Bodies That Don't Matter, but Labor That Does

The Low-Wage Male Migrant in Singapore and Dubai

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Abstract

Singapore and Dubai are hypermodern city-states that host large temporary migrant populations. The majority of this group is composed of low-wage workers, migrant men from India who labor under conditions of structural inequality and extreme precarity. While there is a growing literature that discusses the issues of debt bondage and unfair conditions of employment that these men face, there is far less interrogation of the everyday and embodied forms of discrimination they encounter. In taking a deeply embodied and ethnographic approach to understanding the experiences of low-wage migrant male workers in these two metropolises, this chapter demonstrates how they are subject to multiple tropes that, in totality, seek to marginalize and devalue their work and the more intangible "learning" of the city that they undertake as part of the migration trajectory. As a result, despite extended periods of sojourn, they are never fully incorporated into the urban.

Keywords: migration, Singapore, Dubai, labor, global city, discrimination, race

Introduction

There are almost 1.4 million temporary migrant workers in Singapore today. This makes a quarter of the total resident population of the city-state. Out of this group, the largest component is made up of low-wage migrants—the men and women who do what are perceived as the "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning" jobs that locals will not. The Gulf emirate of Dubai has an even more stark reliance on low-wage labor. Almost 90 percent of its

population is composed of foreigners, the majority of whom are engaged in jobs as domestic workers in homes or as laborers in shipyards, in service industries, and in the booming construction sector. Both these postcolonial city-states are indicative of bifurcated migration regimes that are increasingly becoming the norm across the globe and that engender a mode of engagement with the host city that is often transient, partial, and contingent. In these cosmopolitan and superdiverse urban spaces, male, low-wage workers' bodies are particularly marked for exclusion, despite being the largest component of migrants in both cities. Seen as temporary and transient, needed but not wanted, these men are subject not just to the structural forms of discrimination that disallow family reunification or any type of permanent residency, but they also live within an everyday social and physical landscape that prevents them from being equal urban residents and having a real "right to the city" (Harvey 2003). This chapter demonstrates, through interrelated tropes, how South Asian male migrant bodies are discursively constructed by city planners, by urban residents, and by migrants themselves. In doing so, it demonstrates how their labor is integral to the everyday functioning and the continued renewal of the city, but their bodies and material presence are regarded as completely peripheral.

This chapter discusses the body as a relational subject and object. This perspective implies that embodiment is not just cognitively felt, but that cognition is secondary and relies on the ways in which the body and parts of the body are perceived and placed by others. In such conceptualizations, sexed difference, race, class, and disability status must be central considerations, particularly in the ways in which they represent unequal and hierarchical power relations. The body is then not a neutral biological entity, but an immediately and inherently social one, that is always caught within multiple matrices of value and cultural meaning. Within this relational perspective, then, bodies within the city are significant and important actors—not just to be overlaid or constrained by material structures, laws, and

policy, but who are active and dynamic co-creators of place. This reading of the urban as imbued with potential and constantly shifting draws heavily from Nigel Thrift's conceptualizations of nonrepresentation theory (2007), which center on the creation of place through performative and affective actions, regardless of their intentionality and working at more subconscious levels. The chapter also situates itself within the literature on global cities (Sassen 2001), spaces which are now widely acknowledged to have highly bifurcated populations, wherein the underclass of migrant is a significant component.

Embodiment is not just a relational entity; it is simultaneously processual—one that changes according to lived embodied experiences over time. Bodies are not static: whether they change over the life course or more subtly with material enhancements and clothing, they are constantly being reified and renegotiated. This understanding informs our analysis of low-wage migrants in significant ways. Entering a new space where their bodies may be seen as markers of difference and "out of place," they are often marked as Other and have to undertake affective and embodied labor in order to establish their positions and legitimacy within the new migrant context. For many, this desired legitimacy is never achieved. This chapter discusses some of the most significant ways in which low-status migrant male bodies are interpellated within a diverse city that enables and entails segregation, stigmatization, and alienation of this "invisible" population. After an extended discussion of the methodologies utilized in this research, the rest of this chapter interrogates the migrant body through various discursive tropes. In doing so, it demonstrates how in their aggregation they represent ways in which low-wage migrant lives are shaped and how they are also made sense of by migrants themselves, sometimes counter to the ways in which they are perceived by a socially distant public.

