BORDERS AND THE EXCLUSION OF MIGRANT BODIES IN
SINGAPORE’S GLOBAL CITY-STATE

by

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ABSTRACT

Feminist geographic debates have drawn attention to the multi-scalar role of borders as processes of social differentiation that are reproduced and inscribed on the bodies of migrant workers in everyday life. This thesis explores these questions in the context of Singapore’s global city-state where the increasing visibility of low-wage foreign workers in local residential areas has become a subject of tense neighbourhood frictions that frequently bring borders into sharp relief. Using the case-study of a recent public furore surrounding the proposed location of a foreign worker dormitory in Serangoon Gardens, one of Singapore's well-known middle-class estates, it examines the ways that migrant exclusions in local residential areas are informed by border anxieties and practices that mark out the labouring bodies of foreign workers as alien and “out of place.” The Serangoon Gardens incident exhibited a moment of tension whereby gendered, racialised, and class-based meanings attached to specific forms of flexible labour (particularly foreign construction and domestic work) were inserted into wider debates about nation, community, and the socio-spatial preservation of middle-class identity and belonging. Insofar as Singapore’s growth remains undergirded by the systematic in-flow of low-wage foreign workers to service its infrastructural and social reproductive labour needs, a study of borders helps illuminate the inherent contradictions and barriers of mobility within the global city as an exclusionary landscape. This thesis argues that the deeply marginalised place of foreign workers in society stems predominantly from the constitutive role of the state’s managerial migration regime in shaping everyday social meanings and practices that construct these workers as unassimilable subjects within the city-state. The outcome of these multi-scalar forms of bordering practices has been to produce a transient, depoliticised, and governable migrant population in the interests of security and economic prosperity in Singapore’s global city-state.

Keywords: Singapore, Borders, Migrant workers, Social exclusion, Global city
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

We asked for workers but human beings came.

(Frisch 1967; quoted in Leitner 1995, 264)

The presence of a large group of people, with different habits and customs, [who are] unfamiliar with our social norms, can create suspicion and anxiety. [...] If we want more foreign workers, we must collectively make adjustments to resolve the social problems. If we want fewer foreign workers, we must be prepared for slower growth, higher costs, lower service level, and delays in the completion of our flats, roads and rail lines.

(Mah Bow Tan; Parliamentary Debates, October 20, 2008)

Singapore’s current push into remaking itself as a cosmopolitan, global city has prompted an exceptional inflow of low-/un-skilled migrant workers (referred to locally as “foreign workers”) into the city-state in recent years. Between 2006 and 2008, for example, the number of low-wage foreign workers swelled by 157,000, sparking an increase in 3.5 percent of the country’s total population within the short span of two years (The Straits Times, October 14, 2008)\(^1\). Concentrated within the construction, domestic service, and manufacturing and services industries, foreign workers perform the bulk of low-wage and “3D” (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) labour that are increasingly shunned by locals, but vital to the smooth functioning and economic growth of the city-state (Sassen 1996, 2000; Yeoh 2004b, 2006; Y. Chin 2008). Inasmuch as they provide a critical source of cheap and flexible labour, their growing visibility in public and local residential areas has become a subject of tense neighbourhood frictions that routinely bring borders into sharp relief. These tensions reveal the contradictions that arise between the state’s economic imperative for foreign capital, on the one hand, and local anxieties stemming from the large-scale presence of migrant Others in the city-state, on the other. As Max Frisch articulates, difficulties emerge when foreign workers are treated primarily as abstract units of labour with little account of their social reproductive needs and physical embodiment in the city.

\(^1\) For a more detailed breakdown of population figures between 1970 and 2008, see Table 1 in Chapter 4.
Frisch’s oft-quoted statement on Germany’s *gastarbeiter* (meaning: “guest worker”) programme alludes to the historical experience of metropolitan centres in Western Europe from the late 1940s until early 1970s that utilised (even today) contract labour migration as a means of overcoming their domestic labour shortages particularly for low-/un-skilled workers (Miles 1982; Leitner 1995; Miles and Brown 2003). The intention was to procure a cheap and flexible pool of migrant surplus labour to which the state was minimally obligated to, but which allowed a high degree of control to be exercised over these workers given their political/legal constraints and enforced transient nature. The presence of temporary migrant workers is now ubiquitous among high-growth economies in the Middle East and Asia Pacific region amidst intensifying patterns of global restructuring and the internationalisation of capital (Ong 1996, 2006; Chang and Ling 2000; Coe and Kelly 2000; Yeoh 2004b). Age-old tensions between capital and labour have remained persistent, however, which is seen clearly in the case of Singapore’s global city-state. This dilemma is succinctly captured in Aristide Zolberg’s (1988, 31, quoted in Leitner 1995, 262) remark that it is the “very characteristics that make these human beings suitable as *labour* [that] renders them undesirable from the perspective of *membership* in the receiving society” (original emphasis).

Discussions in feminist geography and migration studies have drawn attention to the multi-scalar role of borders as processes of social differentiation that are reproduced and inscribed on the bodies of migrant workers in everyday life (Nagar *et al.* 2002; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Silvey 2006). In the case of neoliberal migration policies adopted by many labour receiving countries, borders function not only as classificatory regimes that position in-migrants as workers divided amongst particular categories of skilled and unskilled labour, but also as spatial forms of governmentality where difference—based on varying attributes of class, race, gender, and/or nationality—is disciplined and managed “in the interest of security and economic prosperity” (McDowell 2008, 497; see also Foucault 1991; Ong 1999; 2006; Kofman 2005). In other words, the “edges and entry points of the nation” (Silvey 2006, 72) are continually reinforced and
enacted through institutional practices and everyday norms of behaviour that regulate the conduct of these racialised, classed, and gendered subjects across different scales of the nation, locality, household, and the body. Borders are thus understood as expressions of the inherent contradictions between transnational capital and embodied labour, even as they are constructed to resolve these tensions through strategies of inclusion and exclusion that ultimately facilitate the accumulation of capital within migrant-receiving countries.

Whereas studies of globalisation have tended to focus on abstract networks of capital, commodity, and information flows, a critical approach views these transnational flows not simply as unstructured processes but rather “in terms of the tensions between [embodied] movements and social orders” (Ong 1999, 6). In this thesis, I am concerned with how low-wage foreign workers are unequally incorporated into Singapore’s global city-state, and the ways that they are disciplined, managed, and excluded by bordering practices evoked across multiple spheres of the nation, locality, household, and the body. My aim is to tease out the rationalities that shape the discursive meanings attached to “foreign worker” as a category embedded not only in processes of capital accumulation and state legislation, but also one that is reproduced and inscribed on the racialised, classed, and gendered bodies of these workers in everyday social life. Thus I situate my research in the growing body of feminist geographic work on globalisation and migration studies that takes heed of multi-scalar and intersectional approaches to understanding how inequality is actively shaped and constituted by processes of global restructuring that connect with social, political, and material practices across transnational, community, household, and bodily scales (Nagar et al. 2002; Silvey 2006; McDowell 2008).

I ground my inquiry on a case-study analysis of a recent public furore over the proposed location of a foreign worker dormitory in Serangoon Gardens Estate, one of Singapore’s more well-established neighbourhoods. The remarkable surge in demand for foreign workers had exacerbated the ongoing housing shortage for these workers, which prompted the state to seek temporary accommodation facilities among unused state properties as the construction of more
permanent dormitories came underway. In Serangoon Gardens, the state’s decision to convert a vacant public school into a temporary dormitory facility for foreign workers was met with significant levels of ambivalence and unease among residents who perceived the siting as a transgression of the neighbourhood’s moral-social order. The Serangoon Gardens incident exhibited a moment of tension whereby gendered, racialised, and class-based meanings attached to specific forms of flexible labour (particularly foreign construction and domestic work) were inserted into wider debates about nation, community, and the socio-spatial preservation of middle-class identity and belonging. Insofar as Singapore’s growth remains undergirded by the systematic in-flow of foreign workers to service its infrastructural and social reproductive labour needs, an analytical focus on borders helps illuminate the inherent contradictions and barriers of mobility within the global city as an exclusionary landscape.

The research objectives of my thesis are two-fold. First, I wish to examine how state immigration policy functions as a bordering practice that feeds into the socio-spatial exclusion of foreign workers as transient outsiders within Singapore’s global city-state. Second, I seek to analyse the border tensions that have arisen among the local community concerning Singapore’s growing foreign worker population, and the ways that these conflicts are shaped and informed by social structures of class, race, gender, and nationality. My thesis objectives are guided by the following research questions:

- What types of bordering practices have emerged in response to the increasing presence of low-wage foreign workers in Singapore’s global city-state?
- What particular meanings are attached to “foreign worker” as a discursive category in Singapore’s stratified migration regime, and how does the appropriation of this category in state and popular discourses contribute to and/or reinforce the social exclusion of low-wage foreign workers in everyday society?
- How, and to what extent, is the politics of distinction between locals and foreign workers influenced by social hierarchies of class, race, gender, and nationality? In what ways are these distinctions mobilised by the global unevenness of transnational labour migration flows?
The thesis is organised as follows. In the second chapter, I establish the theoretical framework of my thesis research by examining the literature on feminist approaches to globalisation and migration studies in relation to borders, processes of flexible accumulation, embodiment, and questions of place and identity. I then proceed to outline my research methodology in the third chapter. Using a discourse analysis approach, I draw upon a range of secondary sources to inform my analysis of Singapore’s immigration policy and the Serangoon Gardens controversy. In the fourth chapter, I contextualise my study by examining Singapore’s state-led project of “going global” (Goh C.T. 1999), while looking in-depth at its neoliberal immigration policy concerning low-wage foreign workers. In the fifth chapter, I analyse the Serangoon Gardens controversy as a case-study to examine the racialised, class-based, and gendered nature of bordering practices that are emerging in Singapore in response to its growing and visible foreign worker population. I then follow in the sixth chapter to examine the wider implications of the controversy concerning the place of foreign workers in Singapore’s global city-state. In the final chapter, I offer concluding remarks to my thesis and suggest directions for future research.
CHAPTER II

Theoretical framework

The boundary is the place of intercourse with the foreigner.

(Fawcett 1918; quoted in Newman and Paasi 1998, 186)

The theoretical concerns of my thesis are drawn primarily from the work of feminist geographers in migration studies which emphasises the constitutive role of borders in shaping unequal geographies of spatial mobility, difference, and belonging across a variety of sites and scales (Nagar et al. 2002; Silvey 2004a, 2006; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; McDowell 2008). Using borders as an analytical framework, I apply these ideas to a range of interdisciplinary debates organised around three areas of inquiry: i) borders and managed migration regimes; ii) feminist work on global restructuring and migrant labour; and iii) geographies of exclusion. In so doing, I undertake to examine how migrant bodies are differentially inserted into Singapore’s political economy, and the ways that borders are evoked across multiple scales to discipline, manage, and exclude these transient labouring bodies within the global city-state.

In what follows, I first examine how feminist geographers have conceptualised borders in relation to processes of global restructuring and transnational labour migration, while relating these ideas to the emergence of neoliberal migration regimes where migrants are granted different rights of entry and citizenship on the basis of their utility to the economies of labour-importing states. Second, I draw upon feminist political economy to inquire into the social contours of labour market regimes—that is, the ways that they are influenced by uneven structures of race, class, gender, and nationality, and how these inequalities are reproduced and inscribed on specific bodies. Lastly, I utilise the literature on moral geographies and social exclusion to examine how acts of bordering are implicated in social relations of power that reinforce distinctions of Otherness within the spatial ordering of purified landscapes.
Prior to the discussion on feminist research pertaining to borders and migration, it is helpful to first establish what distinguishes feminist scholarship from other intellectual perspectives. Griselda Pollock (1996) has described feminist scholarship as primarily concerned with how discursive categories of the social are implicated within a complex web of power relations manifested through various forms of oppression. Inasmuch as “gender” is an organising analytical concept, feminism may be broadly interpreted as a theoretical and political undertaking that challenges the structures of knowledge and power that organise the dominant socio-spatial ordering of society, often focusing on the effects of these structures on everyday social relationships. In this regard, feminist research is also characterised by its intersectional, multi-scalar, and relational mode of inquiry (Nagar et al. 2002; Silvey 2006; McDowell 2008).

**Borders and managed migration regimes**

*Thinking about borders*

Recent theorisations of the border have dealt primarily with questions of differentiated access to mobility and the socio-spatial production of difference, where borders are seen not merely as physical demarcations on a map or landscape but also as *processes* related to notions of Othering that delineate the discursive lines between “us/them”; “here/there”; and “insiders/outiders” (Paasi 1998; van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; Newman 2006a, 2006b; Jones 2009). Rather than viewing the border as a static and naturalised entity, geographers have increasingly emphasised the importance of analysing the ways that difference is constructed and institutionalised through bordering (or “b/ordering”) discourses and practices in everyday social life (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; Newman 2006a). Borders are thus understood as social constructions that articulate dominant ideas about “who and what belongs in particular places and the kinds of activities and practices that belong to a place” (Wastl-Walter and Staeheli 2004, 141; see also Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996). As spatial expressions of power, they determine the nature of group belonging, affiliation, and membership within a particular territory or community, and the
ways that difference is managed and contained through strategies of inclusion and exclusion (Newman 2006a).

Drawing on post-structural notions of power, feminist geographers have asserted the importance of understanding borders as processes mutually intertwined with social hierarchies of gender, race, nation, and class (Nagar et al. 2002; Silvey 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; McDowell 2008). Importantly, they view these social relations and norms as constitutive of borders and bordering practices rather than simply coincidental to them (Silvey 2004b). Jennifer Hyndman’s (2004) historical analysis of the Canadian immigration system, for example, reveals how people of particular racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds were strategically excluded by explicit policies aimed at deterring them from settling permanently into the country. One such legislation was the $50 “head tax” introduced in 1885 (raised to $500 in 1903) for male Chinese migrants coming into Canada, which was complemented by the simultaneous denial of entry for Chinese women as it was presumed that this move would minimise the likelihood of marriages among Chinese men and women and thereby their chances of long-term settlement. Elsewhere, she develops the idea of a “geopolitics of mobility” to argue the ways that international borders are more porous to global capital flows than to people’s mobility, which varies substantially across categories of race, gender, class, nationality, immigrant status, and so on (Hyndman 2000).

By emphasising borders as “geographically and analytically dynamic sites” (Mountz and Hyndman 2006, 451), feminist geographers also advocate the importance of locating power relations at finer scales of the body and household (Pratt 1998; Nagar et al. 2002; Mountz 2004; Silvey 2006). As Silvey (2006) argues, traditional assumptions about scale often reflect gendered and hierarchical notions of scale in which “higher” scales such as the masculinised domains of “national” and “international” are emphasised over “lesser” scales, such as “household” and the “body,” which are routinely disregarded and constructed as feminine (see also Gibson-Graham 1996; Marston 2000). Geraldine Pratt’s (1998, 287) study of Filipina domestic workers in
Vancouver highlights the multiple ways in which racialised, gendered, and class-based meanings attached to domestic work as a category of labour are discursively “inscribed on Filipina’s bodies, [and] mediated through the geographies of nation and home” in their daily work experiences (see also Chang and Ling 2000; Parreñas 2001). Along a similar vein, Alison Mountz’s (2004) research on the Canadian government’s response to the arrival of “boat migrants” from Fujian, China to Vancouver illustrates the importance of situating the body as a key site of analysis in understanding the spatialised and embodied nature of state governance practices concerning issues of human smuggling.

Jamie Winders’ (2007, 921) work on immigrant exclusions in the contemporary US South provides an insightful analysis of the ways that borders are being constructed at multiple scales in response to the rapid settlement of Latino populations in the region amidst the changing political context of post-9/11. She describes “the border” as a “space and set of relations designed ‘to define the places that are safe from unsafe, [and] to distinguish us from them’ [Anzaldúa 1987, 3]” (920, my emphasis). As she points out, the growing visibility of Latino populations has sparked an identity crisis among Southern communities faced with an increasing shift in regional racial demographics together with post-9/11 national border anxieties. Debates about nation, community, and belonging were subsequently brought to the fore and enacted within the contested sites of Southern locales. Borders were strengthened and militarised, and further complemented by the introduction of temporary visa programmes designed to extract the on-demand labour of Latino workers while relegating the costs and spaces of social reproduction outside of southern communities. In this regard, Winders puts forth the argument for a new “border spatiality” that encompasses “the border of the nation, the figurative boundary of the South, and the limits of local communities” (933).

My interest in borders relating to migrant labour in Singapore’s global city-state follows the concerns of feminist geographers in analysing how processes of global capitalism are intimately tied to gendered and racialised structures of inequality that permeate across scales of
Borders also provide a valuable framework in which to examine the political rationalities of state power and everyday practices of governmentality (Foucault 1990, 1991; Ong 1999, 2006; McDowell 2008); for, as Hyndman (2004, 184) argues, spatial mobility is “as much about technologies of control, containment, and separation as it is about movement and agency.” In the context of Singapore, the disciplinary mechanisms of flexible accumulation tied within the state’s managerial migration policies are mutually reinforced by everyday social meanings and practices that regulate the conduct of foreign workers on multiple and overlapping scales. Furthermore, an analytical focus on borders works to problematise Singapore’s state-led pursuit of remaking itself as a cosmopolitan, global city by revealing the ways that it functions as an exclusionary project that privileges certain sorts of difference (namely: “foreign talent”) over others (Yeoh and Chang 2001; Yeoh 2004b).

In Singapore, scholarship on borders and migrant labour has largely been deficient and sporadic with the exception of Brenda Yeoh’s work on migrant female domestic workers in Singapore’s global city-state (2004b, 2006; see also Yeoh and Huang 1998; Yeoh et al. 2000; Yeoh and Chang 2001). Her research addresses the constitutive relationship between gendered patterns of transnational migration, racialised hierarchies, and local boundary-policing projects within the household and public places that reinforce the marginal position of these workers in everyday life. She also highlights the paradoxical position of city-states like Singapore that simultaneously harbour nation-building and globalising ambitions where:

> On the one hand, the globalising city is predicated on open borders and a high density of transnational relationships to sustain both productive and reproductive activities. […] On the other hand, nation-building requires not just inclusionist but also exclusionist projects that construct the borders of the nation’s geobody by attempting to domesticate certain transnational subjects—namely foreign talent—while distinguishing other foreign bodies as transgressors of the nation (2006, 35-36).

My thesis builds upon these ideas through an explicit engagement with borders, which aims to unpack the rationalities and assumptions that feed into how migrant workers are constructed as
transient and excludable labouring populations on multiple scales within the nation. In this regard, I incorporate a diverse range of literature that deals with constructionist approaches to borders and managed migration, Foucauldian notions of governmentality, feminist political economy, and moral geographies of exclusion to inform my analysis.

**Managed migration regimes**

Apart from debates over whether or not the territorial borders of nation-states have diminished or strengthened with increasing levels of globalisation (see for example, Yeung 1998), the emergence of “managed migration regimes”\(^2\) since the late 1990s has raised more complex questions concerning how borders have been strategically utilised by labour-receiving states to manoeuvre and enhance their economic position in the global economy (Morris 2002; Flynn 2005; Kofman 2005, 2007; May *et al.* 2007; Bauder 2008). Eleonore Kofman (2007, 129) refers to “managed migration” as a “governance regime... based on economic calculus (cost/benefit) of stratified entry, rights and entitlements linked to utilitarian considerations.” These neoliberal policies seek primarily to “filter, as far as possible, welcome from unwelcome strangers” (Kofman 2005, 457) through adverse strategies of “classification, selection and stratification.” Specific categories of migrants are granted differential rights of entry, residence, and access to citizenship where skilled professionals, tourists, and entrepreneurs are valued over their less privileged counterparts (such as undocumented migrants and asylum seekers) who possess far lower levels of economic and social capital. Kofman (2005) further points out that these policies have been most rigorously adopted by states, such as the United Kingdom, which have integrated themselves within a globalised system.

\(^2\) The term “managed migration” stems predominantly from state articulations by the British government concerning the need to “manage legal migration in the interests of the UK economy” (Work Permits UK; quoted in May *et al.* 2007, 156; see also Morris 2002; Flynn 2005; Kofman 2007). Here, I use the term more generally to refer to state migration policies that differentiate between highly-skilled workers and low-skilled workers along a stratified system of eligibility and benefits.
Some scholars have recently highlighted the ways that managed migration policies complement the bifurcated economy of global cities, comprising of highly-skilled forms of employment concentrated within the business and financial sectors, and low-/un-skilled labour in the urban service economy (Kofman 2007; May et al. 2007). This polarised structure may be attributed to the growing emphasis on knowledge-based economies (KBE), which privileges professional, managerial, and scientific competencies embodied by highly-skilled mobile elites to whom these policies are targeted to attract (Kofman 2007; see also Coe and Kelly 2000). At the other end of the skills spectrum, this shift has also fuelled an increasing demand for migrant labour among devalorised sectors of the urban economy, especially those of manual and service work (Sassen 1996, 2000). The hierarchy of eligibility and benefits that underpins managed migration regimes is seen in how transnational elites—regarded as bearers of human capital—are welcomed as desirable citizens while low-wage migrant workers are offered only temporary status and partial citizenship in view of the perceived “problems of assimilation and dependency [...] posed by] their economic and cultural ‘otherness’” (Kofman 2007, 122). As previously argued, these divisions are structured along profoundly gendered, racialised, class-based, and nationalised distinctions.

In line with its economic strategy of promoting Singapore as a global city and knowledge-based economy, the state has likewise adopted a two-tier immigration policy which distinguishes between skilled and low-/un-skilled workers through various strategies of inclusion and exclusion (Coe and Kelly 2000; Low 2002; Yeoh 2006). While migrants labelled as “foreign talent” are privileged as mobile agents who possess the economic and cultural capital needed to enhance Singapore’s global city status (Koh 2003), temporary labour migrants are routinely discriminated as “abstract labour” (Bauder 2006) premised upon a “use and discard” mentality (Yeoh 2004a, 2006). On the one hand, expatriate workers who hold professional degrees and qualifications or specialist skills are eligible to apply for permanent residence or formal citizenship, and have the opportunity of bringing along their spouses and children with them (Low 1995; Yeoh 2004a,
2006; Rahman 2006). On the other, unskilled workers are subjected to a range of restrictions and biopolitical measures that serve to ensure their transience and adherence to immigration legislation, which includes mandatory health check-ups for pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and venereal diseases, and the prohibition of any sort of marriage in Singapore (for a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 4).

