existing experience in teaching and working for the United Nations Development Program in the Philippines. Unable to find this kind of employment, however, and in need of an income to support her son, who she had left with her sister after moving suddenly to escape an abusive relationship, Rosamie accepted a position as a domestic worker. At this time, she was not aware that this would make her ineligible to move to a different kind of employment at any future point. After this realization, she understood the WP to be a "curse," trapping her in a job that she only intended to occupy temporarily.

With time, Rosamie became increasingly unhappy with her working conditions, as she was verbally abused regularly, expected to give massages to her employer each evening, and woken throughout the night when her employers would return home late and intoxicated. Despite knowing of the shelter and

considering leaving her employer many times, Rosamie chose to remain, prioritizing her son and the income she was remitting. She remained with this employer until she experienced physical assault, when she decided to flee. While sitting in the shelter with me, Rosamie questioned, "The job give me a salary for my son, but at what cost? You know about my past [referring to a history of domestic violence], that I need to leave the Philippines, but now, I don't know if this was worse?" Despite moving to escape violence from her husband, Rosamie was left questioning if the freedom she had gained was worth the different unfreedoms and violence she experienced in Singapore.

Both the Singaporean nation as a whole and individual homes within it can, then, become geographies of bodily (dis)possession for domestic workers. Somewhat ironically, it is the possession of certain statuses, visas, and identities (alongside the removal of personal possessions such as passports) that can lead to differing levels of bodily (dis)possession. For domestic workers, the possession of a particular national (foreign), gendered, and racialized identity allows them to obtain a WP, possession of which then leads to their objectification and bodily dispossession. Indeed, although Singaporean citizens, permanent residents, and EP holders do not experience complete labor freedom—as no commodified labor is truly free (Strauss 2012)—their status grants them many more options, rights, and liberties. If labor exploitation and (un)freedom are to be conceptualized on continuums (Skrivankova 2010; Strauss 2012; Fudge and Strauss 2014; LeBaron 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2015; Yea 2015), it is clear that within the Singaporean labor-migration regime the possession of a WP and the title of migrant domestic worker positions you with relatively little autonomy. Despite this, for Rosamie, when she was physically assaulted, she did finally feel able to flee this household. This act of agency demonstrated her refusal to endure suffering any longer.

### **Being and Feeling (Dis)possessed: In Employment Agencies, Homes, and Shelters**

I met Benilda in the shelter. She was always laughing and got on well with most of the other residents. On her initial arrival to Singapore, Benilda



was taken from the airport to a bungalow owned by her employment agency, where she stayed for two weeks while receiving training. Benilda explained that she felt like she had her every move monitored during this period and was constantly reminded that she owed her agent a debt for their services.<sup>6</sup>

Following this, Benilda began her first period of employment, working for a woman who she described as “very fussy.” She was expected to sleep in a small store cupboard, her WP and passport having been taken, and she was not allowed to use her phone. After only three and a half months working, Benilda’s employer drove her back to her agency. Benilda clarified, “Even though she [her employer] is the fussy one, she decided this, not me.” Having then been placed with two further employers, each time the debt she owed her agency being extended (and with neither of these contracts lasting more than two months), Benilda explained that she felt trapped by the amount of money she owed her agency. She stated, “each time they [her employment agency] are always not helping, just send me to another employer ... and then when they [an employer] take me, then I have to pay more. ... I just wanted to finish with my agency and find a new one, but I couldn’t.”

After this, Benilda moved to a household where she remained for four years, eventually paying off her debt, earning a salary, and being given a weekly day off. Although much more tolerable than her previous experiences, this employment was not without its challenges. As Benilda described it, her relationship with her employer’s son, Alex, was “difficult to manage.” She explained that Alex would act in ways to both show his control over her and to demean her, stating, “Like ... he ask me to make him food, so I do, and then he throw it all away in front of me.” Beyond this, he also monitored Benilda on her days off, wanting to control what she wore:

Because I really like to wear string vests and shorts but he don’t like, so I don’t ... but I always bring [a change of clothes] in my bag ... then when I come back I wear short and string vests ... that’s why he’s angry ... “the vests not nice on you, the shorts not nice on you” ... he says like that. But because it happens longer and longer, I become stubborn and just wear dresses and skirts out. (Interview with Benilda, April 2017)

Although Benilda’s relationships with the rest of the household were much more positive, she ultimately left this employment after Alex’s controlling

behavior escalated and resulted in her being physical assaulted. Despite Benilda’s continued reassertion of her autonomy, through simple acts like wearing the clothes she wanted to, Alex’s societal and household positioning made him feel an entitlement to not only control what she wore but to ultimately assault her for dismissing his opinion and desires.