Methodology

The discussions in this chapter draw primarily from extended periods of fieldwork in two city-states, namely, Singapore and Dubai. They present excellent case studies to understand the place and role of low-wage migrant bodies in the urban setting, as both city-states host large proportions of migrants and are highly urbanized and dense cityscapes. These sites are highly comparable, as both have strict labor regimes that restrict permanent settlement and other rights of low-wage labor migrants (Kathiravelu 2016; Yeoh 2006). The low-wage populations studied in both sites are also predominantly Asian migrants from parts of South and Southeast Asia, important players in the South-South migration that now counts for the largest international flow of mobile people in the world. The interviews that this chapter draws from were conducted predominantly with Tamil-speaking migrants from the state of Tamil Nadu in South India and were recruited through snowball sampling. The period these workers had been employed in either Singapore or Dubai ranged from a few months to more than a decade. The main criterion for selection was that they were employed in occupations that qualified them as low-wage migrants—earning below a certain wage category. In each of these cities, this means that they are not eligible to migrate with dependent family members, and that their eventual return to the home country is guaranteed, as they are on visas that need to be periodically renewed, rendering their immigration status permanently temporary and making them ineligible for any kind of permanent residence. The interviews quoted here were undertaken in mid-2017; however, the chapter draws from the author's engagement with low-wage migrants over the past ten years. This extended length of engagement with informants allows for the emergence of a more dynamic and processual understanding of their place in the city.

Embodied Methodologies

In attempting to understand the place and quotidian lives of marginalized migrants in the city, the author utilized a collection of methods that involved accessing the more sensorial and mobile elements of everyday life. In addition to in-depth interviews and participant observation in work and leisure spaces that low-wage migrants occupied, more flexible methods such as spot interviews, transect walks, and photo and video elicitation were employed (Pink 2007). Transect walks involved "walking with" informants on their daily routines to and from work, as well as in understanding how they accessed leisure spaces, utilized public transport networks, and navigated the spaces of mixed and diverse neighborhoods (see, e.g., Kathiravelu 2015). These walks were also instructive in drawing out reflections about particular spaces, incidents, and ways of inhabiting the body in specific spaces. Much of this type of embodied knowledge is often seen as unimportant by migrants and goes unarticulated in interviews or more formal conversations. Observing, stopping, and "walking" (Brown and Shortnell 2016; Pink 2007) through migrant neighborhoods in the city was also a technique that allowed for a less intrusive form of ethnography to be carried out. This enabled the observation of affective "atmospheres" of place (Swanton 2010) that was not just of histories and hierarchies that marked bodies but also left traces on physical spaces and objects.

Photo and video elicitation enabled the author as researcher to access spaces and experiences that would not have otherwise been possible. These included the social gatherings between men over smuggled alcohol and spicy food within the rooms of a worker dormitory, or the camaraderie between colleagues on the worksite of a high-rise tower block. These candidly shot photos and videos provided insight into the everyday ways in which migrant workers interacted with each other, but also how they inhabited particular spaces, especially those not under the gaze of supervisors or a middle-class Other. In using such multimedia technology, migrants were instructed to loosely film or photograph everyday life,

enabling more informant-oriented data collection. While generating less “directed” data, this was an important means through which the author was made aware of activities and relationships that did not come up in interviews.

In working with low-wage migrant populations, foregrounding the researcher’s own body and engaging face to face in affective ways emerged as imperative in building trusting relationships, as well as in accessing in-depth understandings of research participants. In the author’s attempts to build affinity with informants, she drew upon her South Asian heritage: dressing in *kurtas* and *salwaar kameez* when meeting with informants, eating and cooking South Asian meals together, and speaking in shared tongues. Sharing language and cultural affinity also made it easier for many of them to ask for help in translations or navigating bureaucracy related with their employment. Despite acknowledging that she had not been born in India, her shared heritage marked her as a partial insider. The author exchanged photographs of her children regularly on social media platforms like Whatsapp or Facebook with key informants, and they sent greetings to each other for religious or cultural festivals. For migrants who have limited contact with the middle class and citizen population of their adopted city, sustained and embodied contact signals respect of them as individuals in their own right, not just as productive bodies or workers. Engagement with researchers conveys also that their experiences are intellectually valuable, and not just their physical labor is important. The power inequalities engendered in this relationship are, however, still problematic and attempts to “give back” or remedy the imbalance are limited and partial.

