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Precarious Fates: The Experiences of Migrant Workers in Singapore

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Abstract
Migrant labor flows amidst our contemporary era of globalization have been raising significant political, social and cultural issues worldwide. At a time when labor markets are becoming increasingly volatile and unstable, migrant “unskilled” workers have become dispensable units of the capitalist workforce. Drawing upon 3.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 91 interviews with migrant workers, NGO staff, employers, and bureaucrats in Singapore this thesis examines the legal, social, and economical constraints that migrant workers confront everyday. In doing so, this project argues that the transnational labor economy does not only bring about remittances but also broken bodies.

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Precarious Fates:
The Experiences of Migrant Workers in Singapore

By
Vanessa Koh

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS
in
Cultural Anthropology

Submitted to the
Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Kathy Hall and Dr. Adriana Petryna

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Abstract

Migrant labor flows amidst our contemporary era of globalization have been raising significant political, social and cultural issues worldwide. At a time when labor markets are becoming increasingly volatile and unstable, migrant “unskilled” workers have become dispensable units of the capitalist workforce. Drawing upon 3.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 91 interviews with migrant workers, NGO staff, employers, and bureaucrats in Singapore this thesis examines the legal, social, and economical constraints that migrant workers confront everyday. In doing so, this project argues that the transnational labor economy does not only bring about remittances but also broken bodies.
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Introduction

The evening of December 8, 2013 was a typical Sunday night in Singapore. In the district of Little India where narrow streets branch off from Serangoon Road, thousands of migrant workers congregate around the area every week to enjoy food that reminds them of home, meet up with friends, and remit money home. That night, however, ended differently from past Sunday nights. As workers climbed into buses in order to make the trek back to their respective dormitories in preparation for the upcoming work week, Sakthivel Kumaravelu, a 33 year old construction worker from India was ordered off a bus due to apparent intoxication. Displeased with the bus driver, he then ran after the moving bus, and was subsequently crushed under its wheel as the bus made a turn. Kumaravelu died instantly. Not long after the ambulance and police officers had extricated Kumaravelu’s body from under the bus and escorted the bus driver away, approximately 300 migrant workers descended on the scene, overturned police cars, set an ambulance ablaze, and pelted police officers with stones. The riot lasted for two hours. Even though Singaporean citizens were not technically involved in the riot, the country was stunned that this would happen in Singapore. Why were migrant workers so unhappy?

The unparalleled speed and scale with which economic, social, political change in Asia has occurred in recent decades has spurred an increase in population mobility, and an ensuing escalation of spatial complexity and diversity. Woven into these transnational migratory flows is the development of emerging Asian economies that have resulted in an intra-Asian migratory pattern, where more ‘developed’ economies in the region import labor from their less ‘developed’ counterparts. In today’s ‘Asian century’, Singapore epitomizes the aspiring global city that depends on the labor of low-skilled migrant workers.

This thesis explores and situates the lives of transient Bangladeshi and mainland Chinese
workers in Singapore within a context of rapid urbanization. Through an ethnographic lens, I seek to understand the processes of social differentiation that are reproduced and inscribed on the bodies of migrant workers. What legal, social, and economical constraints do migrant workers confront? To what extent is the marginalization of excluded foreign workers a consequence of the Singaporean government’s quest to modernize and built the city-state? What is the future of labor migration within a transnational economy when migration does not only bring about an increase in the exchange of services and remittances, but also the proliferation of broken bodies? This project endeavors to grasp the structure of Singapore’s migrant labor system within a larger context of our globalized world. It is concerned with what Xiang Biao (2007: 1) calls “embeddedness and disembeddedness”—how different actors form connections and disconnections that ultimately contribute to a process of exploitation in today’s contemporary global economy.

Transnational Labor Movements

As a theory of transnational transformation, the concept of globalization has courted substantial scholarly debate (see, for example, Tsing 2005; Cheah 2006; Guillén 2001; Stiglitz 2003). Globalization is widely regarded as a force associated with an increasingly transnational labor market cocooned under a system of flexible capitalist accumulation and speculative finance, the mass migration of peoples, and the flows of culture and information. The current round of economic globalization that began in the 1970s is often described as “a continuation of a process of abstraction that has been central to the evolution of capitalism” (Xiang 2007: 2). The resulting financial deregulation and flexibilization of labor markets, in particular, have notably “freed the market from tangible social relations and from the primary institution managing public
life, the nation-state” (ibid). Mobility and flexibility are thus supposed to be the fruits one can harvest from a free flowing neoliberal economy. And yet, anthropologists and sociologists have disrupted this model through accounts of transnational labor and technology that address the hierarchical and unequal ways in which our global economy is structured, and continue to illuminate close connections between international migration, social inequality and cultural politics.