Through the course of several extended interviews and many informal conversations, it became clear that Benilda felt as though her time in Singapore was spent moving through different geographies of bodily (dis)possession. Although the level of freedom she had in each setting varied, beyond her four different employers, Benilda had initially felt as if she were simply serving time in Singapore, trying to work off the debt she owed her agency. As has been argued, domestic workers are effectively rendered commodities by the employment agencies that market and then “sell” them (Maher 2004; Lan 2006; Liang 2011; Killias 2018; Antona 2022). Indeed, the very system of debt-financed migration and domestic workers’ disposability (Tadiar 2004, 2013; Pratt, Johnston, and Banta 2017) leave them unfree in many respects.

Even after Benilda’s debt had been repaid and she had fled her final employer’s home, she was thrust into yet another space where she experienced significant unfreedoms. While residing in the shelter where I met her, Benilda explained her contradictory feelings of both gratitude for being afforded refuge and a space of safety, and anger for the restrictions to which she was subjected: “I still can’t just go where I want, when I want ... nothing to do, no salary ... just stuck until they decide if I can work again.” Indeed, although the shelter was not directly tied to the state, the organization that managed it was required to ensure that every person that entered the shelter was registered with either the MOM or police. At this point, many residents had their WP suspended and they would be provided with the ironically named “special pass.” As these passes were usually only issued for very limited periods, shelter residents were then required to regularly visit the police or MOM (dependent on their case) to renew them. This act was, to many of the residents, viewed as a further layer of bodily surveillance. As Benilda joked just before she left the shelter to go to the police station one day, “Again, so many months I am here now and they still want to check ... where do they think I am going?”

Due to the state's requirements of the shelter and its residents, the shelter ultimately materialized as another site of surveillance and control: as a geography of bodily (dis)possession for its residents. Despite there being many more freedoms for the residents than there had been in most of their employers' homes, their inability to work while living in the shelter (a policy enforced and controlled by the state) meant that they most often did not have the financial capacity to remit money, nor enjoy time in Singapore. Instead, the shelter functioned as yet another site of containment and detainment, where the residents felt themselves to be objects of the state's investigation. Indeed, even when residents wanted to leave Singapore and proclaimed that they would prefer not to pursue any kind of case (legal or otherwise), the act of fleeing to a shelter and then registering with the state removed this option for them. The shelter residents did, then, experience differing levels of exploitation, (un)freedom, and autonomy in the different dwelling spaces they had lived in while in Singapore. Employers' homes, employment agencies, and the shelter were all multi-scalar geographies of bodily (dis)possession, where the continuum of exploitation and (un)freedom became legible (Skrivankova 2010; Strauss 2012; Fudge and Strauss 2014; LeBaron 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2015; Yea 2015). Rosamie, Benilda, and Susan all had very different experiences in Singapore, but they all moved between spaces where they felt themselves to be possessions and unfree at different times. As Susan said, "You know, I never live in the shelter, just visit, and I think I am lucky for that. ... The girls here [in the shelter], they have bad employers and now this ... its good here, you know, but also, they are here [in Singapore] to earn a salary for their family and now they cannot."

### **Spirits and Geographies of Bodily (Dis)possession in Singapore**

It did not take many visits to the shelter for me to learn about its "other" residents. Through informal conversation with the shelter's human residents, it transpired that many individuals had either felt the presence of ghosts or seen them during the time of their stay. This was simply a point of intrigue for me initially, but it soon became central to my field work experience. Indeed, on one occasion, on arriving at the shelter, a resident named Siti came to me

and told me that I needed to help her, as Jayna, another longer term resident, had felt her body become possessed by the ghosts the previous night. Siti explained that Jayna's spirit possession had sparked fear and chaos, with several of the other residents unable to sleep and feeling concerned about their safety.