Accessing Marginal Bodies

Access to marginal spaces within cities and the marginalized people who live within them often requires the negotiation of gatekeepers and a longer breaking-in period. For researchers of the urban, spaces such as labor camps, worker dormitories, and the private spaces of

people's homes where domestic workers labor can be some of the most difficult spaces to conduct research in. Given some states have reservations about how the treatment of their low-wage migrant populations is portrayed, there is also a need to be cognizant about how researchers' access of migrant dormitories is mediated. In Singapore, for example, the author had to seek permission from an official entity linked to the Ministry of Manpower in order to access a worker dormitory or negotiate access as part of a local non-governmental organization or welfare organization making routine visits. In these places, physical barriers such as retina scans and electronic turnstiles do not just prevent the public from getting in, but also monitor migrant bodies in getting out.

In Dubai, however, access to "labor camps" is less fraught. The security in spaces such as Sonapur—the site of the largest labor camp in Dubai—is not officially marked or protected. Due to its distance and separation from the rest of the city, it is unlikely that anyone without an intention to access the labor camps would end up there. Because of this, camps are less subject to surveillance and restrictions on entry. The author was able to enter some camps on Fridays—the day off for most migrants in Dubai—and interact with men living there with little impediment. She also accessed labor camps in Dubai through her work with a locally based voluntary association while engaging in outreach work in such spaces. While most men questioned her presence in such a highly gendered space, this novelty also made it easy to open up conversations and immediately explain her intentions as researcher.

Notions of danger are often associated with spaces such as migrant labor camps that house only men—especially for female researchers entering such spaces. However, these were some of the most welcoming and hospitable spaces for a single, middle-class female. Due to the author's class and gender, which marked her as an obvious and visible outsider, her presence was often treated with curiosity and welcomed, as she was seen as generally nonthreatening. In Singapore, however, her presence was occasionally questioned and she

was sometimes assumed to be from “the government.” In a state with high levels of surveillance (especially of low-wage migrant men) and control of its transient population, this assumption is understandable. In such instances, she was quick to reassure participants of the neutrality of the research being undertaken and the protection of informants through techniques such as usage of pseudonyms. Her own body, then, became a visible tool through which she could mark out her difference within a working-class migrant space, but that also allowed her to then ask questions and display curiosity that would have been inappropriate for a complete “insider.” Because of her position as a middle-class South Asian female, she was seen as “out of place,” yet needing more protection from the perceived dangers of the city. Despite her more privileged class status in the city, her migrant male interlocutors took it upon themselves to act as male guardians, at times escorting her to the bus stop or warning her about potential dangers in the city. This could also be seen as a means of displaying masculinity (see Kathiravelu 2016, chapter 4, for a larger discussion of this) and performing their knowledge of the city.

The Body as Technology

This section interrogates the ways in which the rationalization of the male migrant body as a form of technology allows for neglect and paternalism by employers and state entities responsible for migrant welfare. Much of this begins with the routinization and discipline of the migrant through managing his time and mobility. Most low-wage migrant men live in dormitories, which are often at the edges of the city, and experience a highly regimented life as workers in Singapore and Dubai. They are typically bussed into and out of their worksites at the beginning and end of each day, with little opportunity to enter or see other parts of the city. These enforced mobilities thus effectively disaffiliate them from the rest of the

metropolis and urban population. Some do not even get a day off a week, but more typically, male low-wage migrants have a day off a week, when they cook, rest, socialize, and engage in maintaining transnational links like remitting money back to their home countries and calling family. Migrant workers describe the predictable and repetitive nature of work life in the adopted city. Here, it is striking that men working in two different cities both emphasize the rigid structuring of their workday and the norms imposed on their bodies for expectations of work or rest.

> "*My work will end by 5.30 pm. So we have to load our equipment from our worksite into our lorry. After that we will get in the lorry and move on to our office. At our office, we will unload the equipment and wait for the lorry to send us back to our dormitory. Free time starts upon our arrival to the dormitory. . . . I will take a good bath and rest. Later on I will cook a meal for myself. If I have extra time, I will watch movies. I watch downloaded movies through my hand phone. After that I will fall asleep*." (Ramesh, air-con technician)
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> *"My work usually starts at 7 am and ends by 3 pm in Dubai. I worked in Shaik complex. Those are my fixed posting. After cleaning the complex I am done. At times I have to go to my general manager's house. My general manager is from a very educated family. They do not know how to cook and make hot drinks. They have two maids, but they are from China and Sri Lanka. So my general manager usually tells me to come to their house to make Indian coffee. My general manager has a lot of Indian clients, so he will want me to make coffee for them. Working in my general manager's house is considered as overtime. At times I will start making coffee at 4 pm and end at 11 pm. I will keep making coffee."* (Mohammed, general maintenance worker)