Xiang Biao’s (2007) exemplary ethnography, for example, focuses on the practice of “global body-shopping” within the information technology (IT) industry to reveal the process of producing mobile IT workers in India, and the conditions of said mobility. Body shopping in India is not only a practice that emerges out of the transnational labor movement in the IT industry, but is also crucial to sustaining that very industry. Tackling the proliferation of North American call centers in Bangalore and Delhi, Meher Varma (2007) examines the ways in which these products of transnationalism shape national identities. Varma debunks the notion that “the world is flat” (Friedman 2005) by pointing to the ways in which the global value chain of production and consumption accentuate inequality in the form of dependency—Bangalore’s thriving IT industry ultimately depends on its foreign clients. Carol Upadhya’s (2013) work studies the return of Indian IT professionals—“techno migrants”—from the US back to Bangalore’s software industry, as they attempt to transform India into a world-class city. In a departure from the IT industry, both Neha Vora (2013) and Andrew Gardner (2010) focus their attentions on South Asian workers that emigrated to the UAE during its construction boom. Vora examines the experiences of Dubai’s most typical and entrenched residents: the middle-class, working-class, and elite Indians who populate the downtown neighborhoods, while Andrew Gardner chronicles the everyday experiences of low-skilled workers who have migrated from
India to Bahrain by mapping the process that classifies these workers as second-class citizens.

In addition to these forms of labor movements within South Asia and the Gulf countries, there have been South East Asian centered migration studies that analyze the emergence of labor exporting/importing. Justin Peñafiel’s (2015) work examines circular labor migration between Australia and the Philippines, as he illustrates the Filipino government’s labor export policies. As the largest labor exporter in the region, the Philippines has invested in an extensive web of legal regulations designed to protect its citizens. On a similar theme, Maureen Hickey (2013) draws on a range of case studies that investigates governmental strategies of labor export heavy countries, such as Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand. However, there is a notable dearth of literature that looks at the South East Asian countries receiving transnational labor. Singapore and Malaysia are primarily labor importers that take in a high number of foreign workers for the purposes of alleviating labor shortages in low-waged and low-skilled sectors. Brenda Yeoh’s (2008) work focuses on the influx of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore, but there has been less scholarly attention on male construction and shipyard workers that form the bulk of Singapore’s low-skilled foreign workforce. This thesis attempts to contribute to existing South East Asian labor migration literature by understanding the lived experiences of Bangladeshi and mainland Chinese workers in Singapore.

**Why Singapore?**

As I interacted with migrant workers and locals alike, my informants all seemed curious about why I had picked Singapore as my place of study. Why not study my native Malaysia? When one speaks of Singapore, images of a clean, orderly, and transparent ‘garden city’ spring to mind. As an ‘Asian tiger’, Singapore is known for its highly educated workforce and impressive economic growth. The Singapore story is thus a model that has come to inspire city
innovation projects across Asia and beyond.

Since Singapore gained independence from the British and separated from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore has transformed itself from a declining trading post in the twilight of the British Empire to a First World economy. Completely devoid of all natural resources, including land and population, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew opened up Singapore to the world as the country turned to the global market in order to develop its domestic economy. Since then, the World Bank has ranked the island that former economic adviser Albert Winsemius once said was a “poor little market in a dark corner of Asia” as the easiest place to do business, where it boasts the world’s second-busiest container port, and the highest proportion of millionaire households (Ramcharan 2002: 125). While Singapore is celebrated for “moving to the next level as the world economy evolved and adjust[ing] to market demands and investors’ interests,” its Malaysian counterpart is lamented as a resource-rich state that failed to “optimize its human capital” (Adam 2010). Keeping these narratives in mind, I endeavor to examine the human costs of constructing a cosmopolitan global city.