Jayna was not the only person residing in the shelter who felt that their body had been inhabited by a spirit. Rather, this incident set off a chain reaction whereby more and more of the shelter's human residents experienced this phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> One of these women, Kartika, stopped speaking for several days due to the experience, appearing pale and expressionless as she moved around the shelter. In the days that followed, and with the support of the shelter's staff and volunteers, several spiritual and religious leaders were asked to come to help manage the escalating issue. On the phone one day, and after hearing my appeal for support, a Catholic catechist simply responded, "Well this is a very strange request." Nonetheless, the catechist was among several religious leaders who took the plea seriously, visiting the shelter a few days later.

Each visitor (or group of visitors) brought entirely different approaches, which was useful given the diverse belief systems that coexisted within the space. Perhaps the most intense visit was from a group of Buddhist monks who led a set of prayers in one of the shelter's activity rooms. On the day of their arrival, having watched several of the residents meticulously clean and prepare the room beforehand, I was surprised to see that the monks' appearance attracted a very large crowd, with non-Buddhist residents also taking part in the prayer session they led. I stood with Siti by the door to the room that the monks were led to, behind a string that had been used to delineate the prayer space.

The room was hot, as always, and quickly started to fill with an intense energy as the monks started chanting loudly, their voices echoing and resonating throughout the whole shelter. Their rhythmic chanting continued for a few minutes before I heard a high-pitched scream. Siti squeezed my hand tightly, as we both stood frozen, seeing Kartika lying on the floor, her hands stretched out above her head with her stomach to the ground. She continued to scream loudly, as she stretched her body in and out looking pained. Others in the room turned to look at me, as I was the only volunteer present. Not wanting to

interrupt the monks' ritual, I remained frozen at the door, holding Siti's hand and feeling scared, concerned, and in disbelief. Kartika moved to her knees, scratching the floor with her fingernails, shrieking at an agonizingly high pitch. The monks continued chanting but quieted their volume, leading Kartika to slowly calm. After they finished the ceremony, the monks left the room as if nothing had happened. Kartika left a few moments later, also walking as though nothing significant had happened, and leaving many of us perplexed by the scene we had witnessed.

Spirit possessions did occur on several more occasions while I was conducting field work, but they were certainly not a weekly or even monthly occurrence, and this was the only time I witnessed an event of this intensity. Much more often, there were utterings of sightings of ghosts, or a feeling of their presence. When discussing these events, the shelter residents' opinions diverged greatly, as one might expect with a group of people with different cultural backgrounds, religions, and belief systems. The residents did have some shared insights, however, with their interpretations of events holding interesting confluences. Although distinct in many respects, similar to the female factory workers' accounts in Ong's (1987) discussion of spirit possessions in Malaysia, several of the shelter residents described unease with the uncleanliness of the shelter and particularly how others were disposing of menstrual blood. As Cahya and Ludia, both Indonesian residents, explained to me on separate occasions:

I also see one time ... but mostly I feel it ... but I just keep praying. ... I never disturb her [the ghost], of course she never disturbs me. I clean the house ... that's why when I talk with the girls [the other shelter residents], I tell them to keep the shelter clean and it [the hauntings] will never happen. Keep the shelter clean, the toilet clean, it doesn't come. Because, we cannot tell them [the ghosts] to go out because maybe this is their house before, right? We're just guests here, but they are like the owner here. ... You know, the Myanmar girls ... I'm warning them, after breakfast they never clean the room ... of course they [the ghosts] get angry. So, I keep cleaning and all my hairs stand up but I just pray "please, please," I say, "I'm sorry I just want to clean, please don't disturb me," and then it's okay. (Interview with Cahya, 2017)

Actually, have so many ghosts here. ... The staircase, that one [pointing to the central staircase in the shelter], that's why so many people to fall down. ...

Some people can feel them, some people can see them. Last time, she [a ghost] always disturbed me. ... Sometimes I feel very scared but sometimes I'm not scared. ... For Muslims, the menstruation in the sanitary [pads], this is much worse, because you throw it in the dustbin. ... For Muslims, must wash ... actually, Muslim and Buddhist it can be the same ... but no one here does it, right ... that's why always the [ghost] problem here. (Interview with Ludia, December 2017)

Ludia and Cahya were not the only shelter residents to describe their frustration over the reluctance of other residents to clean the dormitories and with a concern about the disposal of menstrual blood. For many residents, menstruation was directly tied to the appearance of the shelter's ghosts, with their bodies attracting this unwanted attention. I heard many other rationalizations for the ghosts' presence in the shelter. A volunteer psychotherapist, for instance, suggested that the trauma that many of the residents had experienced—different forms of emotional, physical, and sexual assault—made sense of these sorts of events and sightings. Despite this being a relevant explanatory factor, the particular ways in which the residents of the shelter described the ghosts' appearances suggested a more complex collective understanding of this phenomenon. Like Cahya and Ludia, several residents felt that it was understandable that the ghosts would get angry and haunt the residents, as they were unhappy with how their [the ghosts] home was being treated. Indeed, this was the most common explanation I heard for the spirit possessions.