As with other jobs considered low skilled, there was little variation in the types of work and jobs that migrant men were paid to do. However, they were often expected to undertake additional ad hoc labor for their employers, sometimes unpaid or paid token sums for. Part of this routinization of everyday life was the inability to dictate one's own mobility and leisure time. Work was articulated as repetitive and uninteresting, prompting comparisons with their bodies as a type of technology—specifically a machine that is programmed for only a single repeated task (see Kathiravelu 2016, where this is further developed). These statements also express a sentiment where migrants see their work as devalued—not primarily in terms of the low wages that they are paid, but because of the lack of acknowledgment by supervisors, employers, and a larger public. In this trope, only certain parts or elements of the body are noticed, acknowledged, or seen as important. These are the parts of the body capable of physical and strenuous labor. The intellectual or skilled labor that is also necessary in carrying out many of these jobs is disregarded.

Within this trope where the body is seen as a technology, on par with other machines used in construction or factories, it is not regarded as needing the types of care and maintenance that a fully human (and middle-class) body requires. One of the outcomes of this discursive construction is that migrant laborers do not enjoy the same standards of living that other urban residents in Singapore or Dubai are accustomed to. A construction worker living in a worker dormitory in Singapore describes the abject conditions under which men like him live. In addition to his descriptions, migrants like him also complain of frequent infestations of bed bugs and rats within their living spaces, which employers pay no heed to.

> "*It is bad. There are no proper facilities for cooking, eating, and resting. The kitchen and canteen area are very dirty. No one will feel like eating at that place. We end up eating on the road as it is cleaner than the canteen area. So imagine how dirty it will be? We have to queue up for using the toilet as it is*

> *overpopulated with people. Even the toilets are very dirty. We have a single fan to support ten to fifteen of us. It is very stuffy and humid. Sometimes I regret coming over to Singapore. Facilities are better in India*." (Selvom, piping and electrical worker)

The low-wage migrant's body is also a site of neglect. Workplace injuries and accidents impact the migrant worker's body and often render bodies less productive or unproductive. This is especially the case when working on high-rise construction projects, which form the majority of new developments in both Dubai and Singapore. In cases of injury that results in migrants being unable to continue work, employers are often unsympathetic, and workers wait months or years for appropriate compensation, which often never materializes (Chok and Ng 2017; Human Rights Watch 2009). Once unproductive, migrant bodies are considered irrelevant and an externality to be quickly discarded. Through the rationalization of the low-wage migrant body as "machine," employers and state agencies that deal with temporary migrants' welfare reify a dehumanizing rhetoric that allows for overwork and neglect of migrants' bodies.

The Unproductive Body

A corollary of perceiving migrant men as machines is to view their need for leisure time as unnecessary. Consequently, low-wage migrant bodies at rest are conceived purely as unproductive. This section describes how the resting migrant male body is perceived and interpellated to a space that is at the margins and away from the majority and mainstream of urban life.

For many low-wage migrant workers, their daily rhythms consist of periods of intense, difficult, and dangerous work, followed by periods of enforced rest and boredom. For these

migrants the city is not a space of endless possibility (or at least possibilities that they can access), but instead is a place of potential liability. Within rapidly developing cities like Singapore and Dubai, public spaces with unrestricted access to all are quickly disappearing. Instead, they are being taken over by commercial zones such as malls, theme parks, and even private beaches. This neoliberalization of public space has been acknowledged as a widespread trend, and its consequences for poor and marginalized peoples have been well documented (Low 2006; Peck and Ticknell 2002). Low-wage migrant workers are doubly discriminated in these configurations; while they cannot economically afford to participate in such leisure activities, they are also socially stigmatized and seen as inappropriate within such spaces. Their perceived undesirability is not just linked to perceptions of them as dirty, smelly, and sexual predators, but it is also situated in one-dimensional understandings of them as "workers," with only the need to accumulate capital. Within this frame, the worker's body is seen as out of place when passive or at play, and not at work.