Global City

Singapore’s rapid industrialization program began even before it separated from Malaysia. Convinced that an independent city-state economy of a country Singapore’s size would not survive, the first wave of the People’s Action Party (PAP) leaders desperately wanted keep Singapore under the umbrella of Malaysia for its resources and population. However, this was not to be, and after much political strife, Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965. Due to the separation, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew developed a strategy of survival that prioritized economic growth. The city-state invested in human resource and infrastructure developments, creating a business- and tax-friendly environment to incentivize foreign capital
investment (Velayutham 2007). Furthermore, the loss of the substantial Malaysian market forced the government to reorient the Singaporean economy geographically: the entire world would become imaginable as Singapore’s market. With the idea that “the world is [Singapore’s] hinterland,” the government implemented a program of export-oriented industrialization (Velayutham 2007: 50).

The new international division of labor that began in the early 1960s where manufacturing industries shifted from ‘developed’ capitalist countries to ‘developing’ countries provided ample economic opportunities for Singapore, along with the other newly industrializing “Tiger” economies in East Asia. These Asian economies engaged in a production of rapid industrialization by acting as low cost production hubs for the global market (Rodan 1989). Using their comparative advantage—whether in terms of a large and cheap labor force or technical abilities, infrastructure, and low taxes—to create a niche in this new international division of labor, thereby basing their rapid development on “outward looking, export-oriented industrialisation (EOI) strategies” (Robison, Higgott, and Hewison 1987: 5). For a period of two decades, there was no competition from three of the greatest Asian “reservoirs of labor”: China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, India was in the midst of its own form of socialism through import substitution programs, and Indonesia was reeling from the political instability that resulted from the 1965 coup and massacre. The 1970s in Singapore thus commenced with full employment, and aside from the period during the 1973 oil crisis, the economy boomed (Heng 2003). The end of the decade marked high export-led growth and an excess of labor demand due to Singapore’s small population inability to keep up with the influx of foreign capital investment. As such, the government encouraged the entry of low-skilled foreign workers from India, Bangladesh, and Thailand in order to fill in the labor gap in the manufacturing and
construction industries (Chan & Abdullah 1999). The 1980s were less prosperous, as a result of the global economic recession in 1985. Singapore then entered a period of economic restructuring to transition the economy from its emphasis on production and manufacturing to service and financial sectors, and finally towards the technology sector. Fuelled by these changes, the period since the 1990s saw the continuous increase in foreign labor, both un-skilled and skilled, within all sectors of the economy.

Foreign workers make up 30% of Singapore’s total population today, a quarter of whom are low-skilled workers in the construction, shipyard, and manufacturing industries (Straits Times 2014). The principal nationalities making up the low-skilled foreign worker population include Bangladeshis, Chinese (PRC), Indians, Filipinos, Thais, and Sri Lankans. That Singapore needs these foreign workers in these sectors reflects not only the low wages (approximately SGD 1000) workers are willing to accept, but also the reluctance of Singaporeans – even during times of economic recession – to accept jobs that require manual labor or shift work. In the words of current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the demand for low-skilled foreign workers is likely to persist, as “fussy Singaporeans… will not take jobs in less ‘glamorous areas’” (Straits Times 2009).

**Ethnographic Orientations**

I spent three and a half months as a volunteer-intern at Healthserve, a Singaporean non-governmental organization (NGO) that “seeks to meet the needs of the migrant workers in the community through the provision of medical care, counseling, case work, social assistance, and other support services” (Healthserve). During this time, I met and conversed with approximately 47 Chinese and 32 Bangladeshi workers, and 12 Healthserve staff members. Of those migrant workers, 23 workers were injured workers who ‘hung out’ at Healthserve everyday while they
waited for the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to process their work injury compensation claims. My interactions with workers typically occurred in the outdoor compound of Healthserve’s premises for the sake of privacy. The remaining 56 migrants I interviewed were workers who dropped by Healthserve during evening clinic hours; these conversations were generally shorter than those I had with (more seriously) injured workers. All of these conversations were unstructured, and proceeded in a free-flowing manner. In addition to speaking to migrant workers and Healthserve staff, I also had the opportunities to accompany workers filing a work related compensation claim to their meetings with Ministry of Manpower (MOM) bureaucrats and employers.