In further conversation with Cahya, it transpired that her expressed belief that the ghosts were the property's actual "owners," and the human residents were "guests," connected to a broader association that she had with Singapore. Despite being one of the longest standing residents of the shelter, having lived there for several years, she knew that the state could force her to leave the country at any point. While using different tactics to ensure that she was not possessed herself, by enforcing cleaning schedules for instance, Cahya reiterated on many occasions that her stay in the shelter and within Singapore was fleeting: "... because it's not my home country, you know"; "I am only here short time really." The ghosts' permanence in the shelter and in Singapore stood in stark opposition to Cahya's status.

Beyond this, the ghosts' freedom to come and go at will, and their powers to take possession of the residents' bodies, became analogous with that of Singaporean citizens. Mirroring the racialized and classed distinction between employers and domestic workers, the residents felt their continued subjugation and unfreedoms in the shelter and in their own bodies. Like their former employers, the ghosts were spoken about as agents of control, manipulation, and bodily surveillance, with the residents' bodily hygiene and menstrual practices subject to punishment. As such, in some interviews, employers and ghosts were spoken about in ways that were almost indistinguishable from one another:

They make me feel like ... like, I am a bit anxious all the time ... I just try to get on with my jobs, cleaning ... cleaning and keeping busy so they don't bother to me. (Interview with Cahya, December 2017, speaking about the shelter's ghosts)

When there, I just don't want them to be near because, always I am worried for what they will do. ... Its their house so I try to do the work how they like, but they not always happy ... wanting me to clean in different ways, I just try do what they want. (Interview with Cahya, December 2017, speaking about her former employers)

Diverging from academic literature on spirits and ghosts previously highlighted, the spirit possessions in the shelter did not make the residents think of their labor and its relationship to death (Bear 2018), nor relate to resistance in a clear way (Ong 1987). Instead, it came to exemplify how the space itself materialized as a geography of bodily (dis)possession for its residents. More than this, however, the spirit possessions also demonstrated how the bodies of domestic workers also became geographies of (dis)possession themselves. Here, bodies were both a site and scale in which broader power relations, social structures, and forms of (dis)possession were embodied, mapped, and resisted. The presence of ghosts in the shelter made the residents even more aware of their disposable positioning within Singapore. Although the connections between domestic workers and ghosts and sorcery are not new (Comaroff 2007; Verma 2011) here, the ghosts' ability to haunt and possess the domestic workers' bodies became both a material and symbolic reflection of their collective feelings and experiences of bodily (dis)possession within Singapore, their employers' homes, their employment agencies, the shelter, and their own bodies.

## Conclusion

Whether it be by the state, employment agencies, employers, or nonliving entities, I have demonstrated that domestic workers in Singapore were always at least "possessable," if not entirely "possessed." Although the labor-migration regime intends to position employers as sponsors, the level of bodily control that they are afforded over their employees, in conjunction with the ways in which they are able to effectively purchase them as commodities (Tyner 1999; Maher 2004; Lan 2006; Killias 2018; Antona 2022), positions them as proprietors, or (dis)possessors. Beyond employers, however, I have also shown that the individual or entity that takes possession of a domestic worker shifts, dependent on their corporeal geography and circumstance. At different stages in their migratory journey, or in the event that a domestic worker has to flee their employer, the state and employment agencies (as well as NGOs and other institutions that provide refuge) take key roles in managing their bodies, ensuring they are not only accounted for but also housed in both known and approved locations. Domestic workers' (dis)possession was not a one-off act, but a process that required maintenance (Rossiter 2007).