The migrant worker's body, when not on the worksite or visibly engaged in productive labor whether inside or outside the domestic sphere, is seen as out of place. Most Singaporeans avoid migrant enclaves like Lucky Plaza (for Filipino domestic workers) and Little India (South Asian low-wage migrant men) not just because of the discomfort of their own bodies being minorities "out of place," but also because of the visibility of low-wage migrant bodies engaged in leisure activities, that is, being unproductive. Similarly, most middle-class residents of Dubai never enter areas of the city where labor camps are housed, or in the older parts of "old Dubai" where many low-wage migrants find cheap accommodation and where there is an associated thriving economy. The shared use of public space would force the tacit acknowledgment that migrant workers too need time off and spaces of leisure and relaxation, and that the city must also cater to them. However, this does not fit easily within the larger state discourse of them as "needed but not wanted," to be used

and discarded, and here only to accumulate capital (Yeoh 2006). This singular view is morphing slowly, with much sympathy and interest in recent years particularly over the situation of female domestic workers. This has in large part been through the work of migrant advocacy groups as well as independent media producers. Despite public acknowledgment that low-wage migrant rights must be protected in terms of payment of wages and other such issues, however, there is little agreement over the need for equal access to city spaces for these migrants as well.

Unproductive, low-wage male migrant bodies are also equated with being threatening when at leisure and unsupervised. This is especially apparent in (middle-class) Singaporeans' avoidance of Little India on Sundays, when most low-wage migrant workers get the day off and congregate in the space to meet with friends, remit money back home, and access other aspects of the ethnic economy (Chang 2000). Little India on Sundays can be read as an example of a "nervous landscape," where an identity-based politics of containment has failed and instead produces anxiety, especially when the separation of space between bodies is minimal, and they are actually forced to touch (Bryne 2003). In fact, many Singaporeans even of Indian descent avoid Little India altogether for fear of close and embodied encounters with a lower-classed, dark-skinned male migrant Other (Henderson 2008). Here, Mohammed, an Indian man, describes the heightened humiliation he experiences when ostracized by a coethnic, someone who may look and sound like him.

> "*Local Singaporeans will come to little India, but they rarely talk to us; they seem to have some kind of prestige issue talking to us. . . . Local Indians and we are the same. We share the same language, race, but there is a difference [in] the way they treat us. They will not respect us when speaking. The local feels as though they lost their status when we are there. When we stand beside them, they will move away*." (Mohammed, construction worker)

Often Singaporean Indians also regard low-wage South Asian migrants as “uncivilized” and as potential threats to their physical safety. One key example of how this anxiety manifests even at a collective level can be seen in the response to the Little India riots of 2013, where several public vehicles were destroyed and riot police injured in the culturally South Asian neighborhood in Singapore. This riot was triggered by the accidental death of a low-wage migrant worker from India who was run over by a private bus that provides transportation to and from workers’ dormitories. The Singaporean state’s reaction to the riots was not just to deport without trial a large number of Indian workers suspected to have been involved in the rioting, but also to introduce an alcohol ban in the area (Lim 2013). This ruling was made ostensibly because low-wage migrants in the area became intoxicated with alcohol, lost control, and initiated riots. This ruling, in doing so, makes a decidedly normative judgment about the propensity of unproductive migrants to use their leisure time in frivolous and harmful ways. The move to ban alcohol consumption in public zones in Little India, while being coherent with the Singaporean state’s paternalism, is also one that was, first and foremost, specifically targeted at a particular group to discipline the bodies of those within that group. For low-wage migrants who must engage in “timepass” (Jeffrey 2010) without incurring substantial economic cost, this closes off an already scarce avenue of sociality and pleasure.

Low-wage migrants bodies are thus not just controlled at work but also outside of it. In addition to the disciplining of their bodies and time by employers and the state, these men are also subject to the public gaze, which paints them as dangerous and delinquent, having no place within the city, except as laboring bodies.

Bodies of Simultaneous Affinity and Difference

The migrant body works in spaces such as Singapore and Dubai as both a marker of difference but also, simultaneously, as a basis of affinity. While the foreign, working-class body creates an immediate distancing effect for middle-class residents, the shared experience of the racialized body is one that has potential to bring these disparate populations together. In Dubai, for instance, intraethnic communities of aid and welfare (Kathiravelu 2012) loosely formed around a shared ethnicity and language, particularly between Malayalee working-class migrants and their middle-class counterparts.

On the other hand, Tamil migrants seek out Singapore as a destination because of the perceived ethnic and linguistic affinities associated with this postcolonial city. As Singapore's minority Indian population is primarily composed of ethnic Tamils, for migrants from Tamil Nadu, there is a "special" connection to the place, as the following quote illustrates. This affinity is often linked to particular spaces, where seeing similar bodies, hearing a recognizable language, and tasting familiar foods brings comfort. It is a highly embodied and corporeal affinity. Many migrants like Ramesh describe how Singapore doesn't always feel like a completely foreign space to them:

> "*I have this special interest . . . mainly due to the number of Indians I see at Little India. It is very heart-warming to see so many Indians at one place. In Singapore wherever you go there is a mixture of cultures. I feel secured and happy when I see fellow Indians. It is based on my personal comfort. It reminds me of India, where most of them are your fellow people. I do gain more confident in such places.*" (Ramesh, thirty-seven, air-con technician)

Within the context of an expected welcome, the denial of corporeal and cultural affinity by the coethnic Other causes much emotional dissonance and feelings of rejection and exclusion that are affectively experienced. This series of interview excerpts all speak powerfully to the

exclusions and affronts Indian migrant men face, despite the embodied phenotypic, linguistic, and cultural similarities that they expect will act as a basis for more inclusive interactions.