In significant ways, managed migration regimes highlight the constitutive relationship between immigration and economic restructuring that underpins the “politics of admission and exclusion” (Leitner 1995) among major labour-importing states (see also Kofman 2007; May et al. 2007; Bauder 2008). Under these circumstances, borders function as a type of spatial governance regime that manages these contradictory flows of labour and capital through strategies of selective openness and closure. They also represent the institutionalisation of labour market policies that are often “constituted by territorially and culturally specific regimes of power and knowledge” (Nonini 2002, 5; Bauder 2006). A nuanced understanding of borders thus recognises their complementary role in valorising diversity and openness, on the one hand, while enforcing disciplinary practices of exclusion and containment on specific migrant bodies, on the other. As Peter Nyers (2003, 1087-8) argues:

The border is no longer about the ramparts, fortifications, and barricades that separate an inside from an outside. It also involves the employment of complicated technologies that are designed to absorb, control and manage flows and movements as much as repel them (my emphasis).

Consequently, borders may be described as “polysemic” in the sense that the experience of the border varies substantially among embodied individuals differentiated by skills, gender, race, class, and national origin (Nyers 2003).

*Governmentality and technologies of (non-)citizenship*

Michel Foucault’s (1991) notion of *governmentality* provides useful insight into analysing the disciplinary technologies, prescribed by state migration regimes and everyday norms of behaviour
in society, that serve to regulate the mobility and conduct of migrant workers across a variety of scales. As Foucault maintains, governmentality refers generally to a complex network of discursive and material practices—or “technologies of government”—that seek to shape, normalise, and direct the conduct of individuals and populations in all aspects of life (see Dean 1999; N. Rose et al. 2006). Managed migration regimes may be interpreted as neoliberal forms of state governmentality in the ways that migrant workers are incorporated not simply as labouring bodies tied within a particular niche of low-wage employment, but also as governable subjects regulated by various strategies of surveillance and control (Morris 2002; Nonini 2002). Specifically, it is by virtue of their noncitizen status as transient labourers that these regulatory mechanisms are applied to ensure their close monitoring and supervision in the interests of security and capital accumulation. These technologies of non-citizenship effectively secure a flexible pool of foreign labour in service of a particular economic need, but whose “Otherness” is managed and contained by surveillance measures that function to curb the perceived dangers they pose (N. Rose 2000).

Governmentality plays a critical role in regulating the social order of the nation as a moral community through networks of practice and disciplinary norms of behaviour (N. Rose 2000). Linda McDowell (2008, 496) has argued that migrants “enter a society and an economy within which rules and rituals produce consent [... which] are a consequence of both legislation and institutional practices and more informal behaviours.” Cheng’s (2003, 167) study of foreign domestic workers in Taiwan, for example, reveals the mutually reinforcing ways in which state policies, popular discourse, and employer practices in middleclass households work “collectively [to] constitute a regulatory regime constraining the lives of foreign domestics.” She points out that Taiwanese foreign labour regulations reflect the state’s anxiety over changes in the ethno-racial composition of its citizenry and an inherent concern over the development of Taiwanese national

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3 Elsewhere, he emphasises the constitutive nature of these processes by describing the term as an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power” (Foucault 1991, 102).
identity. These policies are constituted by popular discourse that construct foreign domestics as “undesirably different” (176), which often legitimise the stringent control of foreign domestics by employer practices that indirectly facilitate the state’s agenda of segregating alien labour. Under these circumstances, surveillance “is ‘designed in’ to the flows of everyday existence” (N. Rose 2000, 325) where the border permeates across various scales of the nation, household, community, and the body.

On the scale of the body, Foucault (1990, 140) uses the term “biopolitics” to refer to the “organisation of power over life” through a series of interventions and regulatory controls aimed at achieving “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.” He maintains that these technologies of governing vacillated between two constitutive poles of development: i) “the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, [... and] extortion of its forces”; and ii) “the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, [and] the level of health” (139; my emphasis). These insights illustrate the extension of state power and control over both the productive and social reproductive sphere of the body. When applied in the context of Singapore’s foreign worker policy (vastly similar to the Taiwanese system), stark parallels may be drawn in terms of how the state attempts to police its national borders through the close monitoring and surveillance of migrant bodies via biopolitical strategies, such as compulsory half-yearly medical check-ups that work to regulate their sexual behaviour and reproductive rights, and various other policy regulations aimed at restricting their mobility and conduct within the city-state (Yeoh 2006; see Chapter 4).

It is important to recognise the role of the developmental state when examining Singapore’s neoliberal approach to migrant labour (Low 2001; Yeoh and Chang 2001; Olds and Yeung 2004). Henry Yeung (2005, 89) has described the developmental state as “a state preoccupied with economic development through the establishment of elite economic bureaucracy to ‘guide’ the market.” In the face of globalisation, the Singapore state has sought deliberately to
“internationalise itself, to enable the (re)production of capital” (Yeung 1998, 293, original emphasis), which continues to underpin its political credibility in managing economic insecurity in the global economy. Yeung (2005, 100) thus argues that “neoliberalism is indeed itself a product of conscious state effort to redirect the strategic orientation of economic development via the market mechanism.” Aihwa Ong (2006, 77) contributes to this discussion by introducing what she terms as “postdevelopmentalism,” which emphasises the developmental decisions of Southeast Asian states in promoting “the differential regulation of populations who can be connected to or disconnected from global circuits of capital.” The result of these different kinds of biopolitical investments has been “a system of variegated citizenship in which populations subjected to different regimes of value enjoy different kinds of rights, discipline, caring, and security” (Ong 1999, 217).

For low-skilled migrant populations in Singapore, disciplinary technologies of non-citizenship function strategically to facilitate the cheap extraction of their labour, while ensuring that they remain a transient, depoliticised, and governable population with minimal threat to the political stability of the country. While borders and immigration policies are managed to facilitate labour market restructuring in pursuit of strategic developmental interests, state legislations also take the form of policing strategies that construct foreign workers as potential disease-carriers, troublemakers, and transgressors of established social orders; the most extreme of measures includes corporal punishment for illegal workers through mandatory caning (Aguilar 1999; Poon 2009). These disciplinary mechanisms effectively “brand” the bodies of foreign workers as alien, pathological, and in need of strict surveillance and control, which further translates into public discourse informing the perception and treatment of foreign workers in everyday society (Yeoh and Huang 1998; C. Chin 2002; Poon 2009). Since these workers are welcomed on the basis of economic functionality, the degree of their social inclusion also remains largely contingent upon

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4 Illegal workers include undocumented workers and those who stay beyond the term of their employment contract.
their economic contribution from the perspective of a consumer and service provider relationship (Y. Chin 2008; for a similar example in Hong Kong, see Law and Lee 2006).

**Feminist perspectives on global restructuring and migration**

*Flexible accumulation and migrant labour*

Feminist interventions in international political economy have emphasised the mutually constitutive nature between processes of global restructuring and labour market regimes shaped by social structures of gender, race, nationality, and class (Marchand and Runyan 2000; Nagar et al. 2002; Peterson 2002; Bakker and Gill 2003). As Randolph Persaud (2003, 129) asserts, these categories of difference are “*generative* of the patterns of labour practices, that [...] determine] who does what, where, the rewards that appertain, and the worth conferred on particular kinds of labour activity” (original emphasis). Feminist scholars point out specifically that “working-class, Third-World, minority and migrant women, as the cheapest and most vulnerable sources of labour,” (Marchand and Runyan 2000, 16) have been increasingly incorporated into casualised and flexibilised forms of employment that are characterised by low wages, minimal benefits, poor regulation, low levels of union representation, and tend to be temporary, part-time, and highly insecure in nature (see Sassen 1998; Wright 2006). These precarious forms of labour effectively create a docile and flexible pool of workers, disciplined not only by market mechanisms, but also by a host of other regulations including immigration controls and workplace practices that render them compliant to such terms and conditions of work.

Persaud (2003, 130) has highlighted the importance of taking into account “the interconnectedness of workers’ vulnerability and disposability [...] with] the new patterns of labour market flexibility.” The recursive relationship between disposability and flexibility is seen in ways that the worker’s disposability is marketed as a suitable (read: exploitable) feature of his/her labour power among specific sectors of employment that operate on flexible modes of production. Melissa Wright’s (2006, 32) work on female assembly workers in China, for example, illustrates
how young women are recruited on two-year labour contracts to “maximise the value of their dexterity, patience, and docility” before the wear and tear of factory work “translates into expensive defects, slower production rates, and corporate liability” (41). The correlation between flexibility and disposability is seen also in neoliberal migration regimes where foreign labour policies and visa requirements work to facilitate a flexible pool of cheap surplus labour which, in the case of Singapore, serves as a buffer to even out fluctuations in the local economy where foreign workers are subjected to repatriation during periods of downturn (Yeoh and Chang 2001). To reiterate feminist concerns on intersectionality, structures of accumulation tied to relations of flexibility and disposability also intersect significantly with social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nationality.

For example, a substantial proportion of low-wage work in major cities is taken up by female migrant workers who service the needs of the privileged through waged domestic labour (C. Chin 1998; Parreñas 2001; Yeoh 2004b). Chang and Ling’s (2000, 27) study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong reveals the constitutive ways in which the sexualised and racialised service of foreign domestics is tied to a “regime of labour intimacy” that underpins the high-tech and investment-driven world of “techno-muscular capitalism.” As they point out, female migrant workers toiling in middle-class households help to “release [upwardly mobile] cosmopolitans from time-consuming, mind-numbing, non-rewarding chores so that they may pursue their ‘casino capitalism,’ ‘technology districts,’ ‘strategic alliances,’ [and] ‘global cities’” (41)—masculinised arenas valorised among post-industrial states. Willis and Yeoh (2000, 151) have similarly demonstrated the ways in which low-skilled foreign workers (particularly those in the domestic service and construction sectors) in Singapore’s global city-state are recruited to “service the needs of the privileged in both residential and commercial settings.” In this regard, Yeoh and Chang (2001, 1032) argue that “low-waged immigrant-sector labour is not a residual category in the economy of the global city, but a basic precondition, enmeshed in processes that represent the ‘underbelly’ of globalisation” (see also Sassen 1996, 2000).
Feminist geographers have argued that a relational view of scale is necessary when analysing the spatialities of power that operate through capitalism and patriarchy as twin systems of oppression (Silvey 2004a, 2006; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). As they point out, dominant preoccupations with scale, such as the global economy and nation-state, have served to exclude political and social relations that take place on more “minor” scales, such as the household, community, and the body (Marston 2000; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Silvey 2006). In this regard, questions of social reproduction are also routinely disregarded in dominant discourses of globalisation (Katz 2001; Nagar et al. 2002). Pratt’s (1998) study of Canada’s Live-in Caregiver programme, for example, provides insight into how Filipina domestic workers are incorporated into the intimate spaces of Canadian homes where unequal relations of race, class, gender, and nationality are (re)produced and inscribed on their bodies on a daily basis. As highlighted by Mountz and Hyndman (2006, 455):

Home is a site where the body is border, where one nationality polices another in overlapping home/work space. [...] Global inequalities between nations are inscribed on the racialised body of the domestic worker and reproduced at the scale of the household.

For these foreign domestic workers who occupy highly ambivalent positions as insider/outsider, the border becomes an everyday reality that has to be lived and negotiated.

The gendered and racialised nature of paid domestic work is exemplified through the unequal transfer of (devalued) social reproductive labour to Third World women in households where middle-class women have entered the productive sphere (C. Chin 1998; Pratt 1998; Chang and Ling 2000; Cheng 2003). Insofar as they service the needs of class-privileged women in labour-importing countries, Rhacel Parreñas’ (2000) study of migrant Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles reveals how these migrant workers have simultaneously turned to purchasing the (even lower) wage services of poorer women in the Philippines to perform the reproductive labour that they are serving in migrant-receiving countries. This “three-tier transfer of reproductive labour” that Parreñas (2000, 561) describes raises important questions concerning
the fundamental relationship between neoliberal capitalism and gendered regimes of subordination (see Mullings 2005). It also underscores the need to critically consider “the intersectionality of processes at multiple scales [... and] how diverse social practices, ideologies of gender, and the shifting power of the subjects of globalisation are restlessly being reworked” (Nagar et al. 2002, 267).

While much of feminist literature has focused on the gendered experiences of female domestic work (Pratt 1998; Chang and Ling 2000; Parreñas 2001; Cheng 2003), less has been emphasised in terms of the gendered nature of construction work and its implications concerning the racialisation and sexualisation of male migrant construction workers, particularly among high-growth economies in parts of Asia and the Middle East. In the case of Singapore, only migrant men are allowed to work as foreign construction workers, the majority of whom are Bangladeshi nationals between 20 to 35 years of age (Adullah 2005; Rahman and Lian 2005). I address this gap in the literature by drawing on the Serangoon Gardens controversy as a case-study to explore the interplay of gendered meanings attached to specific forms of flexible labour, and how they converge with racialised, class-based, and nationalist discourses to instil feelings of fear and mistrust toward these migrant Others in the local neighbourhood (see Chapter 5). This research explores the ways that the hyper-masculinised bodies of foreign construction workers were marked out as dangerous and sensual, while female migrant domestic workers were constructed as vulnerable and sexualised subjects within the surveilled spaces of middle-class homes.

**Geographies of exclusion: Place, identity, and transgressive bodies**

*Social exclusion and bordering practices*

Migrant workers, as embodiments of flexible labour, are often marginalised and excluded in “host” societies as undesirable outsiders (Mitchell 1996; Yeoh and Huang 1998; Healey 2000; Bauder 2006; Pow 2007; Smith and Winders 2008). To reiterate Zolberg’s (1988; quoted in Leitner 1995) remark on the socially ambivalent position that these workers occupy, it is the very
characteristics that make them suitable as labour which predicates them as unwelcome strangers in these societies. In other words, migrant workers are routinely constructed as “out of place” in labour-receiving societies by virtue of their alien status as transient labourers. Insofar as they constitute a cheap and critical source of “3D” (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) labour, their economic and ethno-racialised Otherness frequently represent grounds for public concern and anxiety where they are perceived as physical and symbolic transgressors of established social orders (Yeoh and Huang 1998; Pow 2007). Geographical engagements with ideas of place, identity, and embodiment are particularly salient in understanding how moral geographies of exclusion are constructed in relation to migrant workers who are routinely marked out as threats to the social stability of host societies. In what follows, I examine a range of concepts utilised by geographers to understand the nature and practice of social exclusion concerning things “out of place.”

David Sibley (1995, 1998) has argued that practices of social exclusion are typically informed by feelings of fear and anxiety toward groups and individuals marked out as different and “out of place.” These sentiments frequently manifest as a desire for distancing (away from the Other) through bordering practices that delineate spatial hierarchies of belongingness within the moral ordering of purified landscapes. As Sibley (1995, 39) further points out, “spatial boundaries are in part moral boundaries” since spatial separations are tied inherently to the production and maintenance of a moral order. Choon-Piew Pow’s (2007) research examines the ways that landscapes of civilised modernity in Shanghai’s gated communities are constituted by territorial acts of exclusion that construct rural migrant workers as uncivilised, dirty, and dangerous. Migrant workers were depicted as morally inferior Others prone to disorderly behaviour and unhygienic habits (such as spitting, littering, or urinating in public places) that defiled the pristine and civilised environment of these private enclaves. These moral discourses of urban civility in turn legitimised the social exclusion and segregation of migrant workers perceived as external
threats to the upwardly mobile and “cultivated” lifestyles of Shanghai’s middle-class elites within these gated communities.

Tim Cresswell (2005, 128) defines moral geographies as “the idea that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others.” Things are considered “out of place” when they do not conform to the established rules and norms of behaviour within a particular society. Mary Douglas (1996; quoted in Cresswell 1997) illustrates this principle by describing the metaphorical use of “dirt” as “matter-out-of-place.” For example, shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is considered dirty to place them on the dining table where they fail to be in their “proper place.” In this regard, Cresswell (1996, 161) argues that place represents “a fundamental form of classification [... whereby the] classification of things by place structures our judgment of those things.” Place and landscape are thus constitutive elements in the production of moral geographies. Building on David Matless’ work on landscape and morality, Cresswell (2005, 129) further argues that “visions of landscape are connected with ideas of appropriate behaviour that constitute ‘citizenship.’ A moral geography begets moral citizens” while “anti-citizens” came to be viewed as those who disregarded the obligations of conduct exercised within this discourse of citizenship (Matless 1997).

Fundamental to idea of exclusion and border/boundary enforcement is the notion of transgression which literally means “crossing the boundary” (Cresswell 1996). Anxieties about the abject, which Julia Kristeva (1982, 4) defines as “what disturbs identity, system, order [... and what] does not respect borders, positions, rules,” are primarily concerned with the sanctity of territory and the fear of transgression (Sibley 1995). Acts of transgression (or the threat of them) often arouse forms of moral panic that bring borders and boundaries into sharp relief by exposing the power relations that define the terms of belonging within a territorial community (Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996). Transgression may be distinguished from resistance in that the latter implies intentionality, whereas the former is premised upon the result of having crossed the boundary and “being noticed [... and] judged by those who react to it” (Cresswell 1996, 23). More specifically,
as Daniel Trudeau (2006, 437) points out, transgressions represent moments in which “the orthodoxy of dominant groups (re)creates landscape in order to revitalise a sense of community and belonging” through spatial strategies of border enforcement and exclusion. As previously shown in Jamie Winders’ (2007) work, the exclusion of Latino migrants among Southern communities stemmed significantly from border anxieties concerning the transgression of migrant Others into landscapes of the US South.

*Migrant bodies as “out of place”*

Feminist geographers have highlighted the inherently embodied nature of social exclusion, and how structures of gender, race, and class are implicated in the ways that certain bodies are rendered more visible than others in particular places (McDowell 1999; Silvey 2004a, 2006; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). That is to say, borders and boundaries are simultaneously (re)produced and inscribed on the bodies of excluded Others even as they are constituted within the socio-spatial ordering of moral landscapes. Theories of embodiment deal primarily with the ways that the individual body is constructed by power relations embedded within larger networks of meaning on a variety of scales (Butler 1990; Cresswell 1999; McDowell 1999; Ahmed 2000; Longhurst 2005). As demonstrated by the work of geographers, these meanings are associated with “specific social orders of emplacement” (Silvey 2006, 70) that determine the ways that some bodies are marked as “out of place,” and how these abject bodies “perform and materialise fear or disorder” in particular places (see Young 1990; Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996, 1999). For migrant workers, bodily appearance—such as skin colour, behaviour, dress, accent, and so on—often plays a substantial role in constructing them as inferior or morally suspicious subjects (Young 1990; Bauder 2006; McDowell 2009).

Iris Young’s (1990, 123) discussion on the embodied experience of racial oppression reveals how members of marginalised and oppressed groups are “imprisoned in their bodies” when they are marked out by a dominant culture as different and Other. In the case of temporary
migrant workers whose presence is legitimised solely by their labouring function in the host society, their bodies are objectified primarily as alien labouring bodies. Pratt’s (1998, 289) research has shown the ways that Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver often experience having their occupation and class identity (as cheap foreign labour) “read off their bodies” by visual cues filtered through the lens of racial classification. In other words, their personal identities conflated with foreign domestic work as a racialised occupational category where they were reduced to “nannies” both in the workplace and public arena. Similarly, Pow’s (2007) work illustrates how rural migrant workers were considered out of place in Shanghai’s gated communities in view of their nonconformity to the civilised norms of behaviour that defined the moral spatial order of these communities. Their embodied mobility as members of China’s “floating population” also rendered them morally suspicious within the neighbourhood as a place of “rooted morality” (Cresswell 2005, 130).

As previously stated, the aim of neoliberal migration policies concerning temporary foreign worker programmes has been to extract the on-demand labour of migrant workers while relegating the costs and spaces of social reproduction to the worker’s “country of origin” (Winders 2007). These policies seek to discipline difference by ensuring the transience of these workers inasmuch as their “foreignness” is further accentuated in the process. In their study of Latino migrants in the US South, Barbara Smith and Jamie Winders (2008, 65) have argued that these flexible regimes effectively create a distinct sort of labouring body that is low-cost, productive, hyper-mobile, disposable, and held in “liminal status—everywhere and nowhere, constantly available to work yet never permitted to live.” When inserted into local neighbourhoods among Southern communities, however, the flexible bodies of Latino migrant workers collided with racialised, gendered, and nationalist discourses, where neighbourhoods and towns were constructed as “‘domestic’ space[s] to be defended” against “immigrant bodies at rest” (65, 68, my emphasis) within these communities. In this regard, the exclusion of migrant
bodies reflected deeper tensions concerning questions of social reproduction enmeshed in local contestations over place.

Smith and Winders’ (2008) work has also shown how migrant bodies materialised as sites of contestation where claims to identity and belonging converged in the form of reactionary politics against a growing Latino immigrant presence among Southern locales. Cast as trespassers on national/local property, the ethno-racial Otherness and contingent legal status of these migrants, although profitable for business, emerged as subjects of vociferous political arguments and tense neighbourhood frictions. Geographers have maintained that place constitutes a powerful shaping force in defining normative values within a particular society (Cresswell 1996, 1997). Bodies-out-of-place are seen as transgressions of these values, often provoking moral panics and fear, which result in acts of purification through bordering practices that function as socio-spatial strategies of differentiation and exclusion (Sibley 1995, 1998; van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). Mountz and Hyndman (2006, 457) argue that such processes of identity construction “place the body at the centre of theorising” around the nation-state, locality, and global relations, wherein populations are managed via adverse strategies of classification and categorisation. Understanding borders as negotiated processes that are (re)produced and enacted through everyday social practice, however, there is potential for transgression to disrupt patterns of normality by opening up new political possibilities of resisting and subverting these dominant forms of power (Cresswell 1996).