The presence of ghosts in the shelter, and the spirit possessions that took place, also demonstrated the ways in which domestic workers' bodies became a scale at which they could experience (dis)possession. Whether it be in the nation as whole, in individual homes—employers' homes, employment agencies, or shelter spaces—or in their bodies, domestic workers experienced multiscale and multifaceted geographies of bodily (dis)possession. Many domestic workers do, however, come to Singapore to gain more autonomy and can return to their home countries with higher statuses and freedoms. As such, the differing degrees of bodily (dis)possession that they experience also produce differing levels of freedom and self-determination later. Despite having experienced exploitation (and, in some cases, violence) many domestic workers, like Susan, both acknowledge their suffering and yet remain ambivalent about their migratory experiences. Indeed, their ability to remit higher incomes to their families and to gain different forms of freedom and independence in and from their home countries complicates the way they experience (dis)possession in Singapore. Nonetheless, domestic workers continued to talk of

their unfreedom, lack of autonomy and control, and the ways they were positioned as objects, or possessions, and often regardless of how favorably they saw their migratory experience as a whole.

Although the women who were featured in this article were far more than possessions—as they continually demonstrated their agency, sometimes even in their complicity—it is clear that this employer-sponsored migratory system created greater levels of unfreedom and exploitation for some. As well as offering new conceptualizations of the relationship between migrant domestic workers and their employers, employment agencies, and the state, this article has also offered a novel way of understanding how spirit possessions might be conceptualized. Here, ghosts, like other living entities, (re)produced geographies of bodily (dis)possession. For many domestic workers and shelter residents, living in a country that was not their own, and dwelling in different home spaces that were also not their own, led some individuals to feel that their body was also not their own. (Dis)possession by both the living and nonliving can, then, be experienced simultaneously in complex and multifaceted ways.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/J500070/1).

## ORCID

Laura Antona  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1283-2838>

## Notes

1. The organization that managed the shelter also offered emotional, medical, and legal support to its residents, the majority of whom had arrived having experienced abuse or exploitative working conditions. There were also a much smaller group of residents who had themselves been accused of abuse or workplace misconduct (e.g., theft).

2. The MOM is the governmental ministry in Singapore that creates and implements policies relating to labor and laborers (including all migrant labor).
3. Between June 2016 and December 2017, while conducting ethnographic field work, I interviewed forty-five different domestic workers (twenty-nine were shelter residents, some of whom I interviewed on numerous occasions); eight of the shelter's staff and volunteers; and several other employers, activists, and employment agents. As my relationships developed, I was able to extend my research parameters, which led me to visit hospitals, clinics, courtrooms, embassies, birthday celebrations, churches, and karaoke bars. In the years since, I have maintained contact with many of these individuals and have also been introduced to other domestic workers and activists. Although not explicitly cited in this article, the informal conversations and interviews that I have engaged in the years since this core period of field work have informed the writing in this article. To note, all of the names included in this article are pseudonyms.
4. While the terms *spirit* and *ghost* can have very different meanings, I use the terms interchangeably as the residents of the shelter switched between both.
5. As of May 2020, and due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, the MOM altered their policy to enable employment agencies to help cancel WPs on behalf of employers of domestic workers (Seow 2020). At this point domestic workers will be issued a fourteen-day special pass and the employment agency will become responsible for their upkeep, care, and whereabouts. As Seow (2020) wrote, however, employment agencies “will have only the duration of her 14-day Special Pass ... to find her a new employer, after which they must repatriate her if unsuccessful.”
6. Most domestic workers in Singapore use employment agencies to facilitate their migration (particularly when they migrate for the first time). In return for their training and recruitment services, I met domestic workers who had to work for anywhere from two to twelve months without a salary (or sometimes with a very small allowance). Many employers do not allow their employees to have a day off until this period has passed, as they are often required to cover the costs of the domestic workers' debt up front with the agency.
7. This period was not unusual. Rather, shelter residents would see and feel ghosts throughout the period I was in Singapore. More intense escalations (when multiple residents would experience spirit possession) would occur less frequently, but I was warned about this having happened many times before I arrived in Singapore.