> *"Once, I saw a vacant seat in a bus. The person sitting next to the vacant seat was an Indian guy. I felt comfortable when I saw an Indian man. When I went to sit in the vacant seat, the Indian guy moved to other available seats. The local looked down on me just because I was a foreign Indian. If non-Indians do this, I won't get so offended. It affects me because it is a fellow Indian who did it. That was very sad . . . Local Indians and we are the same. We share the same language, race, but there is a difference the way they treat us."* (Hussein, construction worker)

> "*Sometimes when I walk alone at night, people tend to move away from me. I just leave it as they do not disturb me. Sometimes in the MRT, I will ask directions from fellow Indians. They will give me a reply in English. So this kind of thing does happen. Some of them will communicate in Tamil if they are with their own friends but communicate in English to us. It happens*." (Raju, crane operator)

> *"They don't have to talk for a long duration; just a greeting and a little bit of care will make a big difference. End of the day, our descendants are all from the same country. I really feel sad thinking about it."* (Kumar, electrician)

The initial expectations that many migrants may have about the hospitality of their host country are usually revised after arrival and encounters with the city. This eventuates in migrant men's conceptions about the place of their own bodies within the city changing with time. One of the ways this shift manifests is in learning how to negotiate interpersonal relations within the urban. This may take the form of internalizing their marginalized status and retreating to the peripheries. Or, as in the case of Saravanan quoted next, manipulating

the body becomes a way to establish connections, albeit fleeting ones. Projecting a pleasant and nonthreatening demeanor in fleeting encounters with locals is highlighted as key by one migrant man:

> "*During the starting stage of my career, I felt awkward. I was afraid that they might not accept me, looking at my appearance. I had an inferiority complex due to the work I was doing. Now I feel different. I have experience talking to locals. They are very friendly. The key to this problem is a smile. If you smile at the locals, they will smile.*" (Saravanan, construction worker)

Beyond biological phenotype, more subtle cues such as type of clothing, hairstyles, and, of course, smell become the ways in which difference is established and perceived. The olfactory, in particular, has come to become an important marker of difference within the public domain in Singapore, particularly in relation to migrants. The significance of the olfactory came into sharpest light in 2013 during a dispute between a Singaporean Indian family and their migrant Chinese neighbors. This quarrel was centered on the fact that the non-Singaporean family had complained to local council authorities about the smells of curry emanating from the house next door and into their home. This incident, which garnered significant national and international media coverage, brought the tenuous nature of dense urban living into sharp relief. While public outrage was reserved for the new immigrants who were seen not to be respectful of the city's multicultural and diverse culture, there is largely silence about the everyday forms of embodied discrimination that low-wage migrants experience. These nonverbal signals given out by a distanced public are internalized by low-wage migrants themselves as we can see from the following quote. Here, an Indian migrant describes the embodied ways in which others on the public train network show their disgust and discomfort with the presence of men who obviously engage in low-wage, "dirty" work.

"*When we travel in the MRT, people tend to cover their noses. I really feel very sad when this happens; at that moment I cannot wait to leave the MRT. It hurts me badly. We are normally smelly because of the hard work we do. It is human nature to sweat. We try our best to keep ourselves clean but sometimes it happen[s] without our knowledge.*" (Murali, safety officer)

In racist representations, Singaporean Indians are also often depicted as foul smelling, because of the coconut oil in their hair, or because of the smell of curry emanating from the pores of their skin. However, there is little sympathy, even from coethnics, for the low-wage Indian migrant who becomes an extension of that trope. In fact, in attempting to distance themselves from the stereotype of the smelly Indian, Singaporean Indians embody a less ethnicized affect—speaking in English and expressing distaste of strong odors. In Dubai, however, where Indians are the majority ethnic group, and where a shared precarity as temporary migrants shapes everyday existence for both the middle and working class, there appears to be more co-ethnic solidarity (Kathiravelu 2012).