**Conclusion**

In the literature discussion above, I have sought to incorporate a broad range of scholarly work on borders, migration, flexible accumulation, and social exclusion. First, I utilised the theoretical insights of feminist geographers on borders and migration to establish an analytical framework in which to understand borders as processes of social differentiation constructed across a variety of scales. I then connected these ideas to the emergence of managed migration regimes where
borders have been tactically employed by states to filter prospective citizens from workers through strategies of admission and exclusion. I worked too with ideas of governmentality to examine the ways that borders and immigration policies function as disciplinary technologies of non-citizenship to ensure the transience and regulation of migrant workers in the interests of security and capital accumulation. I also argued that Singapore’s managerial approach to migrant labour needs to be contextualised within its role as a developmental city-state where economic development is deployed as a discursive tool of governance that informs the state’s bifurcated immigration policy.

Second, I drew on feminist perspectives on global restructuring and migration to establish the constitutive links between flexible accumulation regimes, labour markets, and racialised and gendered forms of migrant labour. The significance of this research has been to interrogate the power inequalities that influence how particular forms of low-status employment are tied specifically to social attributes of class, gender, race, nationality, and age. Third, I inquired into geographical literature on moral geographies and social exclusion to demonstrate the ways that these relations of power and discipline are inscribed into constructions of place, identity, and the spatiality of everyday social life. In so doing, I sought to map the discursive and material relations between flexible accumulation, spatial mobility, and identity formation through the analytical lens of borders. These concerns stem primarily from critical calls in feminist geography for multiscalar and intersectional approaches to understanding the complex and contradictory ways in which borders and inequality are shaped by a multiplicity of social, political, economic, and material practices across different scales.

A review of these multi-disciplinary strands of literature highlights the extent of processes and meanings that inform the socio-spatial exclusion of migrant workers in host societies. My thesis intervenes in the feminist geographic literature on borders and migration by diversifying the current focus on geopolitics and state securitisation to incorporate ideas of managed migration, governmentality, and moral geographies of exclusion in the context of Singapore’s global city-
state. I argue specifically that an adequate understanding of bordering practices and migrant exclusions in Singapore needs to take into account the relationship between state power, economic restructuring, racialised and gendered forms of migrant labour, and the construction of social order. To reiterate my thesis concerns, I aim to understand how migrant bodies are differentially inserted into Singapore’s political economy, and the ways that they are disciplined and excluded by bordering practices that permeate across scales of the nation, locality, household, and body. An analytical focus on borders allows for a critical and relational understanding of how power is exercised on migrant bodies across a variety of scales and contexts.
CHAPTER III
Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology that I drew upon in order to analyse the relationship between borders and the exclusion of migrant bodies in Singapore’s global city-state. I situate my research concerns with the constructionist approach of discourse analysis, which seeks to examine the ways that language is used to constitute and legitimise everyday practices of social inequality (Mills 2004; Waitt 2005; Wodak and Meyer 2009). My aim is to interrogate how discourses of migrant labour in state immigration policy are circulated and (re)produced within everyday social meanings and practices that culminate in the social exclusion of foreign workers in Singapore.

Doing discourse analysis
Michel Foucault’s writings about discourse, knowledge, and power have been critical to the concerns of poststructuralist geographers in analysing and contesting everyday forms of social dominance, exclusion, and oppression (Keith 1993; Blomley 1994; Pratt 1998; Crampton and Elden 2007; McDowell 1999, 2009). Power is understood as a key element in the production of discourse through social relations that work to normalise particular ways of thinking and acting in the world (Foucault 1977; Mills 2004). Discursive structures impose boundaries that shape and define our understanding of objects, places, and events; as Waitt (2005, 172) puts it, they are “forms of discipline over thought, action, and social outcomes” within a specific historical context. Human geographers who utilise discourse analysis are concerned with the social production and effects of discourse, and how discursive norms are constituted within particular subjectivities and meanings about the relationships between people, objects, and places. As Foucault (2002, 24) argues, it is necessary to “question those ready-made syntheses” and “show that they do not come
about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinised” (28).

Critical linguists such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijik, and Ruth Wodak have sought to operationalise these theoretical concerns in what is now known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), described by Wodak and Meyer (2009, 10) as “being fundamentally interested in analysing... structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language.” Although I draw primarily from geographical work on Foucauldian discourse analysis (G. Rose 2001; Waitt 2005), the insights of CDA on language as a “social practice” are worth quoting at length:

Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frames it... That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258, original emphasis).

In this regard, discourse analysis aims to uncover the multiple structures of meaning that underpin the recursive relationship between language and ideology, and particularly how discourse is used to shape and regulate the lives of people (Waitt 2005).

Drawing on Foucault’s theory of discourse, Gordon Waitt (2005) outlines three main objectives of discourse analysis: i) to analyse the outcomes of discourse in terms of social practices and meanings; ii) to identify the regulatory frameworks within which discursive statements are produced and disseminated in everyday social life; and iii) to explore the underlying mechanisms that inform how certain social categories or ways of thinking about the world are constructed and normalised as “common sense.” He also builds on Gillian Rose’s (2001) work to describe seven strategies in which to analyse the structure of discourse:

1. Suspend pre-existing categories, and adopt a reflexive approach.
2. Immerse oneself in the materials through reiterative reading.
3. Devise coding categories to identify discursive structures within the material.
4. Investigate effects of “truth” and rhetorical strategies of persuasion.
5. Pay attention to complexity and contradictions.
6. Look out for mechanisms that silence.
7. Focus on details.

Apart from these strategies, there is further need to examine the social context within which the text is produced and framed, as well as the subject position of the author and intended audience of the text.

For the purposes of my research study, I incorporated feminist geographic insights on embodiment and the social construction of scale into Waitt’s (2005) approach to discourse analysis. Feminist migration scholars have emphasised the body as “a theoretically powerful starting point” (Silvey 2005, 142) from which to examine embodied subjectivities and how migrant bodies are produced through discursive regimes of gender, race, and nationality in different places (Pratt 1998; Mountz 2004; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). As Foucault asserts, disciplinary power “seeps into the grain of individuals, [and] reaches right into their bodies” (quoted in Pratt 1998, 285) as sites where “the material and discursive, the objective and subjective, are intertwined” (Pratt 1998, 287). I sought to integrate these post-structuralist and multi-scalar concerns by examining the constitutive relationship between state immigration practice, the flexibilised nature of migrant labour, and local identity politics in relation to the exclusion and classification of migrant bodies as Other. I also paid attention to the multi-scalar role of borders in (re)producing boundaries of “us/them”; “local/foreigner”; and “insider/outsider” on the bodies of migrant workers in everyday social life.

Gathering the data

For my analysis of state discourse and practice, I collected legislative documents on Singapore’s immigration and foreign worker policy alongside relevant ministerial speeches and parliamentary debates on foreign workers that I retrieved from various governmental websites. In addition, I
compiled the Prime Minister’s National Day Rally (NDR)\textsuperscript{5} speeches between 1997 and 2009 with the aim of assessing policy trends and the rhetorical ways in which the state has articulated its nationalist agenda on restructuring Singapore as a global city and knowledge-based economy. In so doing, I worked to establish the links between state-led economic restructuring and Singapore’s two-tier immigration policy. I also supplemented my analysis with census data and statistical estimates on foreign workers in Singapore from a range of non-governmental sources and embassy websites.

To examine the Serangoon Gardens case-study, I collected articles (reports, editorial pieces, and forum letters) on the incident from three daily news sources: The Straits Times (ST); TODAY (TD); and The New Paper (NP). The Straits Times is Singapore’s highest circulated English newspaper with a readership base of 40.2 percent, which is followed by TODAY (17 percent), and The New Paper (13 percent)\textsuperscript{6} respectively. The public controversy that sparked from the Serangoon Gardens uproar in early September 2008 generated a total of 103 articles in the ST between the months of September and October, while TD and NP each yielded 34 and 17 articles (see Appendix A). In addition, I sought to diversify the scope of my analysis by examining online postings on the Straits Times Discussion Board (STDB) where news readers commented on articles published in the Straits Times regarding the incident. I also looked at how the controversy unfolded in the Singapore blogosphere using a snowball sample of 25 blogs.

\textit{Reflexivity and positionality in research}

\textsuperscript{5} The ideological significance of the annual National Day Rally speech is pertinent here. As Kenneth Tan (2007, 293) has argued, it functions as “a motivational and agenda-setting exercise conducted at the national level… [and] a carefully staged opportunity for the prime minister to lead the nation in taking stock of Singapore’s situation… and then where Singapore should go and how best to get there.” The 1997 NDR speech by (then Prime Minister) Goh Chok Tong was the first comprehensive articulation by the state concerning its strategy in promoting Singapore as a global city and knowledge-based economy.

\textsuperscript{6} Figures quoted from “Singapore: Straits Times keeps No. 1 spot, drawing 1.35m readers” (The Straits Times, October 20, 2006).
When Foucault (2002) raised the importance of questioning the taken-for-granted categories that structure our situated worldviews, he drew attention to the subjective and power-laden position of the researcher (in knowledge production) and the need for a reflexive approach to research. Even with the use of secondary sources, the process of gathering, categorising, and “writing up” the research are all activities that are imbued with uneven relations of power which mark the researcher’s positionality in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and so on (Mohanty 1991; G. Rose 1997). McDowell (1992, 413; quoted in G. Rose 1997, 308) has argued that researchers should “make visible our own critical positioning within the structure[s] of power” that define our personal situatedness. Feminist geographers have also pointed out, however, that “there is no ‘transparent’ self waiting to be revealed” (G. Rose 1997, 313); instead, our identities are always shifting and (re)constituted through social interaction.

As a child born and raised in a middle-class Singaporean-Chinese family in the mid-1980s, my growing up experience has been deeply intertwined with the presence of foreign domestic workers in our family who assisted with our household needs. Both my parents held full-time jobs, and the responsibilities of childcare and other forms of domestic labour were passed on to our Indonesian domestic helper, alongside several others who have come and gone over the years. My past years of overseas living as an international student in Canada have allowed me the opportunity to “step back” and reflect upon my privilege, as well as the experience of being a non-citizen and “visible minority.” Despite this sense of in-betweenness and displacement—which does not replicate the conditions of work and living that foreign domestic workers go through—I remain surrounded by different forms of privilege in terms of socio-economic status and my educational standing as a graduate student.

**Coding and analysing the data**

Meghan Cope (2005, 226) has highlighted the importance of coding as a recursive and reflexive process. I sought to keep the research process as open and flexible as possible—holding
categories in tension, and constantly returning to the data to reflect upon and rework my analysis as new insights emerged. When I read through the research material for the first time, I recorded my initial thoughts and reactions so that I could keep them in mind as I began the coding process for the data. Cope (2005) also distinguishes between two types of coding: i) descriptive codes, or category labels, which reflect themes that are either readily discernible or stated directly in the text; and ii) interpretative or analytic codes that address the conceptual questions related to the research study. Descriptive codes help the researcher identify initial patterns in the material, and analytic codes help generate deeper theoretical insights.

In the first stage of coding the data that I gathered for my case-study analysis, I read through the material comprehensively and circled words and phrases that struck me as pertinent, while pencilling preliminary codes along the side-margins. I began with a couple of broad research questions:

- What were the reactions and sentiments expressed by local Singaporeans concerning the presence of foreign workers in residential areas?
- What terms and phrases were used to justify their reaction?

After the first reading, I returned again to establish descriptive codes with reference to the initial ones that I had pencilled. I repeated the process a third time as I worked to assign analytic codes for important themes that had emerged from previous readings. I then developed a coding structure using an analytic memo where I categorised various analytic and descriptive codes based on their similarities and conceptual links (Cope 2005).

As I worked on organising the material to develop my theoretical ideas, I sought to identify the discursive structures of these texts, and reflected upon their social context, forms of persuasion, intertextuality, and contradictions. I asked the following research questions:

- How did people choose to identify or describe themselves in their letters and blogs?
- How was the dormitory constructed as “out of place”?
- How are foreign workers described in popular discourse?
- What types of power relations are embedded within the text?
What forms of rhetoric and persuasion were used to justify the inclusion or exclusion of foreign workers in local residential areas?

What links may be established between state immigration policy and these everyday social meanings and practices?

What was largely unspoken and unquestioned amidst the Serangoon Gardens controversy?

Through these questions, I aimed to examine the rationalities and discursive meanings attached to the inscription of “foreign worker” on migrant bodies in state and popular discourse.

**Internet research and REB regulations**

With the aid of improving information technologies, the Internet increasingly offers new opportunities for research in the humanities and social sciences through the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) via newsgroups, weblogs, and online discussion forums. Elizabeth Basset and Kathleen O’Riordan (2002; quoted in McKee and Porter 2009, 81) have pointed out the Internet is “not simply a virtual space in which human actors can be observed,” but also a site for the “cultural production of texts.” In the case of Singapore, the Internet has become an important arena for political communication and the public exchange of ideas given its fewer regulatory constraints compared to mainstream media (Lee and Willnat 2006). Given the “political culture of fear” (Koh 2003, 236) against overt criticisms of the Singapore government, many individuals have turned to cyberspace as an alternative site in which to publicise their viewpoints on local politics and current affairs.

Inasmuch as CMC research offers a rich source of qualitative data, questions about ethical regulations have been raised concerning whether or not researchers who collect data through non-intrusive means may be exempted from REB (Research Ethics Board) review. Heather Kitchin

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7 Kitchin (2007) makes an important distinction between three categories of Internet research: i) *non-intrusive web-based research*; ii) *engaged web-based research*; and iii) *online research*. Non-intrusive analyses comprise of data collection techniques that “do not interrupt with the naturally occurring state of the site... but instead investigates contextual questions related to pre-manufactured text” (15). In other words, no direct contact is established between the researcher and individuals in the online community.
(2007) has maintained that when an Internet user posts material on a site that is widely known to be accessible by the general public, it may be assumed that they expect their material to have public visibility. A “public” domain is generally categorised as a site where there is no restriction of access and no explicit criteria for membership is stated concerning who should or should not become a member of the group. With reference to Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS), Kitchin (2007) argues that CMC research is considered to be situated outside of the human subject paradigm insofar as the researcher uses pre-manufactured texts available through a public forum and poses no intrusion upon individuals.

The Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has drafted an Exemption Policy\(^8\) which states that Internet research may be exempted from ethics review if:

- The researcher is able to access the information freely without having to register as a member of the discussion venue, and no information is provided to suggest that the content is private, confidential, or meant only for a specific group of people.
- No deception is involved by the researcher, for example “posing” as a member in the group, and no direct contact is established with Internet users of site.
- The discussion venue has no policy prohibiting research or the reproduction of its content, and is not a place frequented by minors (persons under the age of 18).
- Anonymity of users is ensured, and verbatim quotes will not be reproduced in any presentation or publication of the research.

The weblogs and online discussion forums that I consulted for my research were predominantly websites that had high levels of reader/viewer traffic as evidenced in the wide variety and amount of comments posted by readers concerning the Serangoon Gardens incident. The sites were freely accessible, and I did not have to register as a member to view their individual contents. In my sample of blogs, I ensured that no specification was made to indicate that the site was strictly confidential or meant only for a prescribed readership. I also avoided the use of verbatim quotes in my final thesis report since it remains possible for the original content

\(^8\) Available online at: http://www.queensu.ca/ors/contracts/policies/QueensDigitalDataPolicy.pdf
(which might contain personal or sensitive information) to be easily retrievable with the use of powerful search engines such as Google.

**Limitations of the study**

I consider this research study to be preliminary in many ways. Due to the limitations of resources and time, I was unable to conduct interviews in Singapore with foreign workers themselves which, in significant ways, further perpetuates the silence that surrounds the everyday experiences of these workers. Another drawback in the study is that since I refrained from using verbatim quotes from the blogs and Internet forums I analysed, the final thesis report contains only quotes from forum letters published in mainstream news. Furthermore, the shortcoming of working mainly with texts is that the research sample is often disproportionately skewed with individuals who have strong enough opinions about a particular issue that motivates them to publish their views in the media. As such, my analysis of the controversy cannot attest to be representative of the overall views of the Singapore population. Notwithstanding these limitations, my thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between borders, state policy, and migrant exclusions in Singapore through its qualitative and critical approach.
CHAPTER IV
State, Migration and Labour Capital in the Global City-State

[In Singapore cosmopolitanism extends upwards, not sideways. The Americans, Japanese, Chinese, Europeans and Australians whom we Singaporeans reach out to belong to the classes of success which we replicate in our own society. [...] What about foreign construction workers and maids? [...] Foreign workers and maids help secure Singapore within, so it can be secured in the world. How cosmopolitan are we towards those foreigners in our midst?

(Latif 2001; quoted in Yeoh 2004b, 2438)

In the quote above, Straits Times journalist Asad Latif highlights the deeply stratified and exclusionary nature of Singapore’s brand of cosmopolitanism in terms of its class bias in the kinds of transnational subjects it privileges (Yeoh 2004b; Poon 2009). While upwardly mobile individuals belonging to the expatriate class are integrated with relative ease, low-status migrant workers are, by contrast, routinely marginalised and excluded within the nation’s “cosmopolitan” landscape. As I shall elaborate in this chapter, this border discrepancy reveals the contradictions embedded within the state’s grafting of cosmopolitanism as a socio-cultural complement to its nationalist endeavour in remaking Singapore as a global city and hub for foreign talent and investments (Goh C.T. 1997, 2001). Aihwa Ong (1999, 217) has pointed out that the market-driven logic of Asian developmental states has tended to promote “a system of variegated citizenship” whereby different subject populations are managed through differential strategies of governing in the interest of economic development. In the context of Singapore, Angelia Poon (2009, 82) argues that these managerial policies amount to a “bifurcated governmentality that results in the constitution and embodiment of [... different categories of migrants] in specific racialised and classed ways.” For low-wage foreign workers, stringent bio-policing measures are

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9 Ulf Hannerz (1990, 239) has described cosmopolitanism as a “stance toward diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures [... and] a willingness to engage with the Other.” Often presented as the humanist counterpart of globalisation paralleled with visions of urban democracy, it espouses a culture of openness and acceptance toward difference and otherness (Yeoh 2004b).
enforced to regulate their transience within the city-state, which feeds in turn into everyday social meanings and practices that shape how these workers are perceived and treated.

In this chapter, I establish the relationship between Singapore’s stratified immigration regime and its state-led project of striving for global city status to examine the ways that its current transition to a knowledge-based economy is premised upon particular forms of inclusion and exclusion concerning migrant Others in the city-state. First, I draw on the Prime Minister’s National Day Rally (NDR) speeches to analyse the state’s discourse on cosmopolitan place-making in Singapore’s global city-state. I emphasise how it valorises highly mobile professional and managerial workers as bearers of social and cultural capital, while low-wage foreign workers are treated primarily as abstract units of labour to be “used and discarded” as required (Yeoh 2004b; 2006). Second, I examine Singapore’s managerial migration regime to illustrate how borders are strategically utilised to differentiate between skilled and low/un-skilled workers in ways that advance the state’s developmental agenda in promoting itself as a “Talent Capital” and knowledge-based economy (MOM 1999). Importantly, I highlight the specific ways that these classificatory mechanisms are informed by social structures of race, class, gender, and nationality, and how state immigration policy functions as a technology of government to discipline and manage the undesirable embodiment of low-wage foreign workers, even as their labour is extracted to facilitate the accumulation of capital within the city-state.

**Cosmopolitan place-making in Singapore’s global city-state**

*Global cities, cultural capital, and transnational flows*

Geographers have highlighted the importance of *place* in influencing the mobility of transnational flows of capital, commodities, and people in global cities (Sassen 1991; Yeung 1998; Yeoh and Chang 2001; Ewers 2007). Global cities are defined as “mega-cephalic command-and-control centres” (Yeoh *et al.* 2000, 148) where territorial concentrations of “state-of-the-art office buildings, top talent and social networking infrastructure” (Sassen 2006, 94) are hosted to
facilitate the global accumulation of capital. Apart from their economic function, global cities are also described as “places of global cultural brokerage” (Hannerz 1993; quoted in Yeoh 2005) where different forms of social and cultural capital are gathered and exchanged (Kong 2007). Brenda Yeoh (2004b) has characterised Singapore as a “wannabe global city” jostling to be atop the urban hierarchy of cities. Wannabe global cities are “cities of spectacle, cities of intense urban redevelopment, and cities of powerful growth rhetoric” (Short and Kim 1999, 101) with the aim of marketing themselves as attractive places for mobile capital. In this regard, “place-wars” among cities are no longer fought purely on economic grounds, but increasingly by means of cultural capital through the development of prestigious urban flagship projects alongside place-marketing and urban imaging strategies (Short and Kim 1999; Yeoh 2005; Kong 2007).

Ulf Hannerz (1993; quoted in Yeoh et al. 2000) has identified four distinct transnational flows that characterise global cities as financial hubs and cultural marketplaces: highly mobile and skilled professional elites; low-wage and unskilled migrant workers; expressive specialists who enliven the arts and cultural scene; and international tourists. Not all of these groups are, however, entitled to an equal stake in the global city, especially low-wage migrant workers who constitute “an invisible and disempowered class of workers” (Sassen 2000, 88) in the urban service economy. Saskia Sassen’s (1991, 2000) work on global cities (London, New York, and Tokyo) reveals how shifts from manufacturing to financial and business services since the mid-1970s have fuelled an increasing demand for low-wage migrant workers among devalorised sectors of the economy, especially those of manual and service work. Inasmuch as they form the crucial “underbelly” of global cities (Chang and Ling 2000; Yeoh and Chang 2001), migrant workers typically occupy a heavily marginalised and stigmatised position in such cities. This ambivalent reality articulates one of the inherent contradictions of global cities, which is a structural dependency on cheap and flexibilised migrant labour, on the one hand, and a simultaneous denial of their embodied presence, on the other.
Reinventing Singapore as a cosmopolitan, global city

Since the late-1990s, the Singapore government has actively promoted its policy of “going global” (Goh C.T. 1999) in a sustained effort to mould the city-state into a global financial and talent hub in the Asian region. As articulated by (then Prime Minister) Goh Chok Tong in his 2001 NDR speech:

My vision is to turn Singapore into a global city, a ‘globapolis’, with people from all over the world and well connected to all parts of the globe... New Singapore will be one of the world’s finest, most liveable cities. Arts, theatres, museums, music and sports will flourish. Singapore will be a lively and exciting place, with plenty to do and experience. Our city will not only have depth, but also the richness of diversity.