I am interested in understanding the hardships that migrant workers have to endure on a daily basis. As I have shown in this introduction, Singapore occupies ‘first-world’ status on the global stage, and enjoys a reputation of transparency and orderliness. Given that the Singaporean economy sustains itself through the influx of low-skilled workers, what are the human costs of such economic success?

In chapter one, I chronicle the different forms of hardships—social, economic, and legal—workers endure on a daily basis. Not only are workers forced to tolerate dangerous and dilapidated working and living conditions respectively, they also have to contend with a dizzying assortment of legal inconsistencies. From unpaid and/or partially paid wages to contentious salary disputes, no two workers experience identical misfortunes. It is precisely these forms of ambiguities that render the transnational labor system inconsistent. Employers are able to exploit workers by invoking and disregarding legal rules whenever it suits them.

Chapter two charts an assemblage of actors that make up the migrant labor system in Singapore. In an effort to theorize the notion of responsibility, I contend that it is useful not to
presume that employers alone are responsible for the suffering of workers. Rather, a network of employers, agents, bureaucrats, the Singaporean government, developers, and NGOs indicates that every actor is equally complicit in the exploitation of workers. Furthermore, I use Hannah Arendt’s (1963) “banality of evil” to argue that the suffering of workers are not the outcomes of diabolical plans, but are instead consequences of an assemblage of actors who wilfully disregard visible evidence of injustice as a means of survival in today’s capitalist world.

My third and final chapter takes an affective approach in order to understand the ways in which injured migrant workers inhabit the hardship they experience. Through a frame of ‘waiting’, I assert that waiting is a contradictory process of survival for workers. While workers want to return home to their families, they choose to stay and wait; to leave Singapore is to leave the possibility of obtaining a better life for one’s family. Rather than dismissing such contradictions as hypocrisy, I argue that these inconsistencies reveal what it means to hope. To hope is not to possess a discrete nor singular feeling; it is to occupy a multifaceted structure of feeling that simultaneous encompasses both despair and optimism.
Chapter 1. Precarity as a Way of Life

“I don’t understand!”

Du JianZhong whips out a photocopy of his work permit and thrusts the paper at me. He tells me to look at the front and back. On one side of the permit, CSC is listed as his employer, while CW is written on the other side. I looked at JianZhong with confusion—how is it possible that he has two employers? He tells me that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) doesn’t understand how this happened either. JianZhong suffered a back injury a month ago, and was in the process of reporting this injury to the Singaporean government. However, MOM wrote to inform him that his work injury compensation case has been thrown out due to the conflicting information on his work permit. JianZhong is livid. He insists that he has only ever worked for CSC, and does not know who or what CW is. The Ministry also can’t explain how it is that his work permit would present such odd information. It is only after various phone calls and Internet searches that Healthserve discovers CSC is a subcontractor that CW has hired. It would appear that the government had made a clerical error while processing his work permit, and accidentally printed two different permits on one card. As Jeff, a social worker with Healthserve, sums up, “There is something strange and fishy about this. No one knows what is going on.” JianZhong’s unfortunate and bewildering experience reveal the ambiguities embedded within the migrant labor system in Singapore. For a country that is known for its transparent rules and regulations, my fieldwork indicates that workers experience inconsistencies and ambiguity on a daily basis.

In this chapter, I ask: What forms of precarity and ambiguity do migrant workers face on a daily basis? What do their bewildering, and sometimes contradictory, experiences reveal about the transnational labor industry? This chapter is a sketch of the perils and pitfalls of migrant

1 Upon looking up both the websites of the companies, the companies are only listed as ‘CSC’ and ‘CW’. There are no full names delineating what the acronyms stand for.
work in Singapore today. While migrants flood in looking for a better life for their family, they experience dangerous and derelict working and living conditions. This chapter describes those conditions. Workers also inhabit a dizzying array of inconsistencies within the legal system. This chapter then goes on to describe their precarity within the legal—in the form of bureaucratic delay, clerical errors, etc. Stories of such daily realities debunk the myth of Singapore as a city-state that embodies transparency, and instead point to the ways in which existing rules of law permit employers to exploit legal loopholes at the expense of workers.