## References

- Ahmad, A. 2017. *Everyday conversions: Islam, domestic work, and South Asian migrant women in Kuwait*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Antona, L. 2022. "Cute face and quiet ... but her look don't match her personality": Commodifying flesh, shaping labour expectations and domestic workers' treatment in Singapore. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48 (2):425–38. doi: 10.1111/tran.12589.
- Bear, L. 2018. The vitality of labour and its ghosts. *Anthropology of This Century* 21. Accessed April 15, 2021. <http://aotcpress.com/articles/vitality-labour-ghosts/>.
- Beban, A., and C. Work. 2014. The spirits are crying: Dispossessing land and possessing bodies in rural Cambodia. *Antipode* 46 (3):593–610. doi: 10.1111/anti.12073.
- Brickell, K., M. Fernández Arrigoitia, and A. Vasudevan. 2017. *Geographies of forced eviction: Dispossession, violence, resistance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chua, B. H. 2003. Multiculturalism in Singapore: An instrument of social control. *Race & Class* 44 (3):58–77.
- Comaroff, J. 1985. *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, J. 2007. Ghostly topographies: Landscape and biopower in modern Singapore. *Cultural Geographies* 14 (1):56–73. doi: 10.1177/1474474007072819.
- Comaroff, J., and J. L. Comaroff. 1999. Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the South African postcolony. *American Ethnologist* 26 (2):279–303. doi: 10.1525/ae.1999.26.2.279.
- Constable, N. 1997. *Maid to order in Hong Kong: Stories of migrant workers*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Cooper, F., and A. L. Stoler. 1997. *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davis, R. A. 2011. *Palestinian village histories: Geographies of the displaced*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- De Genova, N. P. 2002. Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (1):419–47. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432.
- Derrida, J. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The state of debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*, trans. P. Kamuf. London and New York: Routledge.
- Domosh, M. 2017. Genealogies of race, gender, and place. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107 (3):765–78. doi: 10.1080/24694452.2017.1282269.
- Ehrenreich, B., and A. R. Hochschild. 2002. *Global woman: Nannies, maids and sex workers in the new economy*. London: Granta.
- Elden, S. 2013. *The birth of territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fanon, F. 2004. *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fisher, M. 2012. What is hauntology? *Film Quarterly* 66 (1):16–24. doi: 10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16.
- Fisher, M. 2014. *Ghosts of my life: Writing on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. Alresford, UK: Zero Books.
- Fudge, J., and K. Strauss. 2014. Migrants, unfree labour, and the legal construction of domestic servitude. In *Migrants at work: Immigration & vulnerability in labour law*, ed. C. Costello and M. Freedland, 160–79. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, A. M. 2010. Engulfed: Indian guest workers, Bahraini citizens, and the structural violence of the kafala system. In *The deportation regime: Sovereignty, space, and the freedom of movement*, ed. N. De Genova and N. Peutz, 196–223. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gillespie, T. 2016. Accumulation by urban dispossession: Struggles over urban space in Accra, Ghana. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41 (1):66–77. doi: 10.1111/tran.12105.
- Glenn, E. N. 1992. From servitude to service work: Historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (1):1–43. doi: 10.1086/494777.
- Gopal, P. 2019. *Insurgent empire: Anticolonial resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso.
- Gordon, A. 1997. *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gregory, D. 2004. *The colonial present*. London: Blackwell.
- Haila, A. 2016. *Urban land rent: Singapore as a property state*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Harney, S., and F. Moten. 2013. *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Harris, C. 2008. How did colonialism dispossess? Comments from an edge of empire. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (1):165–82. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2004.09401009.x.
- Hartman, S. 2016. The belly of the world: A note on Black women's labor. *Souls* 18 (1):166–73. doi: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596.
- Harvey, D. 1978. The urban process under capitalism: A framework for analysis. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2 (1–3):101–31. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.1978.tb00738.x.
- Harvey, D. 2003. *The new imperialism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. 2012. *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the right to the urban revolution*. London: Verso.
- Hollan, D. 2020. Who is haunted by whom? Steps to an ecology of haunting. *Ethos* 47 (4):451–64. doi: 10.1111/etho.12254.
- Hooks, b. 1990. *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: Southend Press.
- International Labour Organization. 2024. *Forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking*. Accessed January 13, 2024. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang-en/index.htm>.
- Kenney-Lazar, M. 2018. Governing dispossession: Relational land grabbing in Laos. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108 (3):679–94. doi: 10.1080/24694452.2017.1373627.
- Killias, O. 2018. *Follow the maid: Domestic worker migration in and from Indonesia*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.