Singapore’s heavy investment in knowledge and services infrastructure is demonstrated by the fact that it currently straddles among the top ranks of world cities in terms of the highest number of skyscrapers and total office floor count—or, “skyline index” (Emporis Buildings 2005; quoted in Ewers 2007, 123)—while boasting to be the world’s most wired country (Lim 2009). The state has also increasingly emphasised the need to foster a culturally-vibrant and diverse environment geared towards making Singapore “an oasis of talent,” where the rhetoric goes that “who wins [to be the top city in Asia] depends on who attracts the most talent” (Goh C.T. 1999).

Scholars have noted that Singapore’s brand of cosmopolitanism often assumes “an air of inevitability” with respect to its discursive articulation as “an unassailable trend in the global economy to which [the nation] must respond” (Coe and Kelly 2000, 418; see also Yeoh 2004b; R. Goh 2005). As former PM Goh (2001) has argued: “We have no choice but to run at the high speed of the global economic treadmill. Otherwise, we will be thrown off, and all Singaporeans will suffer.” Couched in survivalist terms typical of the state’s developmental discourse, he went as far to maintain that “the need for global talent... is a matter of life and death for us in the long term” (Goh C.T. 2001). To navigate successfully in the globalising world, Singapore must “welcome the infusion of knowledge which foreign talent will bring [... and] become a cosmopolitan, global city... where people from many lands can feel at home” (Goh C.T. 1997, sec. 53). Aaron Koh’s (2003, 251) study of Singapore’s “foreign talent” policy reveals the ways that it
exemplifies a form of governmentality which works to “administer a solution to a national/global ‘crisis’ beyond the control of Singaporeans.” In so doing, it allows the state to manage the economy and exercise power over the social body to accommodate the pool of foreign talent critical for maintaining the nation’s competitive edge.

These rhetorical statements echo Richard Florida’s (2005) urban-economic imperative which argues that world cities should harness their potential by establishing the right “people climate” to attract and retain the New Economy’s mobile class of elite workers in the present “global competition for talent.” Jamie Peck (2005) has criticised this trendy policy ethos as a mass-marketed neoliberal development scheme framed around inter-urban competition, gentrification, place-marketing, and the interests of middle-class consumption. Indeed, what is often strikingly dismissed in this brand of cosmopolitan-elitism is the highly uneven nature of transnational flows into the global city, the bulk of which comprises of low-wage migrant workers who perform the manual and social reproductive labour crucial to the growth and maintenance of the city (Sassen 1991, 2000; Yeoh 2006). Insofar as the state strives to remake Singapore as a “first-class place for talent to want to come” (Lee H.L. 2009), the bitter irony is that much of the physical labour that goes into giving the city its place-attractiveness is supplied by low-wage foreign workers at the opposite end of the class spectrum. As I shall later elaborate, the hierarchical differentiation between highly skilled expatriates (or “foreign talent”) and low-wage foreign workers reflects not only their uneven relationship to global capital, but also the social value accorded to these racialised, class-based, and gendered forms of labour (R. Goh 2005; Yeoh 2006; Pieris 2009).

Reimagining and marketing the city involves the physical transformation of the city (Short and Kim 1999). Singapore’s efforts to remake itself as a “vibrant global city” (Lee H.L. 2005b) has entailed significant ongoing transformations in its urban landscape, including large-scale efforts to rejuvenate its shopping and entertainment district; the installation of new cultural complexes such as art galleries and museums; and, most notably, the signature Marina Bayfront
project consisting of the multi-billion Business Financial Centre (BFC) and still larger Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort\textsuperscript{10} (one of two new IRs in the city)—all of which are aimed to radically revamp the city’s downtown skyline and advance the nation’s economy as a financial and business hub. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong articulates in his 2005 NDR speech, “it will be a city in our image, a sparkling jewel, a home for all of us to be proud of, [and] a home that will belong to all of us.” Inasmuch as the city’s beauty is alleged to reflect the spirit of ambition and excellence of its people (Lee H.L. 2005b), the “hidden hands” (Pieris 2009) that perform the manual labour to supply the city’s infrastructural needs, as well as those that care for the young and elderly in Singapore’s middle-class homes, are chiefly low-status foreign workers who have much less to boast materially.

*Foreign workers as the crucial “underbelly”*

As previously noted, the labour markets of global cities consist not only of skilled and professional workers, but also a significant portion of migrant workers who take up low-status and low-skilled jobs among devalorised sectors of the urban service economy (Sassen 1991, 2000; Yeoh and Chang 2001; Yeoh 2004b). A veritable correlation is apparent between the current surge in numbers of foreign workers and Singapore’s transformative efforts to distinguish itself as a cosmopolitan global city. The construction sector has one of the highest dependency ratios in the employment industry, which recently doubled from 1 local full-time worker to 4 foreign workers in 2006 (Rahman 2006) to the current ratio of 1 to 8 within the short span of three years (MOM website, accessed September 10, 2009). This policy amendment may be attributed to the surge in construction demand, which rose from US$12 billion to US$21 billion between 2006 and 2008. Correspondingly, the number of foreign workers (excluding domestic workers) swelled by 55,000 in 2006 and 102,000 in 2007 (*Parliamentary Debates*, October 21, 2008). Figure 1

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\textsuperscript{10} The government has described Integrated Resorts (IRs) as “leisure, entertainment and business zones” with a wide range of amenities including hotels, restaurants, shopping facilities, convention space, theme parks and theatres (Lee Hsien Loong 2005, sec. 21-22).
illustrates that the number of new hires among Bangladeshi workers in Singapore in recent years clearly reveals a similar trend in figures. The 1996-1997 middle peak traces an earlier building boom in the mid-1990s, which was significantly halted by the Asian Financial Crisis in the late-1990s.

Figure 1 Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore (New Hires)¹

¹ Figures are derived from the number of employees who have obtained clearance at the embassy. In-flow returnees are not included.


According to the Asian Development Bank (2008), Singapore draws its largest source of low-/un-skilled labour from countries in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), followed by Malaysia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) respectively. Pieris (2009) has pointed out how the labour migration of South Asian contract workers (majority of them employed in the construction industry) into post-industrial Singapore replicates colonial migration chains where Indians were historically transported into the British Straits Settlements as indentured and convict labourers. Singapore served as a penal colony in the mid-1800s, and Indian convicts from Madras
were transferred to the island via Bencoolen to meet the increasing labour demand for public infrastructure works, jungle-clearing, and swamp drainage projects (Turnbull 1977; Mani 2006; Periasamy 2007; Pieris 2009). They were responsible for constructing the St. Andrew’s Cathedral, the Government House (currently the Istana), and the Sri Mariamman Temple, together with many major existing roads, including the Causeway to Malaysia. Likewise, South Asian construction workers currently provide a steady supply of cheap labour for building the physical infrastructure critical to the growth of modern Singapore.

In the construction industry which holds the largest proportion of foreign workers, the bottom end of the wage scale is occupied predominantly by low-/un-skilled Bangladeshi workers, whereas semi-skilled Thai and skilled Malaysian workers each command significantly higher wages respectively (Wong 1997; Kitiarsa 2006). As Aguilar (2003, 148) argues, the ethnic hierarchy imposed by these wage differentials affirms the “racist strategies of capital” that exploits the socio-economic disparities of global development through racialised and class-based determinants that intersect broadly with national stereotypes. Abdullah’s (2005, 228) ethnographic study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore identifies the construction site as a “total institution,” in which all aspects of daily work life are “scheduled, timetabled and enforced, cumulatively brought together to realise the discursive ideal of the ‘good docile worker.’” Furthermore, enforced living arrangements are often subjected to “barracks-style regimentation” (Aguilar 2003, 144), typically in the form of makeshift and densely packed quarters confined within the work site. Insofar as these disciplinary forms of exploitation and segregation persist in post-industrial Singapore, they are legitimised only by virtue of the migrant worker’s vulnerability as a non-citizen worker.

While foreign construction workers provide the physical labour that facilitates the rapid infrastructural development of Singapore’s aspiring global city, foreign domestic workers replace the social reproductive labour required among dual-income families seeking upward mobility in society (Parreñas 2001; Yeoh 2004b; Mullings 2005). Feminist scholars have noted the ways that
the consumption of waged domestic labour in middle-class households plays a substantial role in fuelling the state’s pursuit of neoliberal development (Huang and Yeoh 1996; C. Chin 1998; Pratt 1998; Cheng 2003). Similarly, the formal incorporation of local women into the labour force in Singapore is substantially reliant upon the recruitment of migrant female domestic helpers (mostly from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka) as paid substitutes to perform responsibilities in the social reproductive realm (Huang and Yeoh 1996; Wong 1996; Coe and Kelly 2000). The current labour participation rate among women aged between 30 and 34 is 80.5 percent (as of June 2008), which marks a substantial rise from the 1998 figure of 68.2 percent (MOM 2009b).

Since a high rate of female labour participation produces not only an increasing demand for domestic labour, but also a simultaneous decline in supply, surplus labour is thus extracted from overseas in light of Singapore’s small population base and absence of a hinterland (Wong 1996, Aguilar 2003).

There are now approximately 180,000 foreign domestic workers in Singapore (Y. Chin 2008) where 1 in every 6 households employs a foreign domestic worker. Toh and Tay (1996; quoted in Wong 1996, 129) have pointed out that “the maid culture has become a way of life” in view of the growing reliance upon foreign domestic workers among middle-class households in Singapore. Prime Minister Lee H.L. (2005b) once recounted in his NDR speech a situation where a Singaporean air hostess was reprimanded by her employer for neglecting to bring along her passport for work, to which she immediately replied: “I must go home [to] scold my maid because my maid packs my bag. My maid forgot to pack my passport, [and so] it’s my maid’s fault.” This preposterous scenario exposes the common attitude of complacency and dependence among Singaporeans concerning foreign domestic workers. The increasing proportion of households with foreign domestic workers also indicates the rising level of affluence among Singaporeans since households are required to have an annual income of at least S$30,000 (US$21,179) to be eligible.

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11 This figure was published in the Foreign Domestic Worker Employer’s Guidebook (MOM n.d.), and is calculated as of December 2006.
to hire a waged domestic worker. To the extent that having a waged domestic worker represents a status symbol of middle-class living, it may be argued that paid domestic work facilitates the reproduction of social status as much as it does the reproduction of labour (Aguilar 2003; Cheng 2003).

(B)ordering mobility: Singapore’s stratified migration regime

_Breakdown of the foreign population in Singapore_

Demographic trends in Singapore’s post-independent era indicate that its foreign population has grown significantly over the years especially throughout the course of the past two decades (see Figure 2 and Table 1). Strict immigration controls were initially imposed during its formative years of independence in 1965, as the newly elected state sought to establish the nation’s economic foundations, and forge a sense of national identity and ethnic cohesion amongst its diverse population (Low 1995; Yeoh 2007). During the late-1970s and 80s, these controls were gradually relaxed as Singapore embarked on a period of rapid industrialisation which drew in large numbers of low-/un-skilled foreign workers from “Non-Traditional Source” (NTS) countries such as India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, among low-level jobs in the construction, marine, manufacturing, and waged domestic sectors (Wong 1997; Yeoh 2007). In 1987, a comprehensive policy for foreign manpower management was implemented, which marked the “the first official recognition... that foreign labour had become integral to the Singapore workforce” (Wong 1997, 149). Further liberalisation measures in the early-1990s and after has since allowed for a substantial expansion in Singapore’s foreign worker population (Wong 1997).
Table 1 Total Population by Residential Status, 1970 to 2008

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<tr>
<td>Number (000)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number (000)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number (000)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td>2,074.5</td>
<td>2,413.9</td>
<td>3,047.1</td>
<td>4,017.7</td>
<td>4,839.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resident Population</strong></td>
<td>2,013.6</td>
<td>2,282.1</td>
<td>2,735.9</td>
<td>3,263.2</td>
<td>3,642.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizens</strong></td>
<td>1,874.8</td>
<td>2,194.3</td>
<td>2,623.7</td>
<td>2,973.1</td>
<td>3,164.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permanent Residents</strong></td>
<td>138.8</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>112.1</td>
<td>290.1</td>
<td>478.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Resident Population</strong></td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>131.8</td>
<td>311.3</td>
<td>754.5</td>
<td>1,196.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Singapore’s foreign population currently stands at 1.2 million—approximately a quarter of the total population and one-third of its 2.86 million-strong workforce (Lee H.S. 2009; The Straits Times, February 28, 2009)—which constitutes the highest proportion of foreign workers in Asia (Yeoh 2007). Among these figures, 170,000 are expatriate professionals (P and Q pass holders; see Table 2), while the majority of others are low-wage foreign workers. It is estimated that 85 percent (approximately one million) of the foreign workforce consists of low-/un-skilled contract workers (officially referred to as work permit [WP], or R Pass holders), while 4 percent
are middle-level skilled workers (S Pass holders)\textsuperscript{12}, and 11 percent are expatriate professionals \textit{(Parliamentary Debates, July 17, 2007)}. The high demand for low-/un-skilled foreign workers indicates the growing reluctance among Singaporeans to take up employment among low-paying manual or shift work typically labelled as “3D” (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) in the urban service economy (Yeoh 2006; Y. Chin 2008). At present, foreign male construction workers and female domestic workers constitute two of the largest foreign worker groups in Singapore (Yeoh 2006; ADB 2008). As previously noted, these forms of labour are embedded within social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nationality, both locally and globally (Coe and Kelly 2000).

\textit{State immigration policy and technologies of (non-)citizenship}

Singapore’s stratified migration regime is reflective of the ways borders are managed to facilitate the incorporation (or non-incorporation) of particular transnational subjects within the global city-state. The two primary flows of labour migration into Singapore consist of highly skilled elite and professional workers (or “foreign talent”) at the top end of the wage spectrum, and low-skilled contract workers at the bottom end. As illustrated in Table 2, the state has instituted a highly complex and stratified system of management in its immigration policy that differentiates broadly between groups in the former and latter categories. In line with its globalising strategy of promoting Singapore as a “Talent Capital,” the state readily opens it borders to skilled professional workers who are encouraged to take up permanent residence and be “absorbed as Singapore citizens, wherever possible” (Goh C.T. 2000; see also Coe and Kelly 2000). On the other end of the wage spectrum, low-wage foreign workers are subjected to a range of stringent policy measures that serve to ensure their transitory presence in the global city. The S Pass (formerly Q2) was introduced more recently in July 2004 to encourage the in-flow of semi-skilled

\textsuperscript{12} S Pass holders are semi-skilled workers who possess either diploma-level or post-secondary level education, and earn a monthly salary of at least S$1,800 (see Table 2). They are typically employed as assistant engineers and skilled technicians in the marine and construction industries, or retail assistants, restaurant managers, and call operators in the services sector. In 2006, there were 25,000 S-Pass holders, but the numbers trebled to 74,000 in 2008 \textit{(The Straits Times, February 28, 2009)}. 

48
professionals, such as assistant engineers, technicians, and accountants, in high demand into the economy (MOM website, accessed September 10, 2009).

**Table 2 Overview of Work Passes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work Pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Who?</th>
<th>Dependent’s Pass</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Pass (EP)</strong></td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Fixed monthly salary of more than S$7,000 (US$4,958)¹</td>
<td>Foreign professionals, managers, executives and specialists</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>P Pass holders are eligible to bring their parents/parents-in-law on Long-Term Visit Passes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Fixed monthly salary of more than S$3,500 (US$2,479) and up to S$7,000 (US$4,958), and recognised qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dependent privileges are extended only to spouse and children under 21 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>Fixed monthly salary of more than S$2,500 (US$1,771), and recognised qualifications</td>
<td>Skilled and experienced (minimum of 5 years) workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personalised Employment Pass (since January 2007)</strong></td>
<td>PEP</td>
<td>Fixed annual salary of at least S$30,000 (US$21,258) in the preceding year</td>
<td>Selected foreign professionals, EP holders and foreign graduates from institutions of higher learning in Singapore</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PEP holders are not tied to any employer and are able to remain in Singapore for up to 6 months in between jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S Pass (since July 2004)</strong></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Fixed monthly salary of at least S$1,800 (US$1,275)</td>
<td>Middle level skilled workers, e.g. specialised workers, technicians, and accountants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Only those earning more than S$2,500 (US$1,771) per month are eligible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Permit (WP)</strong></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Source country restrictions apply for specific sectors of industry, in addition to various dependency ratios and levy rates³</td>
<td>Semi-skilled and unskilled foreign workers (FW) who do not qualify for S Passes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>FWs are not allowed to engage in any form of marriage in Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At least 23 years old with a minimum of 8 years of formal education, together with the successful completion of an MOM-stipulated entry test</td>
<td>Foreign domestic workers (FDW)</td>
<td></td>
<td>A FDW may face deportation if she is found pregnant during the term of her employment contract</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes:
¹ Based on the currency exchange rate of 1 SGD = 0.708237 USD.
² Effective from June 2009, MOM raised the points system criteria for S Pass holders to improve their quality. A 25 percent quota applies for S Pass holders at the company level, in addition to a monthly levy of S$50 (US$35) for each worker.
³ Source country restrictions apply for the Manufacturing, Services, and Landscaping/ Agritechnology/ Incinerator plant sectors, i.e. foreign workers from Non-Traditional Sources (NTS) including Thailand, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and the PRC (People’s Republic of China). Effective from June 2009, the dependency ratios for the Construction and Process sectors were raised to 1 full-time local worker to 7 foreign workers; and 1 local worker to 5 foreign workers for the Marine sector.

Through this stratified system of eligibility and benefits, the state effectively prescribes “which bodies within the territorial borders of the nation may be construed as mobile, permanent, or transient” (Poon 2009, 76). Insofar as the government actively promotes its immigration programme overseas to welcome international talent (under EP and PEP passes) to enhance the nation’s economic prowess¹³, strict regulations ensure that foreign workers (WP holders) are “here to work and will eventually go home” (Wong K.S. 2010, sec. 12). In general, only EP, PEP, and S Pass holders with a monthly salary of above S$2,500 (US$1,771) are eligible to apply for Dependent’s Passes that would enable them to bring along their spouses and children. Conversely, WP holders are required to leave their families behind to come alone as individual workers, having little or no opportunity for formal integration into the country. The work permit is equivalent to a two-year employment contract that binds the worker to a specific employer, which means that foreign workers also have highly restricted access to the local labour market (Rahman 2006; Yeoh 2006). In this regard, it may be argued that immigration rules function as a technology of governance in differentiating and instrumentalising certain sectors of population in service of the state’s developmental interests.

The state regulates the inflow of low-wage foreign workers in three primary ways: i) the work permit system; ii) a two-tier levy system; and iii) variable dependency ceilings that

¹³ Former PM Goh (2002) has previously argued that “if we now shut our doors to talent, we will soon become like any other Third World city of 3 million people. [...] We will become a small fish—a guppy—in a small pond. To swim among the big fishes in the ocean, we have to top up our population with international talent.”
determine the proportion of foreign workers allowed in each industrial sector. As previously noted, the work permit is typically issued on the basis of a two year duration, and ties the worker to a sole employer who is responsible for ensuring his/her compliance with the MOM-stipulated rules of conduct delineated in the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EMFA) and Immigration Act. The state requires employers to submit a security bond of S$5,000 (US$3,535) to ensure that they adhere to regulations which state that each foreign worker “shall submit himself/herself to, and pass, a medical examination once in every 6 months... in respect of contagious diseases, and pregnancy in respect of females,” and that none shall “engage in any activity detrimental to the security and well-being of Singapore”—which is defined in the EMFA as “any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities, including breaking up families in Singapore” (MOM 2009). The EMFA also stipulates that foreign workers “shall not go through any form of marriage... with a Singapore Citizen or Permanent Citizen” and that women foreign workers must not “become pregnant or deliver any child in Singapore” or risk revoking her work permit and face immediate deportation (MOM 2009).

These biopolitical strategies of governance represent the extension of state control and disciplinary power over the individual bodies of foreign workers, even to the extent of regulating their sexuality and reproductive rights. Arguably, they reflect the state’s anxiety over the changing ethno-racial composition of its (Chinese-dominant) citizenry which has remained fairly constant over the past two decades (Yeoh 2004b). This argument is, however, difficult to ascertain as government remains highly guarded against the release of specific figures concerning the ethnic composition of its foreign worker population (Low 1995; Rahman 2006). Deportation serves as

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14 Latest figures from the 2009 Yearbook of Statistics show the ethnic distribution of the Singapore resident population as: 75 percent Chinese; 13 percent Malay; 9 percent Indian; and 3 percent “Others” (a residual category that includes Eurasian Singaporeans and other smaller minorities).
15 According to the Ministry of Manpower, it does not “publish the specifics of the breakdown [of foreign workers] to ensure that we maintain flexibility and access to labour sources” (Parliamentary Debates, July 17, 2007). “Flexibility,” as defined by the state, however, often translates into job insecurity and transience on the part of foreign workers who are treated primarily as a stop-gap measure to meet high labour demands in periods of high growth, while serving as a “buffer [...] to bear] the brunt of job losses” during times of economic downturn.
a state-sanctioned mechanism which renders foreign workers vulnerable and compliant to the intrusive forms of surveillance and control imposed by the state (Cheng 2003). In significant ways, these regulatory practices are premised upon racialised and gendered discourses attached to specific forms of flexible labour that construct foreign workers as social delinquents, disease-carriers, sexually promiscuous figures, and potential security threats to the nation (Aguilar 2003; Yeoh 2006; Poon 2009). As Abdullah (2005, 226) argues, these policies effectively “perpetuate, systematise and discipline the practice and discourse of difference that correspondingly ‘race’ the foreign body as Other, as ‘not one of Us.’” Inasmuch as these bordering practices function to curb the perceived dangers posed by the ethno-racial Otherness of foreign workers, they also enhance the hypervisibility of their abject labouring bodies in the nation’s social landscape.