I present workers’ experiences of legal obstacles to fair treatment and workplace injuries with as much mundane detail as in order to accurately mirror the struggles that workers experience(d). Tedious and overwhelming to experience and process at times, it is precisely their stories, reactions, frustrations, and annoyances that might provide us with the closest possibility of understanding the precarity that migrant workers have to endure in Singapore.

**Occupational Hazards**

Since the early 2000s, the industries in Singapore that rely most heavily on lowly paid migrant workers are the construction, marine and manufacturing sectors. These same sectors had the highest incidences of worker fatalities and work injuries (Ministry of Manpower 2014). In 2014, the overall worker fatality rate was 2.1 per 100,000 workers. The construction sector in particular, however, has had a significantly higher fatality rate of 7.0 per 100,000 workers, while the marine sector rate was 5.6 per 100,000 persons. This easily makes construction sites and shipyards the riskiest worksites in Singapore. Over the first 10 months of 2015, a total of 16 workers fell to their deaths, more than the total number from 2014. A November 2015 report from ChannelsNewsAsia reveals that one worker “fell from a ladder during a tree-cutting
operation,” while another “fell through an unguarded floor opening.” In addition to these tragic incidents, there was also a reported 87 cases of major injuries from falls over the first 10 months of 2015, in comparison to the 88 cases that occurred in all of 2014. Although these cases were non-fatal, they were still major injuries that involved “fractures, crush[ed] and dislocate[ed] bones, blindness and paralysis.”

Although government statistics may cite a more general number of workplace injuries and the sectors in which they occur, they often do not emphasize the fact that a high percentage of workers who die or are injured on the job are migrant workers. In a study on construction fatalities in Singapore, Ling, Liu, and Woo (2009) note that workplace fatalities disproportionately involved “unskilled” workers with low education levels between the ages of 24 to 34; this would fit the typical profile of migrant workers in the construction industry (2009: 717). It was only in 2013, at the launch of the National Workplace Safety and Health Campaign, that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted that “most of the incidents are in construction, manufacturing and marine sectors… Many of them involve foreign workers.” However, instead of attributing these incidents to unsafe work conditions, PM Lee claims that these injuries occur “because they [workers] speak different languages and they have different work practices in their home countries.” One could perhaps give PM Lee the benefit of the doubt by ignoring his cultural pathologizing, and accept that work practices in Bangladesh, China, and India do not prioritize workers’ safety (which, judging by the many high profile tragedies that have been reported in the media about Bangladeshi and Chinese factories, may not be an unreasonable assumption). But are we then to also assume that workers are deliberately rejecting Singapore’s wondrous safety procedures and safety equipment? Are these workers somehow so culturally

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2 In an infamous report, entitled ‘Report on the Negro Family: The Case for National Action’, Moynihan blamed the alarmingly radical inequality between whites and blacks in America on black people’s supposed internal pathologies rather than on racist, institutional arrangements.
different, so other, that they would neglect their safety if they had the option to be safe? Is their lack of proficiency in English so damning that they would somehow not be able to understand how to use safety equipment?  

Rasel is a 29-year old Bangladeshi worker whom I met at Healthserve. He has been working as a welder for a construction company over the past 6 years, and has just suffered a fairly gruesome injury to his right eye. While doing welding work, a piece of flint had accidentally gotten into his eye. Rasel was not wearing goggles, as his company had failed to replenish its depleting stock of eyewear safety equipment in a timely manner. He managed to remove the foreign material from his eye, and received some oral painkillers from his company doctor. However, the redness and swelling in his eye persisted for three days, and Rasel communicated his concerns to his boss. Telling Rasel to be patient, his boss dismissed him and told him to get back to work. Unable to withstand the pain anymore, Rasel went to Healthserve for assistance. In what followed to be a rather fortunate chain of circumstances, one of the NGO’s social workers managed to get his friend (who was an eye specialist at Mount Elizabeth Hospital) to treat Rasel free of charge. While we waited for Rasel’s name to be called at the hospital, I asked him if such injuries were common at his workplace. Whipping out his Nokia, Rasel showed me a few pictures he had surreptitiously taken of a former colleague handling the steel at the workplace.

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3 This line of argument, while already tenuous in the first place, is further weakened when one considers Chinese workers who mostly work for either Chinese or Singaporean-Chinese bosses. There is certainly no language barrier here.