- Koh, A. 2003. Global flows of foreign talent: Identity anxieties in Singapore's ethnoscape. *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18 (2):230–56. doi: [10.1355/SJ18-2C](https://doi.org/10.1355/SJ18-2C).
- Lan, P.-C. 2006. *Global Cinderellas: Migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- LeBaron, G. 2015. Unfree labour beyond binaries: Insecurity, social hierarchy and labour market restructuring. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17 (1):1–19. doi: [10.1080/14616742.2013.813160](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.813160).
- Lees, L., H. B. Shin, and E. L. Morales. 2016. *Planetary gentrification*. London: Polity Press.
- Liang, L.-F. 2011. The making of an “ideal” live-in migrant care worker: Recruiting, training, matching and disciplining. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (11):1815–34. doi: [10.1080/01419870.2011.554571](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.554571).
- Maher, K. H. 2004. Good women “ready to go”: Labor brokers and the transnational maid trade. *Labor Studies in Working Labor* 1 (1):55–76. doi: [10.1215/15476715-1-1-55](https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-1-1-55).
- McEwan, C. 2008. A very modern ghost: Postcolonialism and the politics of enchantment. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (1):29–46. doi: [10.1068/d460t](https://doi.org/10.1068/d460t).
- McGrath, S. 2017. Unfree labor. In *The international encyclopedia of geography: People, the earth, environment and technology*, ed. D. Richardson, N. Castree, M. F. Goodchild, A. Kobayashi, W. Liu, and R. A. Marston, 1–8. Wiley Online Library. doi: [10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg0703](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg0703).
- McKittrick, K. 2006. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ministry of Manpower (MOM). 2024a. Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (Chapter 91A). Employment of Foreign Manpower (Work Passes) Regulations 2012. *Singapore Statutes Online*. Accessed January 27, 2023. <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/EFMA1990-S569-2012>.
- Ministry of Manpower (MOM). 2024b. *Foreign domestic worker eligibility*. Accessed December 27, 2023. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/eligibility-and-requirements/fdw-eligibility>.
- Ministry of Manpower (MOM). 2024c. *Six-monthly medical examination (6ME) for foreign domestic worker (FDW)*. Accessed December 27, 2023. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/eligibility-and-requirements/six-monthly-medical-examination>.
- Moreno, L., and H. B. Shin. 2018. Introduction: The urban process under planetary accumulation by dispossession. *City* 22 (1):78–87. doi: [10.1080/13604813.2018.1442067](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1442067).
- Mukherjee, A. 2019. After the empire: Narratives of haunting in the postcolonial spectropolis. *South Asian Review* 40 (4):271–89. doi: [10.1080/02759527.2019.1604061](https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2019.1604061).
- Myers, G. 2006. The unauthorized city: Late colonial Lusaka and postcolonial geography. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 27 (3):289–308. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9493.2006.00263.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9493.2006.00263.x).
- Nally, D. 2008. “That coming storm”: The Irish poor law, colonial biopolitics, and the great famine. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98 (3):714–41. doi: [10.1080/00045600802118426](https://doi.org/10.1080/00045600802118426).
- Ong, A. 1987. *Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University New York Press.
- Ong, A. 1988. The production of possession: Spirits and the multinational corporation in Malaysia. *American Ethnologist* 15 (1):28–42. doi: [10.1525/ae.1988.15.1.02a00030](https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1988.15.1.02a00030).
- Ong, A. 2009. A bio-cartography: Maids, neoslavery and NGO's. In *Migrations and mobilities: Citizenship, borders, and gender*, ed. S. Benhabib and J. Resnik, 157–84. New York: New York University Press.
- Oswin, N. 2019. *Global city futures: Desire and development in Singapore*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Pande, A. 2012. From “balcony talk” and “practical prayers” to illegal collectives: Migrant domestic workers and meso-level resistances in Lebanon. *Gender & Society* 26 (3):382–405. doi: [10.1177/0891243212439247](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243212439247).
- Pande, A. 2013. “The paper that you have in your hand is my freedom”: Migrant domestic work and the sponsorship (kafala) system in Lebanon. *International Migration Review* 47 (2):414–41. doi: [10.1111/imre.12025](https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12025).
- Parsons, L., and K. Brickell. 2020. The spirit in the machine: Towards a spiritual geography of debt bondage and labour (im)mobility in Cambodian brick kilns. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 46 (1):44–58. doi: [10.1111/tran.12393](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12393).
- Poon, A. 2009. Pick and mix for a global city: Race and cosmopolitanism in Singapore. In *Race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. D. P. S. Goh, M. Gabrielpillai, P. Holden, and G. C. Khoo, 70–85. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, G., C. Johnston, and V. Banta. 2017. Lifetimes of disposability and surplus entrepreneurs in Bagong Barrio, Manila. *Antipode* 49 (1):169–92. doi: [10.1111/anti.12249](https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12249).
- Robinson, C. J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. London: Zed Press.
- Rossiter, D. A. 2007. Lessons in possession: Colonial resource geographies in practice on Vancouver Island, 1859–1865. *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (4):770–90. doi: [10.1016/j.jhg.2006.12.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2006.12.001).
- Said, E. W. 1994. *Culture and imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Said, E. W. 1995. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Seow, J. 2020. New MOM rules make transfer of domestic helpers easier amid Covid-19 travel restrictions. *The Straits Times*, May 16. Accessed April 6, 2023. <https://str.sg/JAPx>.
- Shin, H. B., and S.-H. Kim. 2015. The developmental state, speculative urbanisation and the politics of displacement in gentrifying Seoul. *Urban Studies* 53 (3):540–59. doi: [10.1177/0042098014565745](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014565745).
- Skrivankova, K. 2010. Between decent work and forced labour: Examining the continuum of exploitation. JRF Programme Paper, Forced Labour. Accessed March 27, 2023. [https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/40697/download?token=LQbY\\_Hvi&filetype=full-report](https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/40697/download?token=LQbY_Hvi&filetype=full-report).