Furthermore, the state-imposed security bond means that employers are obliged to closely supervise the mobility and everyday conduct of foreign workers to ensure that they do not transgress the disciplinary rules of the EMFA. Consequently, in the case of waged domestic labour, Shu-Ju Cheng (2003, 184) points out that the “private sphere, in which domestic service is performed, has become a domain where state policies and nationalist politics play out.” Shirlena Huang and Brenda Yeoh’s (1996) research has shown how employers often resort to “excessive control” measures such as round-the-clock monitoring over their work and social activities, and forbidden access to use the house telephone, for fear of having their security bonds revoked. In Yeoh and Huang’s (1998) survey of foreign domestic workers in Singapore, 28.4 percent of the 162 maids who took part in the study had no off-days at all. Under these circumstances, the foreign domestic worker is confined almost entirely within the boundaries of the house as a means of restricting her mobility, and ensuring that she is placed under constant surveillance. In this regard, the mobility and conduct of foreign workers is subjected to a range of policing measures that permeate across scales of the nation, locality, household, and body.

Apart from the work permit system, the state also utilises a levy scheme and variable dependency ceilings to regulate its intake of foreign workers. Introduced in 1992, the two-tier
foreign worker levy scheme is a regulatory mechanism aimed at discouraging the use of foreign workers by ensuring that the “wages of foreign workers reflect labour market conditions and not simply the marginal cost of hiring foreign workers” (Low 1995, 753; Wong 1997). The imposed levy is also higher for unskilled workers than for skilled workers, which reflects the state’s priority for skilled workers even among bottom-rung jobs (Low 1995; Rahman 2006). Currently, the levy rates range between S$50 for S Pass holders and S$470 for unskilled construction workers (MOM website, accessed July 22, 2009). These levy rates are periodically adjusted to reflect shifts in the business cycle as a way of ensuring that jobs are protected for local workers during times of economic downturn (Yeoh 2006). Variable dependency ceilings bear a similar function, which regulate the degree to which specific sectors of industry are reliant upon foreign labour. Industries with the highest dependency ceilings include: the construction and process sectors (87.5 percent each), followed by the marine sector (83.3 percent), and the manufacturing and services sectors (50 percent each) respectively (MOM website, accessed September 10, 2009).

Stereotypical constructions of gender and ethnicity also intersect heavily with policy measures that regulate the intake of low-wage foreign workers among particular sectors of industry. While only male foreign workers are employed in the construction and marine sectors, and women in the waged domestic sector, the services and manufacturing sectors each constitute a mix of male and female foreign workers (ADB 2008). Furthermore, source country restrictions apply where foreign nationals from Non-Traditional source (NTS) countries (e.g. Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka) are generally permitted to work only within the construction and marine industries, whereas foreign workers from Malaysia, North Asian sources

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16 There is, however, no minimum wage level is instituted for WP holders, many of whom earn a meagre average of S$550 (US$392) a month excluding overtime, which is well below the national wage average (Abdullah 2005).

17 Skilled foreign workers are considered those who possess at least a SPM (also known as the Malaysia Certificate of Education) qualification or its equivalent, or a NTC-3 (Practical) Trade Certificate (MOM website, accessed September 10, 2009). For NAS and PRC nationals in the construction sector to qualify as skilled workers, they must possess at least an SEC (Skills Evaluation Certificate) qualification (at testing centres in their respective home countries).
(NAS)\textsuperscript{18} and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) predominate among the services and manufacturing sectors (Wong 1997; Rahman 2006). Conversely, PRC and NAS nationals are strictly barred from employment within the waged domestic sector, where 90 percent of its workers are from the Philippines and Indonesia, and the remaining 10 percent from Sri Lanka (Rahman 2006; ADB 2008). In view of the overwhelming Chinese majority in Singapore, it is unsurprising that Malaysian, NAS and PRC nationals are encouraged among more visible sectors of employment, especially the services industry. These intricate policy measures attest to the social and political sensitivities that arise with having to negotiate between Singapore’s growing demand for foreign labour and the need to maintain social stability and cohesion among its ethnically diverse population (Low 1995).

**Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, Singapore’s endeavour to remake itself as a cosmopolitan, global city has entailed the unequal incorporation of transnational subjects into the city-state, whereby certain sorts of difference are privileged over others. In line with its developmental trajectory, the state has instituted a hierarchical system of eligibility and benefits via immigration policy to select and manage the types of foreign bodies it wishes to accommodate (or not) within its globalising landscape. While low-wage foreign workers are temporarily co-opted to service the infrastructural and social reproductive needs of the city-state, strict regulations ensure that they remain as a transitory workforce with little opportunity for formal integration. These bordering practices are imposed and exercised through biopolitical strategies that extend disciplinary control over the racialised, classed, and gendered bodies of foreign workers across a variety of scales. In this regard, I argued that the aim of these technologies of non-citizenship has been to produce a

\textsuperscript{18} First introduced in 1984, NAS sources include: Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea and Taiwan (Wong 1997).
flexible, depoliticised, and governable population in service of the developmental interests of the aspiring global city-state.

In significant ways, the profitability of utilising migrant labour rests on their unequal incorporation into the labour force in terms of the legal and political entitlements that full citizenship affords, which renders their labour substantially cheaper in real economic terms (Gibson and Graham 2002). Since foreign workers are co-opted primarily by means of economic need and functionality, they are typically perceived as no more than abstract units of labour whose embodiment (as the labouring class) is often stigmatised as a cause for public fear and suspicion. Consequently, the mobility of foreign workers within the global city is heavily restricted by legal and social boundaries that systematically exclude them as marginal and abject outsiders. In the following chapter, I examine these tensions through a case-study analysis of the Serangoon Gardens controversy with the aim of establishing links between state immigration discourse and everyday norms of behaviour that work to discipline and exclude migrant bodies in Singapore’s local residential areas.
CHAPTER V

The Serangoon Gardens Uproar

We may have to experience some geographical transgression before we realise a boundary existed.

(Cresswell 1996, 22)

The snobbery of residence and place persists everywhere in land-scare Singapore. It is what drives us to strive. It is what has led us to become a nation of upgraders. Has a globalised world turned us inward, in a siege against unfamiliar unwelcome change? With few frontiers left untouched by the forces of globalisation, have our homes become the final, most precious sanctuary?


Ken Jalleh Jr’s reflection on the Serangoon Gardens controversy offers a poignant portrayal of the contradictory tensions that emerge with Singapore’s current push into becoming a cosmopolitan, global city and world-class “home.” These developmental trajectories articulate the state’s ongoing project of economic modernity and its attendant pursuit of the “good life”—or, what C. Chin (1998, 10) describes as “an emphasis on more efficient ways to generate, accumulate, and utilise material wealth”—that foregrounds the everyday social life of its citizens. If, however, the nation-state is governed and defined by the construction of symbolic and material forms of territoriality (B. Anderson 1991), contradictions arise when the nation seeks to re-imagine itself through the heterogeneous lens of the “global” where fundamental challenges of inclusion, diversity, and belonging are presented at the fore. Since global cities attract not only highly-skilled professionals and expatriates, but also blue-collar migrant workers concentrated within the urban service economy (Sassen 1991), questions of place concerning who belongs (or has the right to belong) at “home” in Singapore’s global city-state inevitably raise deeper questions about social hierarchies of class, race, gender, and nationality. I have maintained elsewhere that borders are expressions of these inherent contradictions, constructed to resolve these tensions in ways that ultimately facilitate the accumulation of capital within the global city-state. In this chapter, I engage specifically with how discursive borders—concerning distinctions between “us/them”;
“local/foreigner”; and “insider/outsider”—are enacted and (re)produced in the social fabric of everyday life in Singapore in my case-study analysis of the Serangoon Gardens furore.

Overview of the Serangoon Gardens uproar

The controversy was first triggered by a public uproar that arose among residents in the Serangoon Gardens (SG) Estate concerning a proposed plan by the government to convert an unused school in their neighbourhood into a temporary dormitory facility where approximately 1,000 foreign workers would be housed. On September 3, 2008, over 250 residents gathered in a heated dialogue session with their Members of Parliament, Mr George Yeo and Mrs Lim Hwee Hua, to voice their concerns and objections to what they perceived to be an ill-conceived proposal that would “create security and social problems and spoil the ambience of the estate” (MICA 2008, 11). Almost 1,400 petition signatures were collected from the 4,000 households in the immediate vicinity of the proposed dormitory to appeal against the idea. Although many residents had no difficulties acknowledging the country’s economic need for foreign workers, the primary issue of contention centred on what was regarded as the fundamental “inappropriateness of locating a foreign worker dormitory in a well-established [and family-centric] residential enclave” (8). Specific concerns included: the safety of young children, women, and the elderly; traffic congestion; potential increases in crime; littering and loitering; conflicts over the use of parks and other public amenities; property value depreciation; and fears concerning “undesirable relationships” between foreign workers and domestic helpers.

During the course of the petition, media reports on the incident drew in a slew of wide-ranging remarks and comments from the general public in the form of letters to the editor in the daily press and online web-postings on discussion forums and the local blogosphere. Many were quick to condemn the situation as an embarrassing case of social elitism and middle-class xenophobia by snobbish, insular, and racist individuals who failed to appreciate the critical contributions of foreign workers in helping to maintain the “good life” enjoyed by most.
Singaporeans (TD 25). Opinions published in editorial commentaries in the national press also reflected a particularly strong stand against the incident, conveyed through jarring titles that read: “Power, pride and prejudice... Will the middle class pass the co-existence test?” (ST 5); “Foreign workers’ housing: Act educated about it” (ST 39); or, “Too ‘good’ for our own good?” (ST 75).

At the other end of the debate, however, there were many others who sympathised with what they perceived as genuine fears and concerns on the part of SG residents, which they justified using personal accounts of their negative encounters and experiences of living near foreign workers. Ironically, the SG community found themselves caught in the unforeseen situation of having to defend their claims against the media bombardment of moral stereotypes that branded them as “supercilious, intolerant, racist, [and] unaccommodating” (ST 39) middle-class folks.

The manner in which the controversy escalated to “a national debate on social tolerance and class” (TD 15) is testimony to the intensity and scale at which the issue of foreign worker accommodation affects the nation as a whole. More importantly, the Serangoon Gardens incident exposed the underlying and mounting border tensions 19 between locals and foreigners (particularly low-wage foreign workers) that correlate directly with the state’s economic strategy of “going global” and its increasing reliance on foreign employment as a means to address the country’s labour shortage problem. Although the case-study captures only a moment of a wider and ongoing process, it offers a valuable lens through which to examine questions of place, belonging, and the social exclusion of foreign workers in Singapore’s globalising landscape. The local neighbourhood is significant in ways that it symbolises a sense of being “in place” and at “home” within the nation. In light of state immigration policy (as a bordering practice) that disembodies the labour of migrant workers insofar as it alienates them from their site of reproduction (see Kearney 1991), foreign workers are treated as no more than transient labourers with bachelor/single status in Singapore, who are effectively marginalised and excluded given

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19 Although I am primarily concerned with tensions between locals and foreign workers here, I wish to point out that class conflicts among locals (specifically between landed property owners and those living in public housing) were also manifested during the controversy.
their status as permanent outsiders. The proposed location of the dormitory may thus be seen as a moment of transgression that threatened the social “order of things” in the local neighbourhood as a place of reproduction for citizens at “home” (Cresswell 1996; see also Smith and Winders 2008).

Transgressions (or the threat of them) represent moments in which borders and boundaries are made explicit through efforts by a dominant community to preserve its normative values and image by excluding others deemed as different and “out of place” (Cresswell 1996; Trudeau 2006). By emphasising the dormitory siting as a form of transgression, I seek to raise questions about the power hierarchies and social norms of behaviour that govern the territorialised politics of belonging in Serangoon Gardens as a privatised residential neighbourhood in order to draw attention to the inherently spatial nature of social exclusion. As Gallaher (1997, 262; quoted in Trudeau 2006, 434) puts it: “the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not just an abstract line upon which mental boundary wars are waged. This boundary is articulated on the ground, in the construction, reconstruction and contestation of spaces.” My focus on analysing the discourse of public reactions to the dormitory proposal aims to highlight the discursive ways that language is used to articulate beliefs about social difference and belonging that portray the abject presence of foreign workers as outsiders in the neighbourhood. In particular, I examine how these discourses are performed and materialised in place; that is, how the neighbourhood is socially constructed to reinforce categories of Otherness that differentiate an “inside” and “outside” concerning who belongs and does not belong within this bounded community (Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996).

Serangoon Gardens Estate as a privatised neighbourhood

Situated in the north-east region of the city-state, Serangoon Gardens is one of the oldest residential estates built in the 1950s as part of an early wave of private housing projects

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20 Although the term “estate” is often synonymous with public housing in the North American context, estates in Singapore may be distinguished between private and public housing estates consisting of housing developments that range from detached, semi-detached, and terrace houses (landed properties) to high-density multi-storey housing blocks.
developed during the post-war period in Singapore. Roads in the estate are narrow (since cars were previously less common), and many continue to bear colonial-sounding names like Brockhampton, Berwick, Chartwell, and Carisbrooke (see Figure 3). Before the 1970s, the area was occupied mainly by British military officials who lived in bungalows, semi-detached and terrace houses, many of which were owned by local Chinese elites who were well-off enough to purchase these properties. It was commonplace for wealthy middle-class families in the estate, both local and expatriate, to employ *amahs*\(^{21}\) as part-time or live-in domestic helpers to assist with managing their household needs (Huang and Yeoh 1996). These *amahs* have since been replaced by Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers who are now regularly seen in the neighbourhood. Since many families are long-term residents in Serangoon Gardens, the estate currently has a high concentration of three-generational households and is widely regarded as a family-centric neighbourhood. Demographically speaking, the local population is overwhelmingly Chinese, comprising of almost 85 percent of the total resident population (Statistics Singapore 2000)\(^{22}\). There is also a significant expatriate population in the neighbourhood, owing to the area’s proximity to the Lycee Francais De Singapour (the Singapore French School) and the Australian International School.

The neighbourhood’s reputation as a middle-class estate may be attributed to the fact that it has one of the highest concentrations of landed properties in the country (Statistics Singapore 2000). Owing to their sheer limited supply, private landed properties—bungalows, semi-detached houses, and terrace houses—are typically perceived as exclusive landscapes of middle and upper class living in land-scarce Singapore. As R. Goh (2005) points out, images of private property reflect status symbols of social class and elitism, which feeds into its desirability as a privileged commodity that only 15 percent of resident households are currently entitled to (Statistics

\(^{21}\) *Amahs* refer to domestic workers who migrated from China in the 1930s to work for British and Chinese middle-class households in Singapore (Huang and Yeoh 1996).

\(^{22}\) The remaining 15 percent consists of Malays (5 percent); Indians (8 percent) and other minority others (2 percent).
In fact, private landed properties constitute a mere 5.4 percent of all resident dwellings in the city-state, the majority of which are public housing built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) where 82 percent of the population lives (HDB 2008; Statistics Singapore 2009). Private properties are thus characterised by the distinctive qualities they offer, such as “privacy, quiet [surroundings], peace of mind, and [other] related features” (R. Goh 2005, 151) which public housing lacks. In addition, private properties offer an attractive source of investment for Singaporeans and are often valuable assets for rental income, especially with the rising tide of foreign professionals coming into Singapore in recent years (Tay 2007). Even the smallest terrace houses are now worth over a million dollars amidst the ongoing property boom.

Serangoon Gardens Estate is generally characterised as a quaint, upscale neighbourhood that is well known for its popular eateries and vibrant nightlife. The uniqueness of the estate is frequently attributed to its charming and archaic environment, which features a recently upgraded network of spacious and lush-green parks, and a diverse host of restaurants, cafés, and hawker centres (most notably the “Chomp Chomp Food Centre”) around the nucleus of the estate, affectionately termed as “the circus” (see Figure 3). Many residents describe the estate as having “a sense of homeliness” (TD 3) where parks offer “an oasis of spaciousness and tranquillity” (TD 7) for people to unwind and relax, and where narrow streets—shared alike by motorists, cyclists, young children, and elderly folk—provide an area “conducive to neighbourly interaction between residents” (ST 18, 29). In the words of one resident who grew up in the estate, Serangoon Gardens is “a big backyard where families who have lived there for years, play and meet” in an environment “founded on long-term familiarity and camaraderie” (ST 62). As the controversy unfolded in the media, however, the symbolic landscape of Serangoon Gardens emerged as a site of class-based tensions, not only between SG residents and foreign workers, but also local HDB

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23 This figure was obtained from a real estate agent who specialises in selling landed properties in the Serangoon Gardens Estate. He maintains a property weblog at http://serangoongardens.blogspot.com/ (accessed January 11, 2010).
dwellers (or “heartlanders”) who felt side-lined in the debate, claiming that SG residents had no right to be up in arms against the presence of foreign workers in their neighbourhood since many of them were already dealing with the “burden” of living in close proximity with these workers.

**Figure 3** Street map of the area in question in Serangoon Gardens Estate

**Figure 4** Two-storey detached house along Burghley Drive (Photograph by author)

![Two-storey detached house along Burghley Drive](image)

**Figure 5** Resident houses opposite the proposed dormitory site along Burghley Drive (Photograph by author)

![Resident houses opposite the proposed dormitory site along Burghley Drive](image)
Figure 6 The former Serangoon Garden Technical School (Photograph by author)

Figure 7 “Save Our Serangoon”  


This picture was taken by a passer-by who posted the image on STOMP, a citizen-journalism website that operates on user-generated material provided from the public. I was unable to trace the details of how the sign came to be found on the gate entrance of the former Serangoon Gardens Technical School, although the content suggests that it was most likely put up by an individual or group of residents living in the area.
**Constructing the dormitory as “out of place”**

Migrant exclusions in residential neighbourhoods reflect local struggles over place involving efforts by a dominant community to differentiate and exclude the alien bodies of migrant workers through bordering practices that enforce particular ideas about belonging and inclusion within that community (Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996; Winders 2008). As Daniel Trudeau (2006, 434) succinctly puts it: “To be out of place is to violate a community’s sense of place.” In the case of the Serangoon Gardens uproar, the dormitory proposal represented a transgression of the nation’s moral geography by threatening to disrupt one of the most cherished images of home in Singapore’s culture of upward mobility—or, “upgrading,” as is commonly termed (see R. Goh 2005). If social reproduction is understood as a set of “placed processes” (Smith and Winders 2008, 61, original emphasis) involving what Cindi Katz (2001, 710) describes as “the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life,” it becomes evident how defences of place as “property” and “way of life” were hinged upon the construction of the local neighbourhood as an extended site of social reproduction where citizens—the social body of the nation-state—engaged in “life’s work” (Mitchell et al. 2003). On this account, the neighbourhood was amplified as a local-domestic sphere which residents felt had to be fiercely guarded against the intrusion of migrant outsiders.

Writing on behalf of SG residents with feedback gathered from neighbourhood leaders and the dialogue session on September 3rd, MP Lim Hwee Hua’s formal letter to the Ministry of National Development (MND) stated that:

> My residents and I wish to express serious reservations and grave concerns over the feasibility of such a proposal as follows: a) general—fundamental question of the appropriateness of siting a foreign worker dormitory within a well-established residential enclave; and b) specific—woefully inadequate transport and supporting infrastructure which will give rise to significant disamenities relating to disharmony, security and other social issues (MICA 2008, 8).

By appealing the issue as a matter of inappropriate land-use, it was implied that a foreign worker dormitory did not belong in a “settled” residential neighbourhood like Serangoon Gardens.
Following this assertion, “residential” areas were prescribed as places characterised by particular forms of dwelling—for citizens rooted and invested “in place”—which conflicted against the operative function of the dormitory as temporary *en masse* housing for foreign workers. Ingrained within this spatial logic was also the expectation of specific norms of behaviour, where arguments about safety, community, and property value reflected concerns with social distinction and boundaries that intersected with uneven structures of class, race, gender, and nationality (Maher 2003). Hence, the alleged absence of adequate “supporting infrastructure” did not merely represent a question of lack; it was also one that posed a fundamental issue of *incompatibility* concerning the prospect of accommodating an unprecedented influx of migrant Others into the neighbourhood.

In significant ways, the construction of the dormitory as a non-residential entity aligns with the state’s instrumentalist approach to migrant labour, which reflects the prevailing mindset that foreign workers are simply transient workers who satisfy the demand for “3D” labour that locals were unwilling to do (see Chapter 4), and would eventually “leave once they make enough money, or [when] their work permit expires” (ST 26). In this regard, they are not committed to “sinking roots” in Singapore (since the majority do not qualify for permanent residence) and are viewed predominantly as economic tools to help bolster the nation’s material growth. Many residents adopted an equally pragmatic standpoint in arguing against the dormitory proposal as a case of improper land-use planning. As stated in a letter to the editor: “Singapore has good industrial and commercial policies in the sense that zones are clearly spelt out and... planned in the long term. […] Why can’t we apply the same logic to this issue?” (ST 26) In the words of another resident, “the Singapore populace should not be burdened to make sacrifices or suffer losses” for the benefit of “cost savings” (TD 9) on the part of private companies who contract foreign workers to fuel their own profit motives. Arguments about inappropriate land-use were particularly salient among individuals who attempted to reason against accusations of xenophobia, racism, and social elitism that pervaded the debate.
Specifically, many were concerned that the “sudden introduction” (ST 26) of 1,000 foreign workers would place an overwhelming constraint on the existing facilities in the neighbourhood, which would thereby undermine its quiet and harmonious environment. While the school had “served residents well [by] enhancing the community spirit of the area,” converting the building into a foreign worker dormitory was foreseen to have the “opposite effect” as it would “burden residents” with unnecessary “financial, emotional, and physical” costs (ST 18). A significant problem raised was the issue of traffic congestion in the neighbourhood, where many of the roads around the estate’s entry and exit points were narrow and one-way streets. The dormitory, it was argued, would bring “chaos to the fragile traffic system” (ST 29) during peak periods since foreign worker employers would have to cater buses and trucks to shuttle these workers to and from work. Consequently, the amount of vehicular traffic stemming from this situation would create frequent bottleneck problems in the estate’s road system that would significantly inconvenience residents in the neighbourhood. As argued by a resident: “The entire estate will be gridlocked with heavy vehicles... [And] what about the danger these heavy vehicles could pose to the quiet lanes where there are many young children, elderly folk and cyclists?” (ST 29).