Embodying the Ideal Urban Resident

Habitus can be understood as a set of behavioral attitudes and habits that make up a social identity (Bourdieu 1990). It draws attention to the symbolic meaning of our actions. Habitus is inescapable as a marker of identity because it is ingrained and resides in the body. Thus, the corporeality of the body is an important part of the habitus that needs to be managed. The earlier parts of this chapter have discussed more visible aspects of the male Indian low-wage migrant's corporeality. Here, this chapter discusses how the marginalized male migrant body must actively negotiate the material spaces of the city and its diversity.

For many low-wage migrants from small towns or villages in their home country, migration is often the first extended experience with big-city life, as internal migration to a metropolis in India is not often a route taken prior to international mobility. Singapore and Dubai are especially known to be hypermodern cityscapes with high-tech solutions embedded within the built environment. For these migrants from India, the everyday forms of technology that middle-class urban residents take for granted in the urban environment must be negotiated and learned. The use of taken-for-granted devices like the ATM must be demonstrated, often with guidance from a friend or coworker who has had more experience in the host city. Other forms of technology are not so easily taught or observed, and they involve for some migrants overcoming an embodied hesitation and fear. This type of trepidation for many migrant men stems from the fear that their bodies are out of place within the realm of the modern metropolis, as the following quote demonstrates.

> "*I felt nervous to get on the escalator. It is something I have never seen before. I was afraid I will fall off the escalator. I am very used to taking the staircase in India; here it was very modern*." (Kanagaraj, electrical supervisor)

Fear can also result from confrontations with embodied difference in a racially and culturally foreign Other. For low-wage migrants coming from a highly homogeneous linguistic and ethnic environment, encountering and dealing with diversity within the city is one of the key challenges that they face—not just as urban residents but also as employees attempting to fulfill job roles effectively. For migrants from Tamil Nadu, having to work alongside and closely with Bangladeshi and Chinese migrants is commonplace in the city-state of Singapore. Their work often deals with technical issues, where they have to cooperate across a worksite. These considerations are rarely taken into account by employers, and individual men have to work out their own solutions in such situations. The following quotes describe how the lack of language skills can induce an embodied feeling of fear.

"*Yes it was very scary. Bangladeshi workers are the majority in my ex-company. I had faced several communication problems. It was very tough at first. Day by day I learned gestures to communicate with them. It worked out, and I had no problem after that*." (Rajendran)

"*I felt afraid when I see a multiracial community. There are Malays, Chinese, and other nationalities living here. I was afraid to approach and talk to them as I do not know how would they judge me? It took me some time to learn the language and communication in Singapore. It was really very bad at first but as days passed, I manage to catch hold of the language. English was the most difficult though. I learnt most of my communication skills from my colleagues. They guided me through my learning journey.*" (Mariappan, wiring and piping worker)

"*There was a lot of misunderstanding between us. The main cause was language. I had two Chinese bosses and one Indian supervisor as my superiors. Both the Chinese bosses always scold me. I get scolded almost every day. They will use Chinese words to scold me. Most of the time I don't understand why they were scolding me. I feel very depressed during these times. It also good not to know Chinese, as this will provoke the situation further. The Indian supervisors are very friendly. We do not face any language barrier as both of us are able to speak Tamil. He helps my friends and me. He is very understanding and kind as well*." (Selvom, piping and electrical worker)

The issues of language were also present for Tamil migrants in Dubai, where the working language on sites was usually Hindi or Urdu, and Arabic was spoken by employers. Within such a space, Hussein describes how even the sight of someone who spoke the same mother tongue was a source of comfort.

> "*I felt upset when I left my house to work abroad. I had many thoughts on leaving my family and parents behind. I had no previous experience leaving my family and parents before, not even to neighboring states within India. So going to Dubai which was considered to be very far in my understanding was very difficult to digest and overcome. While working in Dubai, I faced challenges in understanding their language. As we know, there is a lot of difference between our language and their language. Language was a major communication barrier. At that moment seeing our fellow countryman gives us a special happiness. It is really comfortable to communicate with our own people without a communication barrier*" (Hussein, construction worker)

In describing the barriers that language poses, Mahen compares the working and living environment in Dubai, where he had worked before, to Singapore, where he now works.

> "*In Singapore it was much easier. I felt it was more difficult in Dubai. In Singapore there are Tamil-speaking people. In Dubai most of them speak in Hindi and Arabic. Therefore, it was really difficult for me. I am from Tamil Nadu; we only know how to speak in Tamil. It took me months to learn Hindi. I started learning Hindi while observing people's gestures. I even use to write notes, when people speak Hindi and Arabic. It took me six months to get used to the language*."