- Spillers, H. J. 1987. Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics* 17 (2):64–81. doi: 10.2307/464747.
- Stoler, A. L. 1995. *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Strauss, K. 2012. Coerced, forced and unfree labour: Geographies of exploitation in contemporary labour markets. *Geography Compass* 6 (3):137–48. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00474.x.
- Strauss, K., and S. McGrath. 2015. Temporary migration, precarious employment and unfree labour relations: Exploring the “continuum of exploitation” in Canada's temporary foreign worker program. *Geoforum* 78:199–208. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.01.008.
- Tadiar, N. X. M. 2004. *Fantasy-production: Sexual economies and other Philippine consequences for the new world order*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Tadiar, N. X. M. 2013. Life-times of disposability within global neoliberalism. *Social Text* 31 (2):19–48. doi: 10.1215/01642472-2081112.
- Tilley, L., A. Kumar, and T. Cowan. 2017. Introduction: Enclosures and discontents. Primitive accumulation and resistance under globalised capital. *City* 21 (3–4):420–27. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2017.1331562.
- Transient Workers Count Too. 2020. Qatar abolishes its kafala system, when will Singapore do so? Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://twc2.org.sg/2020/10/16/qatar-abolishes-its-kafala-system-when-will-singapore-do-so/>.
- Tyner, J. A. 1999. The web-based recruitment of female foreign domestic workers in Asia. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 20 (2):193–209. doi: 10.1111/1467-9493.00054.
- Varia, N. 2012. Cleaning house. The growing movement for domestic workers' rights. In *The unfinished revolution: Voices from the global fight for women's rights*, ed. M. Worden, 167–77. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.
- Verma, A. 2011. Black magic women: On the purported use of sorcery by female foreign domestic workers in Singapore. In *Negotiating identities: Constructed selves and others*, ed. H. V. Bonavita, 25–50. Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi Press.
- Weizman, E. 2007. *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation*. London: Verso.
- Wilson, B. M. 2005. Race in commodity exchange and consumption: Separate but equal. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (3):587–606. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00476.x.
- Yea, S. 2015. Trafficked enough? Missing bodies, migrant labour exploitation, and the classification of trafficking victims in Singapore. *Antipode* 47 (4):1080–1100. doi: 10.1111/anti.12144.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. 2006. Bifurcated labour: The unequal incorporation of transmigrants in Singapore. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 97 (1):26–37. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9663.2006.00493.x.
- Yeoh, B. S. A., and S. Huang. 1998. Negotiating public space: Strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore. *Urban Studies* 35 (3):583–602. doi: 10.1080/0042098984925.
- Yeoh, B. S. A., and K. Willis. 2005. Singaporeans in China: Transnational women elites and the negotiation of gendered identities. *Geoforum* 36 (2):211–22. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.07.004.

LAURA ANTONA is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: [l.f.antona@lse.ac.uk](mailto:l.f.antona@lse.ac.uk). She is a feminist geographer whose work focuses on migration, labor, violence, and gender.