Underlying these arguments revolving around traffic congestion and overcrowding, however, was a fundamental desire among residents to protect an established “way of life” in Serangoon Gardens as a privatised residential neighbourhood. It was raised by an individual (presumably also a resident in the estate) that while the Serangoon Gardens Technical School was still up and running, there would routinely be family vehicles and buses lined up outside the school compounds during the start and end of school for two cohorts of students. In his words, since “far less congestion occurs when a single bus ferries 40 workers as opposed to 40 cars catering individually to 40 students,” the arguments about traffic congestion seemed “hardly tenable” (ST 65). As previously stated, private landed estates are distinguished by the privacy, tranquillity, and spaciousness they offer to those who are able to afford these exclusive properties.
While the Serangoon Gardens community prided itself as a “cosy and family-centric neighbourhood,” the presence of the dormitory—representing a significant influx of foreign workers into the estate—threatened to displace its unique charm and attractiveness, resulting in “a significant deterioration in the quality of their home environment” (MICA 2008, 9-10). Several netizens who were sympathetic to the concerns of SG residents raised the point that individuals who pay to live in private housing estates are those who worked hard for a better lifestyle, which alludes back to Singapore’s culture of upgrading in terms of social and material advancement.

Since residents effectively pay a premium for the privacy they enjoy, many were concerned about the substantial property devaluation that would result from the location of the foreign worker dormitory near their homes. As pointed out in a forum letter: “We all know property values are much about location, which translates to desirable qualities such as safety, privacy, availability and adequacy of support services and facilities” (TD 9). Stated more crudely in another letter was the worry that “Who wants to buy a property near a workers’ dormitory? And who is going to compensate the residents for their losses?” (TD 11) Unsurprisingly, these sentiments were met with sharp criticisms from the wider public, rebuking SG residents for their middle-class snobbery and elitist behaviour. Particularly among comment postings in the STDB and various blogs, these tensions also became a source of conflict and division between “well-off” SG residents and presumably “lower-class” HDB dwellers who interpreted the arguments about property devaluation as implying that the dormitory should be housed “elsewhere”—meaning public housing estates, some of which have already seen large numbers of foreign workers moving in over the past years. This pervasive sense of reluctance to live in close proximity to foreign workers bears strong testimony to their undesirable presence in local residential areas. In the following section, I illustrate how arguments against the dormitory proposal were premised upon border anxieties and fears that the quiet streets of Serangoon Gardens would be polluted by the abject, labouring bodies of foreign workers.
Moral panics and the transgression of foreign bodies

Polluting the neighbourhood’s pristine environment

Geographers have argued that land-use zoning practices are “normative prescriptions [...] that create spatial categories of acceptable social behaviour and visual aesthetic” (Trudeau 2006, 422) within a particular area. In the context of Serangoon Gardens, the undesirable presence of foreign workers was frequently attributed to certain bodily dispositions that characterised their uncouth and anti-social demeanour in modern Singapore. These “bodies-out-of-place” (Cresswell 1999) allude to Iris Young’s (1990, 123) discussion on the embodied experience of cultural imperialism; that is, how members of marginalised and oppressed groups are “imprisoned in their bodies” when a dominant culture defines them as Other through bodily characteristics that mark them as “ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, [...] loathsome, or fearful.” In this racialised schema of class and gender difference, foreign workers were constructed as the nation’s Other—dirty, uncivilised, and backward—in view of their nonconformity to the established “behavioural norms of respectability” (Young 1990) in Singapore. Importantly, the alleged “disamenities” (as stated in MP Lim’s written petition) relating to social disharmony and security issues were perceived outcomes associated with the derogatory labelling of foreign workers as deviant and brutish, stemming largely from their underclass status as transient low-wage labourers.

The sentiments expressed in the following letter reveal how foreign workers were commonly identified with notions of social delinquency and disorder, albeit with a stark tinge of irony:

Rationally speaking, the concerns raised by residents have nothing to do with race or social strata, but more with the potential difficulties of living in such close proximity to a significant number of people with very different values, cultures and habits. We cannot expect the workers to be... confined to the “self-contained” compounds [of the dormitory]. We cannot expect them to change their habits overnight. Nor would it be fair to expect residents not to be concerned when the workers relax by loitering around shirtless, drinking and talking loudly (ST 28).

While private residential estates were recognised as “secluded and peaceful” (ST 23), the presence of foreign workers was deemed as an “eyesore” (TD 12) that threatened to tarnish this
preserved image of privacy and tranquillity. In another private estate situated with several foreign worker dormitories close by, Leslie Lee, a resident in the area, described the “slum-like environment” that residents had to endure with foreign workers loitering around the vicinity:

Every evening, the workers congregate in the private carpark and on the pavements of my estate. At about midnight, residents end up with heaps of peanut shells, beer bottles (sometimes broken), vomit, urine, packets of leftover food and snacks and sometimes even faeces. Sometimes in the morning, you can also see some drunk[en] foreign workers sleeping on the five-foot way (ST 30).

He also added having to hire a pest control company to fumigate the place in order to deter the spread of pests and contagious diseases.

Cleanliness, efficiency, and orderliness are prime symbolic markers of Singapore’s social modernity (Velayutham 2004). The correlation between cleanliness and middle-class sensibilities may be traced back to the Victorian era, where Anne McClintock (1995, 153) has argued that “the iconography of dirt became deeply integrated in the policing and transgression of social boundaries.” Dirt was associated with the visible surplus of manual labour which marked the boundaries of race, class, and gender between imperial wealth and the subjugation of “undomesticated” working class and colonised populations. As McClintock explains, the formation of Victorian middle-class identity came to be premised upon a “cult of domesticity” (169) where dirt was segregated from hygiene, and order from disorder. She further highlights the contradiction tied to dirt as a boundary marker; specifically, that the production of middle-class identity was undergirded by the hands and bodies of working class women and the colonised through their “labour of invisibility” (166) which went against the precept that social wealth was created primarily by the rational principles of the market. Parallels may be drawn with Singapore’s (foreign) “army of cleaners” employed to maintain the pristine and litter-free environment of the country (The Straits Times, March 25, 2009). Inasmuch as foreign workers are responsible for doing the “dirty” job of cleaning up after Singaporeans, their visible embodiment remains marked by abject notions of dirt and impurity.
The unsavoury “habits” that mark the perceived backwardness and cultural inferiority of foreign workers stem primarily from the moral geography that underpins modern social life in Singapore (Pow 2007). Iris Young (1990, 137) has maintained that “behavioural norms of respectability” are linked to the idea of order where “all manners come to be associated with bodily decency, restraint, and cleanliness.” Many of those who contributed to the debate cited the anti-social behaviour of foreign workers as the “root of the problem” (ST 38) concerning why Singaporeans held such aversive attitudes toward them. As stated in a forum letter:

Foreign workers do not behave according to the social norms practised and accepted by Singaporeans, hence the rejection they face. [...] Therefore, foreign workers... must be educated on Singapore’s norms... [which include:] no spitting, no urinating in public, no littering, no loud banter and the like (ST 22).

Since foreign workers failed to conform to the civilised standards of conduct maintained within the nation’s moral-social order, it was presumed that their “bad habits” must be reformed by learning the “correct social etiquette in Singapore” (ST 38). An SG resident who remained sceptical, however, even went as far to argue that “Some of them may not be interested, or may not understand why we are teaching them to change their character... It is not up to us to help them change, but up to human nature” (ST 59).

While it is clear that racist sentiments (like those above) pervaded the Serangoon Gardens debate, they were often couched in covert expressions that emphasised the Otherness of foreign workers in terms of cultural differences tied to connotations of poverty and rural backwardness. By accentuating the “foreignness” of foreign workers through distinctions of nationality, cultures, and lifestyle habits, the language of race was deliberately avoided, leaving the stark racial inequalities embodied by migrant labour largely unquestioned and taken for granted (Cheng 2003). This tendency was particularly evident among letters published in the newspapers where greater caution was exercised to express what was deemed as “politically correct” in view of the highly sensitive nature of public discussion on race relations in Singapore (Chua 2005). While explicit discussions of race were generally absent in mainstream media, comments posted on the
STDB and a variety of blogs frequently cited examples of disorderly behaviour among foreign workers with reference to Singapore’s “Little India”25 where South Asian workers congregated weekly on Sundays. In particular, racial meanings attached to “Little India”—specifically, the vacant field along Race Course Road which serves as a meeting point for workers to gather—as a weekend foreign worker enclave were projected onto images of the Serangoon Gardens dormitory as a place of social contamination and disorder.

The mutually constitutive relationship between racial discourse and place is highlighted in Kay Anderson’s (1987) study of the historical formation of Vancouver’s Chinatown, where she demonstrates how moral associations of the Chinese as dirty and uncivilised were tied inherently to the construction of Chinatown as a place of pestilence, disease, lawlessness, and sexual promiscuity. As she points out, racial ideologies are socially constructed processes that are necessarily embedded in “place” where they are assigned a local referent and become reproduced (even institutionalised) as social facts. Yeoh and Huang’s (1998, 593) study of Lucky Plaza shopping centre (or “Little Manila”), where Filipino workers socialise on weekends, reveals how these “weekend enclaves” are often perceived as “physically and socially polluted landscapes [...] where Singaporeans] complained of the ‘crowds,’ the ‘crush,’ the ‘human barricades,’... the ‘noise’ and the ‘litter.’” Representations of these degenerate spaces were inextricably tied to the hyper-visibility of these workers, which in turn reinforced the spatial construction of foreign workers as Other. Likewise, connotations of messiness and disorder are routinely attached to “Little India,” renamed by reporter Zaihan Mohamed Yusof (2008) as “Litter India” in his account of how bags of rubbish, empty beer bottles, and scraps of food remains would be strewn all over the field along Race Course Road after a typical Sunday.

25 The term “Little India” should be problematised here, which serves to mark the Serangoon Road area as a racially constructed landscape. The area was historically designated as an ethnic neighbourhood where Indian immigrants resided under the British policy of ethnic segregation.
“Safety and security issues”

Apart from fears regarding social and physical contamination, SG residents were also (more importantly) concerned about the safety of young children and the elderly as a result of having a large group of foreign workers “all male and without their family” (ST 26) in the neighbourhood. Annabelle Chan, a resident whose home was three streets away from the proposed site, expressed how she had “chills down [her] spine... [with the thought] of having 1,000 strong, red-blooded men in a modest community of about 2,000 households within 500 [metres] of the site” where the majority comprised of “the aged, children and maids” (ST 37). As elaborated by another resident:

Foreign workers are in a “bachelor” state without their family. They are grouped together, single men in dormitories. [...] The connotations emanating from foreign single men living in dorms in an estate which is predominantly family-oriented is only too obvious (ST 32).

In a similar argument: “Who in their right mind will welcome 1,000 men, likely to drink beer and ogle at your teenage daughter when she walks home from the bus stop?” (ST 50). Many residents also felt that it was their duty to protect their families from any threat of harm that came with having a large presence of foreign workers in the neighbourhood: “All it takes is one unfortunate incident... Is it worth the risk to push the comfort levels of the quiet residents of Serangoon Gardens towards unchartered territory?” (ST 23)

Furthermore, there were worries about the dormitory being located close to an all-girls’ school (CHIJ Our Lady of Good Counsel), and the safety implications that this would entail (ST 15; see Figure 3). Among comments posted on the STDB, discussants exchanged past news stories about victims (often young females) that have been robbed, raped, or murdered by foreign workers. In these instances, the hyper-masculinised, racialised, and classed bodies of foreign workers—regarded as dangerous, brute, and sensual—were marked out as a threat to the moral purity and established order of the neighbourhood where the vulnerable must be protected. Residents were cast as potential victims who might “fall prey” (ST 46) to the immoral vices and lewd behaviour of these rough, uncouth workers. Discriminatory attitudes toward foreign workers sometimes also vacillated between dehumanising fears and prejudices, to those which emphasised
brute human perversion. As stated pragmatically by a resident: “Foreign workers are also human beings. They have emotional needs. They may feel lonely. I’m concerned for the general female population in Serangoon Gardens and for the maids” (ST 15). Here, the emphatic acknowledgment of the workers’ common humanity threatens to dissolve the prescribed border between “us” and “them” at the same that it translates into genuine fear and a desire to distance oneself away from the abject presence of foreign workers (see Kristeva 1982; Young 1990, 144).

Geographers have demonstrated the significance of social categories of race, gender, class, and age in shaping people’s fear of crime (Valentine 1989; Sibley 1995; Pain 2001). In the United States, for example, images of black males are often associated with racial stereotypes of crime that are both gendered and sexualised (Pain 2001). Studies have shown that white middle-class women’s perceptions of their vulnerability to threats of sexual violence and harassment tend to be informed by racialised fears about the sexually violent nature of black males (Valentine 1989; Pain 2001). As David Sibley (1995) points out, feelings of fear, anxiety, or nervousness in public areas frequently stem from stereotypical constructions of people marked as different and “out of place.” In the case of Serangoon Gardens, the terms in which residents have articulated their fears about crime (stemming from a substantial foreign worker presence in the neighbourhood) must be contextualised within the racialised, gendered, and class-based inequalities that underpin how these workers are temporarily co-opted into the city-state as cheap migrant labour. As noted in Chapter 4, state immigration policy dictates that work permit holders are allowed to come only as individual workers without their spouses and family. Furthermore, foreign workers employed in the construction industry and waged domestic sector comprise predominantly of male Bangladeshi migrants, and Filipino and Indonesian women respectively.

To a significant extent, the language of crime serves as a way of articulating fears and anxieties about transformations in the nation’s social landscape that challenge the locally accustomed way of life (Maher 2003). Although police statistics have revealed that the arrest rate for work permit holders was in fact the lowest in the country (227 per 100,000 as compared to 435
for Singapore residents)\textsuperscript{26}, foreign workers remain targeted as the brunt of social evils in the country. As Teresa Caldeira (2000, 34; quoted in Maher 2003, 768) articulates in her study of middle-class residents among gated communities in São Paulo, “Crime supplies a generative symbolism with which to talk about other things that are perceived as wrong or bad, but for which no consensus of interpretation or vocabulary may exist.” Applied in the Singapore context, the talk of crime reduces the complexity of issues and events that inform the country’s heavy reliance on migrant labour to stereotypical assumptions about foreign workers, which glosses over the extent to which the sharp rise in numbers of foreign workers over the past years is due to the growing demand for cheap labour that underpins the nation’s social and material wealth.

\textit{Foreign domestic workers as the intimate Other}

It is important to note that foreign workers were already living in the Serangoon Gardens neighbourhood since the 1980s as live-in female domestic workers (casually referred to as “maids”). One may assume that majority of the households in the area are employers of foreign domestic workers, whose labour is often treated by middle-class Singaporeans as an economic necessity especially among dual-income families (Huang and Yeoh 1996)\textsuperscript{27}. Despite their (partial) incorporation within the private sphere of the household as waged domestic workers, foreign domestic workers occupy a deeply ambivalent place in the household as the “intimate other” (Chang and Ling 2000) where they tread “a fine line between being an ‘employee’ and a ‘family member’” (Yeoh 2006, 33). In many cases, their mobility both within and outside of the home is heavily restricted by disciplinary measures—for example, separate boarding arrangements and mealtimes, curfews, and the regulated use of domestic space—that work to circumscribe “whose raced, classed and gendered bodies have a place [at rest] within the home” (Pratt 1998, 293; see

\textsuperscript{26} These percentages reflect 2007 figures (quoted in TODAY, September 15, 2008).
\textsuperscript{27} As pointed out in Chapter 4, latest statistics from the Ministry of Manpower show that 1 out of 6 households in Singapore employ a foreign domestic worker.
also C. Chin 1998; Constable 2007). Since there is no legislation that requires employers to provide their foreign domestic workers with off-days from work, it is not uncommon for these domestic workers to be confined almost entirely within the boundaries of “home” as a means of containing them “in place” and under surveillance (Yeoh 2006).

The potential arrival of new migrant Others into the neighbourhood destabilises the precarious boundary surrounding the domestic worker’s ambivalent position as a simultaneous “insider” and “outsider” within the home. References made to foreign domestic workers as part of the neighbourhood’s vulnerable population were tinged with feelings of suspicion and fears concerning the disconcerting prospect of potential hook-ups with foreign workers. When the safety and security of female residents in the neighbourhood arose as a particular concern, foreign domestic workers were discriminated as those who should be supervised with extra vigilance. At a resident dialogue session with MPs in Serangoon Gardens, Josephine, a sales executive, spoke of how she once spotted her neighbour’s domestic worker “letting a man out of the house” (ST 1) when they were away on holiday. Another resident asserted in a letter to the ST editorial that “the fears are real and certainly well-founded” (ST 23), recounting an incident where his foreign domestic worker was impregnated by a foreign worker, which he later discovered only when she suffered a messy miscarriage from attempting a self-induced abortion. In a more recent encounter, his domestic worker was “terrified and intimidated by [the] frequent ogling and catcalls” (ST 23) from foreign workers living temporarily next door when extensive renovation work was being carried out on his neighbour’s property.

Rose, a landed property owner, stated in her blog that she sympathised with SG residents in view of her personal experience of living with foreign construction workers in her neighbourhood. When foreign workers first moved in behind her home where large-scale construction work was being carried out, they began befriending the foreign domestic workers in the neighbourhood, and would sometimes whistle and throw nails onto her balcony and those of her neighbours’ to attract the attention of their domestic workers. These foreign workers also
patronised the neighbourhood mini-mart where residents and foreign domestic workers frequented, and she subsequently barred her domestic worker from leaving the house alone at any time. On one particular instance, however, she discovered that her domestic worker had been stealing food from the house and distributing it to the foreign workers, which was also the case among six other households further down the street. She promptly decided to send her domestic worker home, confessing that too much was at stake with the S$5,000 security bond that she could potentially lose if her domestic worker became pregnant, as well as security issues with having to leave her children alone with the domestic worker in the house when she was frequently away. Similar sentiments were expressed among STDB online postings where people cited examples of their experience with domestic workers.

Employer anxieties about the likelihood of intimate relationships between female domestic workers and foreign workers affirm Parreñas’ (2001, 49; quoted in Yeoh 2006, 33) observation that “only the production and not reproduction of their labour is desired.” Furthermore, the claim of ownership and entitlement with which some employers referred to their foreign domestic workers reveal the extent to which these workers were perceived almost synonymously as personal property to be defended. Insofar as the neoliberal economy demands that the bodies of migrant workers are disciplined to be disposable, productive, and affordable, these flexible bodies are, as Smith and Winders (2008, 65) point out, held in a “liminal status... [That is,] everywhere and nowhere, constantly available to work yet never permitted to live.” By externalising the costs of social reproduction for low-wage foreign workers, state immigration policy functions as a bordering practice which ensures that these workers are permanently excluded in the global city-state as outsiders that “exist... only to work” (Smith and Winders 2008, 64). Within the sphere of the household, state power is enacted and (re)produced by employers who are entrusted with the responsibility of regulating the everyday conduct and sexual behaviour of foreign domestic workers through strict monitoring and control measures (Yeoh and Huang 1998; Cheng 2003).
Postcolonial attitudes concerning “foreign talent”

While low-wage foreign workers were marked out as abject outsiders in the neighbourhood, expatriate professionals (or “foreign talent”) were, by contrast, virtually “invisible in their ‘foreignness’” (Maher 2003, 755), owing largely to their official designation as highly-skilled professional workers with far superior levels of economic and social capital. In a *Straits Times* feature article concerning the Serangoon Gardens furore, it was reported that 5,000 expatriates currently lived in the estate which interestingly, is also unofficially known as Little France and Australia (ST 43). The Lycee Francais De Singapour was set up along Ang Mo Kio Avenue 3 in 1999, while the Australian International School was more recently built in 2003 at Lorong Chuan. Over the years, many expatriates have since moved into the estate in light of the area’s close proximity to these international schools. Swiss national, Laura Tamburrini, who recently moved into the neighbourhood with her husband and two children, told the ST press in an interview: “Though I’m just getting to know the area, people here [in Serangoon Gardens] have been very warm” (quoted in Sudderuddin and Yue 2008; ST 9). In the same article, MP Lim Hwee Hua remarked that these expatriates did not seem out of place in the neighbourhood, seeing that “they [hung] out quite comfortably at the [Serangoon Gardens] ‘circus’ and shops.”

Postcolonial racial sentiments were particularly evident amongst various forum letters and blog posts. Alluding to previous criticisms on the uncouth demeanour of foreign workers in Singapore, it was argued in a letter to the editor that:

> One clear distinction between blue-collar foreign workers from countries like India and white-collar workers from Western countries is their *behaviour*. With a significantly higher level of education, one would not expect these white-collar workers to behave like blue-collar workers (ST 49, my emphasis).

Although emphasis is placed above on the relationship between educational standing (as a product of socio-economic class) and social demeanour, racialised distinctions between First World and Third World were used to map the type of skilled or unskilled labour perceived to be derived from these parts of the world, which feeds in turn into the ways they are presumed to think and act.
Brenda Yeoh (2004b) has pointed out that local attitudes to foreigners may be expressed in three distinct ways: i) “looking up to them” (connoting postcolonial attitudes of inferiority toward the White expatriate); ii) “looking down on them” (allocating unwanted and low-status “3D” jobs to economically and culturally inferior migrant Others); and iii) “fear of them” (pertaining to their physical presence in the social landscape and fierce competitions in the job market). These attitudes reveal the extent to which deep-seated colonial hierarchies continue to remain embedded within the “cosmopolitan” landscape of the aspiring global city-state.