The affinity of a shared language (and ethnicity) often makes a city more hospitable. However, like Mahen, many low-wage migrants learn skills or languages on the job, as a means of assimilating into the host city and so that they can communicate with fellow workers. This type of labor and self-taught entrepreneurial behavior is hardly ever rewarded or even recognized by fellow residents or employers as remarkable. Migrants themselves,

while expressing pride in being fluent in the lingua franca of the city, also see it as a part of becoming a full urban resident, wholly embedded in the structures and flows of the city.

Embodying a good urban resident involves other aspects of encountering and living with diversity as well—not just in communicating across different linguistic registers. Much of this centers on the workspace or public spaces, as we have seen from the earlier examples. But the domestic or domesticated and shared spaces of the worker dormitory are also zones where embodied forms of diversity must be encountered and negotiated. Many migrants express discomfort and even disgust at the unsanitary practices of differently raced migrant Others.

> "*It was terrible. The environment is very dirty and unhygienic; no one cares about cleanliness. There are people from different nationalities; they have their own way of living. Some are not acceptable. Some will spit betel leaf on the ground. It is very disgusting. The toilet stinks; sometimes I even regret going to the toilet. It was very bad last time; now it has improved a lot*." (Kanagaraj, electrical supervisor)

These practices of learning to use technology and strategies to live and work with diverse Others are constitutive of "learning" the city. They are part of the embodied knowledge that migrants take with them, but that, together with learning new languages, is also not given recognition as part of the difficult path to becoming well-integrated urban residents. Low-wage migrants do this kind of "diversity work" that necessarily involves sustained embodied interactions without any support from human resource departments or state agencies. This is yet another way in which the embodied but also intellectual labor the low-wage migrants undertake is marginalized.

Disembodied Practices of Friendship and Kinship

With the rise of information communication technology (ICT) and social media, many migrants rely on social networks that are more "virtual" than "real" for emotional, as well as more tangible, support (Vertovec 2004). In fact, after the increased restrictions on movement and recreational activities in the Little India district of Singapore, many migrant men report shifting much of their contact with friends and relatives to mediums such as Facebook or Whatsapp. For men staying in outerlying labor camps in difficult-to-access regions of the city, maintaining contact through social media is also a more inexpensive way to maintain social lives and connections in the host country (as well as, of course, to family back home).

> "*It is totally different now. If I have any problem, I can use my hand phone immediately to contact my family. Previously, you need a lot of money to make calls to India.*" (Hussein, construction worker)

> "*Hand phone was important even in those days. Now it has become more important as it has more functions that support communication. WhatsApp and Facebook have really helped me to do video calls to my sister. She will then pass the phone to my parents. I feel very happy that such application can help me to see my family. It feels as though I am in India when I use such application to communicate with my family*" (Mariappan, wiring and piping worker)

These interactions on cheap Facetime and Whatsapp calls take on a different mode of embodiment, where voices and images of the self represent a larger totality in their absence. This mode of contact is, however, very constant, and acts as a reminder of the more embodied and offline interactions to come. The constant rhythm of communication, however, is not wholly positive. Along with being intimately involved in the lives of their family abroad, many men also become subject to household disputes and frequent requests for remittances. Most men also did not report accessing the Internet to reach out to social services or embassies, or obtain information about their legal rights in the host country. These

disembodied transnational practices can thus be seen as extending the social sphere of the marginalized migrant, rather than creating new ones—both augmenting their connections within the migrant city but also linking them to spaces back home. It allows them to live out social and emotional lives online, when offline spaces are hostile and unfriendly to their presence.

Concluding Thoughts

The contradictions between the fully embodied labor that low-wage migrants undertake and the lack of the visible and tangible presence of their bodies within many spaces of the city makes these case studies of Singapore and Dubai particularly stark. Bodies here, as elsewhere, are discursively formed and also discursively make up the material and social landscape of the city, through their performative iterations and interpellations. In the case of highly authoritarian states with bifurcated migration regimes such as Dubai and Singapore, these tussles to define what bodies mean and their right to the city typically leave low-status migrants disenfranchised and disaffiliated from the larger urban commons. In addition to acknowledging the role of structural factors such as immigration policy and lack of legal protections for low-wage migrants, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that it is also everyday embodied interactions that constitute the exclusions, stigmatization, and discrimination that characterize much of low-wage migrant lives in the city.

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