4 Company doctors are widely known to be rather disreputable physicians that companies hire in-house at a cheap rate in order to ‘treat’ workers’ injuries. They often prescribe painkillers and antibiotics, and while these forms of medication might suffice with minor injuries, they fail to properly address major ones.
According to Rasel, the worker in this photo is in fact wearing a pair of goggles (seen more noticeably in the first photo), but he is not wearing a mask, gloves or any related safety equipment that might protect him from the hazardous welding fumes. I asked Rasel if workers have asked for masks and gloves. “When I ask Boss, he say[s] ‘coming, coming’. Only when they [supervisors] know people [safety inspectors] are coming, they [will] make things look safe” (my emphasis).” ‘Looking’ safe in this case meant temporarily halting welding work and doing safer, ‘clean-up’ work while safety inspectors were on the premises. But safety inspections, according to Rasel were very rare occurrences. In his 6 years working for this particular employer, he had only ever witnessed 4 visits in total.  

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5 To the government’s credit, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has recently stepped up inspection efforts. From October to December 2015 (a few months after my fieldwork had concluded), officials inspected over 1,150 worksites, “with a focus on work at heights, crane safety and traffic management.” A January 2016 press release
This number is significant in the context of the Singaporean government’s highly public campaign on the importance of work safety. There is a long list of ‘Dos’ and ‘Don’ts’ in the ‘Workers’ Safety Handbook’, such as “Do not use defective ladders” and “Wear your safety harness and secure it to an anchorage point.” The handbook preaches at workers to “make safety [their] priority, [their] personal responsibility.” In order to be safe at the workplace, one must “begin by following safety rules and participating actively in the safety programmes at [one’s] workplace.” In 2012, the Singaporean Land Transport Authority hired a work safety consulting firm to educate workers on workplace safety. As part of a three-month course on workplace safety, this workshop was meant to transform the ‘culture’ of workers. According to the general manager of the consulting firm, “When kindness becomes part of the workers’ culture, they might remind each other more often to be safe. When people are not easily agitated, they are also less likely to make hasty decisions that could lead them to be caught in risky situations.” In line with Prime Minister Lee’s attribution of workplace injuries to Bangladeshi and Chinese workers’ “different work practices,” the manager implies that migrant workers somehow are more prone to ‘agitation’, and that this supposed ‘agitation’ leads them to deliberately neglect their own safety. There is clearly no attempt to consider the possibility that workers may not even have had the opportunity to access safety equipment. During my daily commute to Healthserve (and a visit to a housing dormitory), I spotted different safety banners that heavily promoted a discourse of personality responsibility in the absence of concerted attention to the scope of worker injuries.

reports that “more than 1,900 contraventions were uncovered and close to $450,000 in fines were issued, with fines ranging from $1,000 to $65,000 per inspection. 14 workplaces were also issued with Stop Work Orders.”
Figure 2. A banner on a construction site along Orchard Road. Photograph by author.

Figure 3. A safety banner placed outside a construction site. Photograph by author.
When I began my fieldwork, I didn’t expect the theme of workplace injuries to become so prominent in my story. My initial plan was to study migrant workers’ housing conditions, but as I spent time in Singapore, this theme became inescapable everywhere I went. I took photos of these banners on my way to Healthserve. The area is located on the eastern fringe of the central region of Singapore. Infamously known as the red-light district, the area houses many migrant workers. These banners make it clear that the onus is on workers to somehow stay safe. One can think of this bootstraps discourse as a manifestation of power in the process of discursive production. By insinuating that workplace injuries happen because workers are deliberately choosing not to wear safety goggles, helmets, gloves, masks, etc., the government is effectively silencing workers’ complaints of the lack of access to safety equipment. As past incidents of collapsed cranes, fallen concrete slab and metal pipes disappear, so too, do employers’ and the government’s responsibilities for workers’ safety.
Yet another safety concern involves the everyday work practice of transporting workers on the cargo decks of trucks and lorries. While the Road Traffic Act stipulates that vehicles carrying goods are not supposed to carry passengers too, there is a clause that makes an exception for scenarios where “the person so carried is in the employment of the owner or hirer of the vehicle and is proceeding on his master’s business.” Aside from its troubling language, the rule also condones and *legalizes* dangerous work conditions.