Moreover, the unproblematic presence of foreign expatriates in the neighbourhood was commonly justified by the reason that a “large portion of them [were] sinking roots [in Singapore] with their families” (ST 26), whereas foreign workers were here only on a temporary basis. Although the state provides numerous incentives for high-paying foreign professionals to take up permanent residence and citizenship in Singapore, many of these expatriates are, as Yeoh et al. (2000, 152-3) point out, highly mobile workers who frequently move between “a two-to-five-year rhythm from one global city to the next along with their households.” Consequently, while the transnational mobility of foreign professionals is privileged by discourses of cosmopolitanism in the global city-state, the (enforced) transient nature of low-wage foreign workers often translates into local exclusionary practices among citizens who tend to view them with feelings of suspicion and fear. It is clear in this regard that mobility is “embodied in different ways by different bodies” (Cresswell 1999, 179) within the city-state, insofar as borders are simultaneously constructed “to domesticate certain transnational subjects... while distinguishing other foreign bodies as transgressors of the nation” (Yeoh 2006, 36).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued how the exclusion of foreign workers in Singapore is premised upon bordering practices that are shaped substantially by social structures of race, class, gender, and nationality. Inasmuch as foreign workers provide the much-needed labour for low-end jobs in
Singapore, it is precisely their labouring function that excludes them as outsiders within the moral geography of the local neighbourhood where citizens are “at rest.” The dormitory was constructed as a transgression of the neighbourhood’s moral-social order in ways that it signalled the large-scale encroachment of migrant Others into the neighbourhood. Beneath arguments concerning traffic congestion and the lack of infrastructural facilities was a fundamental desire among residents to preserve a “way of life” in the Serangoon Gardens community as a place of rootedness and belonging. In particular, arguments against the dormitory proposal were premised upon border anxieties that marked out the bodies of foreign workers as abject, dangerous, and non-belonging. I also sought to highlight the ways that the state’s highly managerial approach to foreign labour resonates in everyday social meanings and practices that construct these workers as unassimilable (read: undesirable) subjects within the city-state.

As revealed in the tensions above, the Serangoon Gardens uproar raises larger questions about Singapore’s relentless quest for growth in its current push into remaking itself as a cosmopolitan, global city. According to Foreign Minister George Yeo: “We may grow much faster if we open our doors to foreign workers but if there are too many of them coming into Singapore, it will affect our living environment” (quoted in Luo 2008; ST 17). His words articulate the contradictory tensions that emerge with Singapore’s economic need for cheap migrant labour, on the one hand, and aversive attitudes towards the alien presence of labouring bodies in local neighbourhoods, on the other. The focus in Chapter 5 was predominantly on negative reactions to the dormitory proposal since my aim was to examine the types of bordering practices that have emerged in response to the growing visibility of foreign workers in Singapore’s social landscape. What was less emphasised, however, was the substantial criticisms that SG residents received from the wider public concerning their callous remarks against foreign workers. In the next chapter, I explore these counter-arguments as well as the specific outcomes of the controversy to reflect on the place of foreign workers in Singapore’s global city-state.
CHAPTER VI

Foreign workers and the issue of “accommodation”

[T]he immigrant [...] is a guest dependent on the conditional hospitality of the host. In relation to hospitality, a common metaphor is the country as a home, but in the case of the migrant with a temporary status this is no home. It approximates more to a boarding house with vacancies.

(Kofman 2005, 456)

When we had to put work-permit holders in Serangoon Gardens Estate, there was tremendous unhappiness. But in fact, we’ve fenced it off, made a different entrance, and I think it will work out.

(Lee Kuan Yew; quoted in The Straits Times, December 11, 2009)

The boarding house as an analogy of the state’s neoliberal management of migrant labour provides useful insight into analysing the issue of accommodation concerning temporary foreign workers in Singapore. I have shown in Chapter 4 how state immigration policies function as bordering mechanisms that filter and manage who is welcome (or not welcome) into the global city-state as “home.” While the nation’s borders are fluid and open to the transnational mobility of highly-skilled elite and professional workers, low-wage foreign workers are subjected to a range of stringent regulations that construct them as “excludable [working] populations in transit” (Ong 2006, 16) within the global city-state. These bordering practices are informed by the state’s utilitarian approach to foreign labour, which regulates the presence of foreign workers as part of a revolving pool of cheap and flexibilised labour needed to sustain the upwardly mobile standard of living in Singapore. As pointed out in Chapter 5, contradictory tensions arise when the transient labouring bodies of foreign workers are momentarily inserted into the local neighbourhood as a place of belonging and rootedness within the nation. The case-study also revealed how negative assumptions tied to the category “foreign worker” are shaped substantially by social hierarchies of class, race, gender and nationality. In this chapter, I build upon these ideas to explore the specific outcomes of the controversy and its wider implications concerning the place of low-wage foreign workers in Singapore.
In what follows, I first examine the range of public criticisms that emerged in the Serangoon Gardens debate concerning the SG petition against the government’s plan to locate a foreign worker dormitory in their neighbourhood. I analyse the critical weight of these arguments, while alluding to the legal barriers posed by state immigration policy in ensuring that foreign workers remained as a transient workforce within the global city-state. Second, I examine the state’s discourse on issues of foreign worker housing, and demonstrate how it remains premised upon a developmental rhetoric of growth dependent on the appropriation of migrant labour in the form of disposable and governable bodies within the city-state. Lastly, I consider the state’s eventual decision to move ahead with the dormitory proposal, and how it sought to address the concerns of SG residents by putting in place various disciplinary and containment measures to “minimise disruption” in the neighbourhood. In this regard, spatial borders were further evoked to address the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, which serve to further regulate the bodies of foreign workers within the uneven landscape of the global city-state. I argue that insofar as foreign workers are partially incorporated into the city-state as transient labourers, their provisional stay is contingent upon their legal and social obligation to a stipulated set of “house rules” that govern the nation’s moral-social order.

"Integration" versus "segregation": Two sides of the same coin?

As seen in the sheer volume of media attention and discussion that surrounded the Serangoon Gardens furore, the controversy represented a distinct moment of crisis in the nation’s social imaginary, which forced many Singaporeans to reflect upon what it means to live in a global city where foreign workers have become a necessary part of the nation’s economic and social landscape. In her commentary on the SG debate, Yolanda Chin (2008) highlights two camps in which the debate was divided between: those appealing for integration, and those for segregation. In the first, moral appeals underscored the critical contributions of foreign workers in sustaining the good life in Singapore, maintaining that Singaporeans, as beneficiaries, had the ethical
obligation of receiving these workers in their midst. These accounts also alluded to the fact that
the nation was historically built by the immigrant forefathers of Singaporeans who likewise came
as impoverished labourers in search of a better life. Singaporeans who discriminate against
foreign workers are those who have forgotten their migrant roots, the argument goes. On the flip
side of the debate (as detailed in Chapter 5), others maintained that foreign workers are transient
labourers who are poorly educated and do not conform to Singapore’s social norms. In view of
these differences, it is difficult to expect Singaporeans to accept these workers as equals.

Set against the backdrop of Singapore’s transition into becoming a cosmopolitan, global
city, the appeals for integration have been forceful in terms of highlighting the discrepancy
between the humanistic values of cosmopolitanism and the range of discriminatory remarks raised
during the controversy:

This fiasco is of great embarrassment to Singapore. We claim we are a cosmopolitan city but
the way we treat the very people who have played a major part in shaping our city is just
plain ungrateful (ST 47).

Accusing ‘foreign workers’ of being potential rapists, robbers and murderers reeks of
xenophobia, and I am embarrassed to be called a Singaporean. Talk about being a First World
City (ST 25).

Tensions within the nation’s self-identity are seen in the different expectations that stem from
Singapore’s celebrated economic success story. On the one hand, Singapore’s economic
modernity is promoted as a “prime marker of nationhood” (Velayutham 2004, 8) which has
instilled a deep sense of pride and belonging among many Singapore citizens. In particular, it is
this ideological distinction of Singapore’s espoused economic progress that fuels the discourse of
Otherness surrounding the social exclusion of foreign workers in the city-state. On the other hand,
many have also criticised the dominant culture of economic pragmatism in Singapore that has
tended to preclude deeper engagements with cosmopolitan values of egalitarianism and diversity
(Yeoh 2004b; Poon 2009).

In general, the arguments for integration may be categorised under two constitutive
strands: i) humanitarian appeals that urge Singaporeans to sympathise and understand that foreign
workers, as fellow human beings, have every right to be treated with equal dignity and respect; and ii) moral arguments emphasising Singapore’s economic dependency on foreign workers, often with mention of the nation’s immigrant past, with the aim of appealing to a sense of mutual understanding between locals and foreign workers. Many of the ST editorials adopted a mixture of these arguments, which also tended to reflect the rhetoric of ministerial speeches concerning the need for Singaporeans to be tolerant and accommodating towards foreign workers. In a sardonic portrayal of the incident, for example, ST journalist Tan Hui Yee parodied the arguments of SG residents as follows: “‘I have nothing against foreign workers but...’ [...] They will rob our elderly folk. They will molest our women. They will sleep with our maids. They will litter. They will get drunk in our parks and make us feel unsafe in our homes” (ST 8). When measured against the matter-of-fact (or state-driven) reality that foreign workers were critical to the nation’s economic growth, these arguments quickly became undermined as petty and selfish concerns harboured by well-off Singaporeans who were interested only in protecting their middle-class privilege.

Despite their effectiveness in highlighting the problematic nature of exclusionary attitudes manifested during the debate, many of these humanitarian appeals and moral arguments for integration inadvertently remain premised upon an “us/them” mentality, with little capacity to address the structural inequalities that underpin the demand for cheap migrant labour in Singapore. That is to say, benevolent calls for sympathy and compassion often work to accentuate and reinforce the Otherness of foreign workers inasmuch as good intentions are harboured:

If you were in a foreign land earning whatever you can so that your family, whom you won’t see for years, can scrape by, wouldn’t you want their sympathy too? [...] Wake up, stop dreaming, and have a little heart (NP 17).

I read with disgust on how much prejudice some Singaporeans have against foreigners who are less well off and are here to work as labourers to support their families back home... though I understand that some of their public behaviour is considered socially unacceptable in Singapore. Perhaps foreign workers should be given a course in proper etiquette when they arrive (ST 51).
As evidenced in the quotes above, the economic and social divide between locals and foreign workers is further perpetuated through the ideological construction of foreign workers as economically impoverished individuals. In the second scenario, this distinction translated into similar forms of cultural imperialism that discriminate foreign workers as subordinate and inferior.

Likewise, a harking back to the nation’s immigrant past merely reinforces the celebrated achievement of Singapore’s economic success, which situates foreign workers at the lower rungs of “progress” in relation to Singaporeans who are placed at the top.

I urge residents to put themselves in the shoes of these working-class immigrants or backtrack many years ago when their ancestors came from villages overseas (ST 47). Our forefathers were once foreigners here, and they managed to rise up to own property and land, which they have passed down to us, their children. Truly, we have forgotten our roots (TD 2).

Amidst these emphatic calls for identification, two problematic issues emerge. First, the conditions under which immigrants first entered Singapore during the nineteenth century were vastly different from the present era of flexible accumulation, where foreign workers are granted only temporary work visas with little or no opportunity of “sinking roots” in the country. Second, these nostalgic accounts often depict, as Poon (2009, 77) has pointed out, “a timeless and universal story of money and labour that glosses over the historical and materialist circumstances for each period of labour movement.” Scholars have noted that enduring forms of colonial pluralism remain evident in the racialised labour categories that stratify Singapore’s contemporary migration regime (Abdullah 2005; Pieris 2009). As highlighted in Chapter 4, for example, a disproportionate amount of South Asian workers currently perform the bulk of manual labour in the city-state.

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28 In colonial Singapore, the Chinese dominated the bulk of commercial trade apart from the Europeans, while many were also recruited as rickshaw coolies and wharf labourers. The Indians, generally perceived as more docile workers (Campbell 1971; D. Goh 2008), provided a cheap and preferred source of labour for the colonial government, although a relatively small but significant number of them took up higher status positions in commerce and the public administration (Huff 1994; Mani 2006).
Arguments which emphasise Singapore’s economic dependency on foreign workers generally aligned with the state’s appeal for tolerance and understanding among Singaporeans concerning the nation’s critical need for foreign workers. Insofar as tolerance is promoted on the basis of economic functionality, however, the structural inequalities underpinning the exploitation of migrant labour remain predominantly silenced, even normalised. As earlier noted, many Singaporeans had no qualms about articulating their appreciation of the work that foreign workers do to help maintain the growth of the city-state. Inasmuch as they conceded advocating decent housing and living conditions for foreign workers, the issue was rather that they should be housed elsewhere, in non-residential areas. To quote an astute remark in the ST forum:

How is it that on the one hand, we freely admit that there are large numbers of people working in exploitative conditions and publicly proclaim our ‘gratitude’ to their hard work from which we benefit greatly, and yet, in the next instance, reject that they have any right or entitlement to reside close to us and enjoy the same levels of autonomy and standards of living that we enjoy? (ST 57)

Arguably, much of the irony lies in the unequal conditions under which foreign workers are co-opted into the city-state as transient labourers, and the segregative reality imposed by state immigration policy that maintains this distinction.

**State discourse on issues of foreign worker housing**

In this section, I examine the state’s discourse on issues of foreign worker housing in response to the range of public grievances that arose in the controversy concerning the presence of foreign workers in local residential areas. Faced with numerous criticisms of poor government/land-use planning reflected in the precipitous demand for temporary dormitory facilities, MND Minister Mah Bow Tan reframed the situation as “one of the problems of success [in terms of high growth, in that] because we were so successful, we did not anticipate this kind of issue” (Mah B.T.; quoted in The Straits Times, September 18, 2008). In a parallel argument, MP Lim Hwee Hua expressed that “Singapore finds itself in an ‘ironically happy situation’ where investments are flooding in and require a whole lot of support” (quoted in The Straits Times, October 17, 2008).
This “support” refers not only to business and services infrastructure, but also basic housing provision for foreign workers who perform the bulk of manual labour necessary to build and maintain these facilities. In view of the limited availability of suitable dormitory sites in Singapore, the state has urged Singaporeans to be understanding and accommodating towards foreign workers living in their midst as these workers are “here to contribute to [the nation’s] economic growth” (Mah B.T.; Parliamentary Debates, July 21, 2008).

There are generally four housing options for foreign workers in Singapore: i) on-site housing (predominantly for construction workers); ii) dormitories converted from existing industrial premises; iii) purpose-built dormitories with on-site amenities; and iv) rented properties in private housing. For the most part, measures are taken to house foreign workers as close to their work-sites as possible, while other alternatives are considered when this option is not feasible. There are 25 existing dormitory developments in Singapore, many of which are located either within or at the periphery of industrial estates (Parliamentary Debates, October 20, 2008). The government has released 11 other sites since February 2007, which are coming underway and expected to provide 65,000 additional bed spaces by 2010. In the meantime, temporary dormitory facilities are urgently needed to address the present housing shortage for foreign workers, which may either be converted from vacant state properties or buildings, or built on unused state land. Since these sites and properties are typically located closer to residential areas, residents will inevitably face a measure of inconvenience as a result. In this regard, the government has ensured that steps will be taken to minimise these potential disamenities, although Minister Mah Bow Tan also asserted that employers and the local community “must each play [their] part” (Ibid.).

In the wake of the Serangoon Gardens uproar, Minister Mah B.T. emphasised in parliament that the presence of foreign workers in local residential areas was an unassailable reality that Singaporeans would “all have to accept”:

In land scarce Singapore, it is not possible to totally segregate foreign workers from the local community. If Singaporeans do not want to see foreign workers near their residential areas or using common facilities, this will set a physical limit on the number of foreign workers we
can accommodate, which will, in turn, limit our economic growth, raise our business costs as well as the cost of living generally (Parliamentary Debates, October 21, 2008).

Likewise, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng has argued that reducing the inflow of foreign workers would have “serious repercussions on our ability to maintain our standard of living” (Parliamentary Debates, October 20, 2008). Stemming from this necessary state of affairs, Singaporeans were called upon to be more accepting of foreign workers since they constituted an essential part of the national growth equation. In many ways, however, this argument is fraught with contradictions in light of state immigration policy which shuts the doors on foreign workers as unwelcome outsiders by systematically denying them access to citizenship within the nation. While the institution of migrant labour forms a critical component of Singapore’s project of economic modernity, it is arguably this very enterprise which prompts the local populace to position itself ideologically against foreign workers as marginalised Others in Singapore’s global city-state.

It is evident that a developmental logic of growth underpins both the state’s instrumentalist approach to migrant labour and its appeal for Singaporeans to be accommodating towards foreign workers living in their midst. As Minister Mah B.T. has argued:

If we did not have the number of foreign workers that came in, that would have impacted our growth. [...] So we decided to say yes. We decided to go for growth, and then find ways and means to solve the down-stream problem of looking for housing for them. It is not an easy issue to tackle. It is a challenge. It requires residents to bear with some inconveniences and to make some adjustments. It requires advisers to work on the ground to try to convince their residents that overall, on balance, there is a benefit to the economy, to the country and to them ultimately (Mah B.T.; Parliamentary Debates, October 21, 2008, my emphasis).

Insofar as the provision of housing for foreign workers is represented as a “downstream problem” secondary to the economic functionality of their labour, Singaporeans are expected to play their part in accommodating these workers who are deemed as a critical necessity to the nation’s economy. In this regard, economic development is deployed as a discursive tool of governance to legitimise the state’s agenda in co-opting foreign workers as transient labour, on the one hand, while persuading local residents to be receptive of these differences, on the other.
The state also consistently recasts social tensions stemming from the presence of foreign workers in residential areas as an economic dilemma between choosing “maximum growth” or “slower growth” (Goh C.T. 2008, sec. 19) in order to reduce the inflow of foreign workers into the country:

The presence of a large group of people, with different habits and customs, and unfamiliar with our social norms, can create suspicion and anxiety. So we have to make a choice. If we want more foreign workers, we must collectively make adjustments to resolve the social problems. If we want fewer foreign workers, we must be prepared for slower growth, higher costs, lower service level, and delays in the completion of our flats, roads and rail lines (Mah B.T.; Parliamentary Debates, October 20, 2008).

Framed in such a manner, racialised, class-based, and gendered inequalities underlying the tensions between locals and foreign workers become systematically reduced to technical problems in need of technical solutions. It is therefore unsurprising that the state’s response to the Serangoon Gardens uproar was simply to introduce further bordering measures to contain and manage the undesirable embodiment of foreign workers in the neighbourhood. In the following section, I examine the state’s decision to move ahead with the dormitory proposal, and its efforts to address the unpopular presence of foreign workers in local residential areas.

**Moving ahead with the dormitory proposal**

Despite loud objections against the government’s plans to set up a temporary foreign worker dormitory in Serangoon Gardens, the Ministry of National Development (MND) announced in early October 2008 that it would proceed with the proposal. A series of measures would be put in place to address the particular concerns of residents regarding traffic congestion, as well as safety and security issues that were foreseen to arise with having a significant influx of foreign workers into the neighbourhood. Residents were informed at the outset that the dormitory would house foreign workers from the manufacturing and services industries—not construction workers, as many of them had initially feared—comprising of a mix of male and female occupants (ST 82). The number of foreign workers would also be capped at 600, which may later be increased to a
maximum of 1,000, if necessary. Most notably, a new access road costing two million dollars (US$1.4 million) would be constructed specifically for the dormitory so that buses ferrying foreign workers may access the facility without having to pass through Serangoon Gardens Estate (ST 84). Buses would enter the dormitory via a slip lane along the Central Expressway (CTE) and exit through an additional road leading directly into Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 (see Figure 8). A new entrance would also be built where the access road leads to the dormitory, and the original entrance at Burghley Drive sealed off except for emergency fire access.

To complement these measures, the buffer zone between the nearest houses along Burghley Drive and the dormitory would be increased as a noise reduction measure by excluding a segment of the school building and the basketball court. A new fence would be built to demarcate the modified site, with additional trees and shrubs planted along fences and the access road to “screen the site off” (MICA 2008, 6) from neighbouring houses within the vicinity. Plans were also made to equip the dormitory with “self-contained facilities,” including a provision shop, laundry room, barber shop, and communal canteen, so as to reduce the need for workers to venture outside of the dormitory to access these amenities (MICA 2008). Shuttle buses would be arranged during the weekends to take the workers to nearby town centres in Ang Mo Kio or Bishan Central where they would presumably be better dispersed. Within the compounds of the dormitory, “noise-control, security and other measures” (ST 81)—for example, no mass gatherings or activities after 10:30pm, and no visitors allowed except in the canteen area—would also be implemented, and efforts made to educate foreign workers on the various social norms in Singapore. When the dormitory was up and running in mid-December 2009, it was reported that a demerit point system was instituted to deter dormitory residents from breaking ground rules (such as, no littering and no smoking in non-designated areas), and those who chalked up too many points would be asked to leave the dormitory (The Straits Times, December 19, 2009).
Figure 8 Site map of the proposed dormitory development


These explicit measures that the government has undertaken to “minimise disruption” (ST 81) in the area are deeply telling of the extent to which spatial strategies of exclusion and confinement are employed to manage the hyper-visibility of foreign workers in local residential areas. Importantly, they allude to the symbolic and material power of racialised, class-based, and
gendered discourses of Otherness in shaping the (dis)location of the dormitory as a degenerate place—typified by notions of crime, social disorder, and sexual promiscuity—to be contained and policed within the ordered landscape of Serangoon Gardens. As David Goldberg (2001) has argued, the transgression of established social orders by “out of place” entities often necessitates the reproduction of order through practices of spatial distancing and containment (see also Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996). While fences and trees serve to contain and reduce the visibility of the dormitory, they also function as “a form of panoptical discipline” (Goldberg 2001, 80) that extends control over the bodies of foreign workers in the neighbourhood. Foreign workers are thus not erased from the landscape insofar as their presence is rendered more conspicuous through the spatial inscription of borders—both on the landscape and their bodies—by means of “dislocation, displacement, and division” (Goldberg 2001, 72).

**Figure 9** Covered fence surrounding the dormitory premises

*Source: Photograph used with permission from Lin Yifen.*
Goldberg’s (2001, 72) notion of “periphractic space” offers a useful way of understanding how marginal places characterised and produced by systems of racial categorisation may be simultaneously located within the city but distanced from it. “Fences,” physical and/or imagined, are critical in reinforcing the circumscription of these places “in terms of location and their limitation in terms of access—to power, to (the realisation of) rights, and to goods and services” (71). Using the example of project housing in Cape Town, South Africa, he points out how racially marginalised populations are often spatially isolated within the city, enclosed in high-density buildings with only single entrances or exits, and segregated from middle-class residential areas by highways, vacant lots, or railway lines. The abject nature of project housing is emphasised by the fact that it “sticks out” because of its transgression of the prevailing norms of housing, where the “marginal are centralised in this faceless space, [and] peripheral at the social
centre” (80). Likewise, the foreign worker dormitory is *periphractic* in ways that it is constructed as a bordered and contained entity within the neighbourhood. Regulations against loitering as well as the arrangement to have self-contained facilities in the dormitory further reinforces the marginal position of its inhabitants, not merely in terms of mobility, but also the right of shared access to the neighbourhood’s amenities.

It is instructive to note that the S$2 million access road was proposed by the government despite its decision that the dormitory would only be given a short-term lease of not more than five years (MICA 2008). As illustrated in Figure 8, the road functions entirely as a single entry and exit point for the dormitory, which ensured that the site would be completely segregated from the local road network in Serangoon Gardens Estate. It also marked a significant border-point between local residents and foreign workers, along which the threat of “spill-over” effects from the dormitory was presented. In fact, the decision to build the access road sparked another public outburst among residents living around the Tai Hwan area and Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 who were likewise concerned with issues of security and contamination, including other potential disruptions that foreign workers would pose to their comfortable living arrangements (ST 83, 84).

In the words of a resident from Tai Hwan Heights: “Now they [the government] are pushing the whole thing to our side without solving the problem” (ST 84). It is clear from this comment that despite substantial measures taken to cauldron off the contaminating effects of the dormitory, the overarching “problem” identified by many residents seemed fundamentally to be the undesirable embodiment of foreign workers in local residential areas.

The fact that it was emphasised that a mix of men and women manufacturing and service workers (as opposed to male construction workers) would be housed in the dormitory further reveals the stark racial and gendered contours that stratify specific forms of flexible labour in Singapore. As pointed out in Chapter 4, foreign workers employed in the manufacturing and services industry are mainly Malaysian and Chinese (PRC) workers, while those in the construction sector predominantly consists of South Asian migrant workers. Since no information
was previously released regarding the “type” of foreign worker moving into the neighbourhood, speculative concerns exposed the heavy stigma attached to the dominant image of “foreign workers” as representing (South Asian) male construction workers with unruly lifestyle habits and behaviours. Subsequently, racialised, class-based and gendered meanings attached to this negative stereotype warranted the implementation of various securitisation measures, both within and outside of the dormitory, that functioned to curb its polluting effects on the neighbourhood’s (and by extension, the nation’s) “body politic” (K. Anderson 1987; Goldberg 2001). These disciplinary strategies, drawing similar parallels with various biopolitical regulations enforced by state immigration policies, serve primarily to ensure their compliance with the established norms of civility and order in modern Singapore.

Figure 11 Newspaper excerpt from *The Straits Times*

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**All-round effort to help them fit in**

By Ang Yiying

The Straits Times finds out how the problems of housing foreign workers were solved in different parts of Singapore.

NATIONAL Development Minister Mah Bow Tan yesterday held up Jalan Kayu as a residential area which has made efforts to accommodate the foreign workers in the neighbourhood.

After two dorms housing 6,000 workers were built there three years ago, a fence was built to get around the problem of foreign workers taking short-cuts through the residential areas, said Mr Wee Siew Kim, a Member of Parliament for Ang Mo Kio GRC and adviser to the Jalan Kayu grassroots groups.

Another move: Including recreational amenities within the dorm compound, and setting up a beer garden near the dormitories so foreign workers do not need to gather in public spaces.

Agencies and embassies have also explained the social norms here to the workers.

A group of volunteers, calling themselves the Jalan Kayu Rangers, patrol the area to keep residents safe and help the foreigners to fit in.

*Source: Extracted from LexisNexis database*
In *The Straits Times* article shown in Figure 11, efforts to “accommodate” foreign workers may be categorised into four main aspects: i) spatial *containment* measures and imposed restrictions on mobility; ii) social *segregation* in terms of access to public spaces and amenities; iii) disciplinary forms of *socialisation* through education; and iv) active *surveillance* in the form of neighbourhood patrols. These measures may be critically interpreted as spatial forms of governmentality that regulate the movement and behaviour of foreign workers who are largely constructed as unassimilable subjects within the nation. Efforts to help foreign workers “fit in” are not intended for the purposes of future integration, since the border has already been strictly drawn in terms of their temporary status as work permit holders; rather, they are meant principally to mould these “anti-citizens” (N. Rose 2000) into governable subjects within the nation. Since January 2009, the government has set up a Ministerial Steering Committee (MSC), chaired by the Minister for Manpower, Mr Gan Kim Yong, to address local concerns that have arisen with the growing presence of foreign workers in Singapore. According to the Mr Gan K.Y. (2009, sec. 12), the purpose of the MSC is to “coordinate whole-of-Government efforts to facilitate a harmonious co-existence between locals and foreign workers.”

In his speech at the opening of Avery Lodge, Singapore’s newest purpose-built dormitory, the Minister described three ways in which the government has worked to “better manage the presence of foreign workers in [local] communities” (Gan K.Y. 2009, sec. 12). First, foreign workers employed in the construction, marine, and processing industries will be educated on Singapore’s laws and social norms as part of their mandatory pre-employment training. A multi-lingual booklet containing these messages will also be provided upon their arrival, in addition to mobile exhibits displayed at dormitories and workplaces. Second, the government has deployed uniformed Auxillary Police Officers (APOs) and security officers to patrol daily around the Serangoon Road area (“Little India”) to enforce against anti-social behaviour such as littering and spitting. This initiative will gradually be extended to various areas across the country where foreign workers are known to gather in significant numbers. Lastly, the MSC has worked to
provide purpose-built dormitories fitted with on-site social and recreational facilities, in addition to the designated SCAL Recreational Centre\(^{29}\) for foreign workers with amenities that include a canteen, supermarket, gym courts, and a beer garden.

These holistic measures serve primarily to facilitate the securitisation and disciplining of migrant bodies within the everyday social fabric of the city-state. In the case of APO patrols, Minister Gan Kim Yong (2009, sec.14) explained that:

> Although Police statistics have consistently shown that foreign workers are no more likely to commit crime than locals, we are aware that some residents would nonetheless like to see a stronger security presence in the midst of a large group of foreign workers.

Working in uniformed groups of four with at least one armed officer present, APOs may be seen in various housing areas between 7:00pm and 1:00am on weekdays, and 4:00pm and 1:00am on weekends (*The Straits Times*, March 1, 2010). These officers were first deployed in “Little India” in late January 2009, and have since expanded to at least ten additional areas across the country where foreign workers are known to mingle in groups. As embodiments of state surveillance, APOs would conduct random checks on the workers’ identification cards (foreign workers must carry their work permit cards at all times), and ensure that they do not transgress the law or engage in any anti-social behaviour. The added security presence of APOs has generally been well-received by local residents (*The Straits Times*, April 1, 2009). In an ST interview, MP Denise Phua stated that residents within her constituency have “proactively praised the efforts” (quoted in *The Straits Times*, March 1, 2010) of APOs in the area, and also that complaints about foreign workers have decreased substantially.

As evidenced in the range of bordering and policing strategies highlighted above, the state’s response to the increasing visibility of foreign workers has been to step up its security efforts to manage and discipline the undesirable presence of these workers in the city-state. These practices are informed by racialised, class-based, and gendered discourses that construct foreign workers as transgressors of the nation’s moral-social order. Consequently, borders are

\(^{29}\) Singapore Contractors Association Limited (SCAL)
(re)produced and inscribed on the bodies of foreign workers through exclusionary practices informed by the constitutive relationship between state policy, public discourse, and everyday norms of behaviour. The cumulative result of these multi-scaler forms of bordering practices—in terms of state immigration policy, and surveillance measures implemented at intersecting levels of the neighbourhood, household, and the workplace—is thus a governable (and disposable) subject with minimal rights of citizenship, ideal for the accumulation of capital. The “boarding house” (Kofman 2005), in this regard, does not merely suggest the transient stay of foreign workers, but also the fact that their accommodation is contingent upon their legal and social obligation to various “house rules” that govern the nation’s moral-social order.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I drew attention to the limitations of counter-arguments in the controversy that sought to promote the integration of foreign workers in Singapore. Inasmuch as these arguments were effective in problematising the range of discriminatory attitudes manifested during the SG debate, they remained largely inadequate because they neither addressed the legal barriers to citizenship imposed by state immigration policy, nor the structural inequalities that fuel the demand for cheap migrant labour in the country. I also demonstrated how the state’s instrumentalist approach to migrant labour is underpinned by a developmental logic of growth, which was similarly used to justify the exceptional surge in numbers of foreign workers into the country in recent years.

The state’s eventual decision to move ahead with the dormitory proposal was prompted by the urgent need for temporary accommodation facilities to address the significant housing shortage problem for foreign workers. In response to public anxieties raised concerning the growing visibility of foreign workers in local residential areas, the state has introduced a range of containment and disciplinary measures that serve to regulate the abject embodiment of these workers within the city-state. These strategies stem from discursive representations of foreign
workers as outsiders and threats to the nation’s established moral-social order. Overall, the outcome of these multi-scalar forms of bordering practices has been to produce a transient, depoliticised, and governable population in service of the continual growth of Singapore’s global city-state.
CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

Through a critical engagement with borders concerning the place of low-wage foreign workers in Singapore, I have sought in this thesis to unsettle the often picturesque representation of the global city (see Lee H.S. 2005b) by drawing attention to the geographies of exclusion and (im)mobility that underpin the politics of belonging within the global city as an exclusionary landscape. The exceptional influx of foreign workers into the city-state in recent years derives predominantly from the state’s current push to reinvent Singapore as a cosmopolitan, global city. Inasmuch as the nation remains heavily reliant upon low-wage foreign manpower to service its infrastructural and social reproductive needs, the increasing visibility of these workers has routinely been problematised as a “social cost” and “dilemma” (Goh C.T. 2008, sec. 19). As the Serangoon Gardens case-study has shown, migrant exclusions in local residential areas highlight the contradictory tensions that arise between the state’s economic imperative for foreign capital, on the one hand, and local anxieties stemming from the growing presence of foreign workers in the country’s social landscape, on the other.

This research has demonstrated the ways that the deeply marginalised place of foreign workers in everyday society results from a range of multi-scalar bordering practices that construct these workers as transient labourers within Singapore’s global city-state. These bordering practices take the form of state immigration policy, popular discourse, and established norms of behaviour that operate across multiple and overlapping scales of the nation, locality, household, and the body. Borders do not merely exclude; they function also as spatial forms of governmentality that serve to regulate the everyday conduct and mobility of foreign workers within the city-state. In this regard, I have argued that foreign workers are effectively produced as a flexible, depoliticised, and governable migrant population in service of the economic interests of Singapore’s global city-state. Inasmuch as the global city is often valorised as a place of diversity
and openness, this research has revealed the exclusionary nature of citizenship and belonging in the global city where mobility is embodied in highly variegated ways by different types of foreign bodies (Cresswell 1999; Yeoh 2006).

In line with its economic strategy of “going global,” the state has instituted a stratified system of eligibility and benefits through immigration policy to filter and manage the types of foreign bodies it wishes to accommodate (or not) within its globalising landscape. While upwardly mobile individuals belonging to the expatriate class are integrated with relative ease, low-status foreign workers are, by contrast, routinely subjected to a range of stringent policies that serve to ensure their transience within the city-state. State immigration policy dictates that foreign workers are permitted to enter the country only on two-year contracts as individual workers without their spouses or family. They are also prohibited from marrying in Singapore, and are obliged to comply with various forms of biopolitical regulations, such as mandatory health-checkups for contagious diseases, and pregnancy (concerning women migrant workers), which effectively “brand” the bodies of these workers as alien, pathological, and sexually promiscuous. These discourses have influenced the ways that foreign workers are perceived and treated in everyday society, whose presence is often stigmatised as a cause for public fear and suspicion.

As illustrated in the Serangoon Gardens case-study, meanings attached to “foreign worker” as a discursive category were embedded in racialised, class-based, and gendered discourses of Otherness that marked out the bodies of these workers as transgressors of the nation’s moral-social order. Foreign workers were constructed as dirty, backward, and unruly individuals who failed to conform to the established norms of civility in Singapore where cleanliness and orderliness are deemed as symbolic markers of the nation’s social modernity. The incident also exposed the heavy stigma attached to South Asian male construction workers who currently form the largest bulk of low-wage foreign workers in Singapore (ADB 2008). When contrasted against the predominantly family-oriented setting of Serangoon Gardens, these migrant men were perceived as sexualised objects of fear that threatened to destabilise the moral order and
purity of the neighbourhood. In particular, their cultural and economic Otherness were accentuated by stereotypical assumptions of poverty and rural backwardness that conflated with specific attributes of race and gender typically associated with construction work as form of flexible labour.

These discourses subsequently materialised as spatial borders of exclusion and control that served to regulate the abject embodiment of foreign workers within the uneven landscape of the global city-state. Inasmuch as the dormitory siting represented a distinct moment of transgression that unsettled the local politics of place and belonging in Serangoon Gardens, borders were further evoked as disciplinary and containment measures to manage the undesirable presence of these workers in the neighbourhood. In the wake of the Serangoon Gardens controversy, the state has also worked to step up its security efforts through the deployment of uniformed auxiliary police officers in areas where foreign workers are frequently known to mingle. It is clear from this move that foreign workers remain predominantly regarded as highly stigmatised individuals with little or no stake of belonging within the social fabric of the nation. In view of state immigration policy and these various forms of surveillance and control, the border is presented as an everyday reality that these workers are obliged to negotiate on multiple levels.

As previously stated, this research is not without its limitations and may be considered preliminary in many ways. With the lack of in-depth interviews with foreign workers themselves, I was unable to explore the personal narratives of these workers concerning their daily experiences and perceptions of living as migrant workers in Singapore. This research project could also benefit from the use of interviews with residents living in the Serangoon Gardens neighbourhood to enhance my empirical analysis of the incident. I was, however, unable to conduct these interviews due to the limitations of resources and time. Despite these

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30 As pointed out in Chapter 4, only migrant men from NTS ("non-traditional source") countries including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Thailand are recruited as foreign workers within the construction sector.
methodological constraints, I have sought to adopt a diverse theoretical approach to analysing the constitutive role of borders in shaping the politics of inclusion and exclusion concerning the place of migrant workers in Singapore’s global city-state. In so doing, I worked to establish the constitutive relationship between Singapore’s state-led project of striving for global city status, its managerial migration regime, popular discourse, and local identity politics in influencing the socio-spatial exclusion of foreign workers in everyday society.

Amidst the present drive among emerging industrial economies to develop their cities as “world-class” cities, there is need for a greater range of scholarship that seeks to examine the implications of this highly uneven development. Scholars have pointed out that foreign workers often constitute the “underbelly” of global cities, where they perform the bulk of low-wage and manual labour needed to sustain the powerful growth rhetoric that characterises these cities (Sassen 1991; Short and Kim 1995; Chang and Ling 2000; Yeoh and Chang 2001). In the case of Singapore, a developmental logic of growth continues to underpin the state’s instrumentalist approach to migrant labour, which appropriates the cheap labour of foreign workers at the same time that it ensures that these workers remain excluded from the rights of membership within the city-state. I have sought in the Serangoon Gardens case-study to examine the implications of these contradictory tensions, which raises larger questions about the country’s relentless quest for growth and the discrepancy between cosmopolitan ideals and the modernising aspirations of globalising cities.

Despite the persistent stigma attached to embodied presence of foreign workers in Singapore, it remains important to recognise the transgressive potential of their very presence in the nation’s social landscape. In view of the intense media discussion that surrounded the Serangoon Gardens debate, opportunities are available for more engaged forms of public dialogue on the rights and citizenship of foreign workers in Singapore. The range of counter-arguments expressed during the controversy also raised important criticisms against the class bias that underpins the state’s rhetoric of cosmopolitanism, which arguably remains deeply selective in the
types of non-citizens (namely foreign expatriates) it incorporates (Yeoh 2004b). These arguments challenge Singapore’s dominant self-image as a multicultural society where inter-racial conflicts have historically been suppressed by the economic prosperity that the state has managed to deliver to its citizens.

Poon (2009) has argued the need for critical scholarship to analyse the continuities and breaches in state power in order to explore the possibilities of resisting the existing norms of power that feed into the social exclusion of foreign workers. In addition, further research is necessary to understand the everyday experiences and perceptions of these workers living in Singapore, including the specific ways in which they engage in resistance strategies to negotiate their place in society. The political capacity of civil society and non-governmental organisations in promoting the rights and welfare of foreign workers also remains a relatively unexplored but significant terrain for critical research and activism.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Newspaper articles on the Serangoon Gardens controversy

N – News report; E – Editorial/Commentary; L – Letter to the Editor

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80 N What's online most read, most commented and more [Most commented: Dorm in Gardens to go ahead.]

81 N Dorm makes house visits to allay fears

82 N Dorm plan draws new objections; Those living near new access route cite noise and pollution from buses ferrying workers

83 N Dorm access road to cost $2m; But Tai Hwan Gardens residents say plan pushes problem to them

84 N 'Please give us work’ ‘... and remember to pay us’; More Bangladeshis who are brought in on work permits allegedly end up with no jobs or wages

85 L Serangoon Gardens foreign workers’ dorm: Residents need to accept the inevitable

86 N Raising bar for worker dorms; New Jurong dorm boasts more space, river views, cable TV, better facilities

87 N Your Insights; Last week we asked readers what they think is the impact of immigration and how integration can be fostered.

88 L See how Balestier residents cope

89 N 'We are sad that after all our pleas, we still can’t convince the Government not to have the dormitory here.

90 E The ‘Them and us’ divide; Singapore is a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic city built by immigrants, so why do people here display intolerance and snobbery towards foreigners?

91 E Workers are human, too; Integrate, not segregate: That should be the way as their numbers grow

92 L What a piece of work is man... and meritocracy: Finland and Singapore

93 E Wake-up call from dorm issue

94 N Voice of reason amid sound and fury; The politician in the eye of the Serangoon Gardens storm over foreign workers

95 L One restaurateur’s happy experience

96 L Let us house them everywhere

97 N Some suggestions from residents accepted; But a suggestion for an alternative road is rejected for safety reasons

98 L Assurance is the key: Integrating foreign workers

99 N Sacrifice votes or economy? No contest; In Serangoon Gardens row, the important thing is to do what's right, says George Yeo

100 E Fewer foreign workers? The price is slower growth

101 E ‘Floating dorms, Mr Minister?’

102 E Foreign workers aren’t modern-day slaves

103 E Doors open to foreigners: SM; But Singapore must balance economic value with social and political costs

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1 N Serangoon Gardens: MPs handle the heat

2 L Serangoon Gardens saga: We were them once

3 L Security over practicality

4 E Quick, lock up your women

5 L Mutual trust and understanding on both sides needed

6 E Expats: The foreigners in our midst

7 E Speak up, and be connected; As in Serangoon Gardens episode, dialogue between government and the people can aid policy-making decisions

8 N Towns for foreign workers in the works?

9 L Serangoon Gardens: Should companies gain at our expense?

10 L Point of view

11 L How about just 500 foreign workers? We should set prejudices aside, but half the number would be more acceptable

12 N Unjustified fears? New statistics show foreigners, including construction workers, commit fewer crimes in relation to Singapore residents
13 L Black sheep exist in all communities
14 L Point of view
15 N Housing foreign workers: A dangerous divide; Mah: Stop demonising workers, residents and start accepting them
16 N Living side by side, through compromise; Some residents say they have gotten used to presence of foreign workers
17 E A ‘good’ idea that may not be so good; Despite its initial appeal, segregation is fraught with hidden pitfalls
18 E Diversity: What’s worked for us. Let’s not forget lessons of planning as we work to accommodate foreigners
19 N Businesses cash in on dorm demand
20 N Dorm gets go ahead: New road, other measures to address residents’ worries
21 N Population numbers: The moving target; As numbers keep changing, presence of foreigners raises questions about us a community
22 N A busy Sunday afternoon at the park: Residents at Tai Hwan estate unhappy over proposed workers’ dorm
23 L Is it too hard for us to have a heart?
24 L Boon Lay Drive: Time for checks
25 E Living together in perfect harmony?
26 N Dorm access road to stay... But other measures to be adopted to placate residents
27 N Floating dormitories? Offshore housing for foreign workers is one alternative
28 N Dorm locations limited in land-scarce Singapore
29 N Offshore housing for foreign workers?
30 N Foreign workers: When things go wrong for them...
32 L A step forward into the past: Idea of floating dormitories smacks of segregation
33 L Foreign workers are our counterparts
34 L House them on self-contained island

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1 N Serangoon Gardens residents against plan to build dorm
2 N Graveyard solution to Gardens’ housing issue?
3 E Is it a Serangoon Gardens problem or SG insularity?
4 N Government may plan townships for foreign workers
5 N Speak
6 N Internet hot bites: Townships for foreign workers?
7 N If not here, then where?
8 L Foreign workers’ dormitory debate: Have we regressed?
9 N Foreign workers’ dorm in Serangoon Gardens: Government approves plans to house 600 foreign workers
10 L Housing of foreign workers: Don’t pass the buck to Ang Mo Kio residents
11 N Internet hot bites: Foreign worker dormitory gets green light at Serangoon Gardens
12 L Decision will affect property prices
13 L Embarrassing to know such prejudices exist
14 L No tolerance for other cultures?
15 L Ashamed by those who are so judgmental
16 L Don’t make foreign workers out to be bogeymen
17 N Learn to see them differently; Help foreign workers become part of Singapore society, say MPs