![Workers, along with materials, squeezing into the back of a lorry. Photography by author.](image)
According to the *Straits Times* (2010), there were five reported deaths and 76 injuries in 2006 due to workers being squashed dangerously between building materials in lorries, as they move from one jobsite to another. By 2008, this figure more than doubled, with 210 passengers on lorries facing either injuries or death. In 2009, yet another *Straits Times* piece reported that “an average of four workers a week [my emphasis] never reached their destinations in one piece.” Workers I spoke to confirmed that they have witnessed colleagues being flung off lorries when the vehicles stopped abruptly for red lights. One major reason employers prefer this mode of transportation over chartering buses is cost-effectiveness. In response to public outrage over the lorry-related incidents, the Singapore Contractors Association (2012) declared that “workers and employers accept the practicality of such a mode of transport. To date, this is the most efficient means to ferry workers to and from their workplaces.” While one might be tempted to
simply attribute blame to employers, one cannot overlook the role the government plays in implicitly sanctioning such practices.

A series of tragic lorry accidents in 2013 renewed public debate about workers’ safety. The Land Transport Authority announced new safety measures that would be implemented over the next three years, such as height restrictions and the installation of side railings and canopies for lorries. However, when questioned about the timeframe for implementation, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Transport Teo Ser Luck responded that “we [the government] have to consider the businesses and the small and medium enterprises as well; cost factors are also a consideration for them” (Straits Times 2014a). The chairman of the Singapore Logistics Association’s land transportation committee reaffirmed this cost-dependent mindset, declaring that “it is not always cost-effective to charter vans and buses to transport a few workers” (ibid). Meanwhile, a Labour MP and chairman of the government-funded Migrant Workers’ Centre (MWC), Yeo Guat Kuang, insisted that the “root of the problem” is the “behaviour of unsafe drivers” (Straits Times 2014b).

In addition to being simultaneously vulnerable to hazardous work environments and blamed for any ensuing injuries that may arise, workers also face alarming living conditions.
Many workers relayed their disbelief at the decrepit living conditions. A Bangladeshi worker drew a comparison between the housing conditions of local Singaporeans and those of migrants. “Singaporeans lives in HDBs [in a family of] 4-6 people. We? 16-18 people [are stuck] in one room.” There was shock over the fact that such dilapidated places even existed in Singapore. Ironically, some workers had left their home countries with the expectation that Singapore would be a clean, safe, and orderly city, only to discover that they would be living in accommodation that were “much worse than anything [they] had experienced back home.”

Precarious Beginnings—The Process of Acquiring a Job

On one of the earliest days of my fieldwork, I met Uddin, a Bangladeshi migrant worker who came to Healthserve’s Tuesday evening clinic sessions because he had a fracture on his right ankle that resulted from a three-story fall while he was cleaning windows at work. Uddin
had also come to the NGO to follow up on a salary compensation claim that Deb (a social worker at Healthserve) had helped him file with Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower 3 weeks ago. His employer had only paid him half the salary he was owed for the past 2 months. When I asked Uddin how it is that he found a job in Singapore, he uttered one word softly: “Agent.” This word would pop up consistently throughout my fieldwork as most of the workers, if not all, that I had spoken to share that one commonality of having paid recruitment agents in order to land a job in Singapore. In exchange for a promise of a job that would pay him SGD 1500, Uddin had paid the labor agent approximately half a million Taka (SGD 9,000). Alas, he arrived in Singapore with a job that would in reality pay a monthly salary of SGD 850 (48,000 Taka). He would have had to work for at least 10.5 months in order to merely recoup the money he had borrowed, and even that would be too generous an estimate, as Uddin still had to send back some money to his family every month, and was responsible for the cost of his own food. Unfortunately, he did not have 10.5 months. Three months into his job, Uddin suffered a major injury that put him in crutches. To make matters worse, he was now without a job as his employer had cancelled his work permit due to his injury.

An infectiously sunny 20 year-old Chinese woman, Miao Miao worked as a clerk in a paper packaging company for 6 months before her employer fired her inexplicably. We met at Healthserve for Miao Miao had dropped by the NGO to file a wage complaint with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). “I can accept losing my job, but I can’t go home [back to China] because my boss hasn’t paid me for the past month’s salary. He also hasn’t bought me a plane ticket,” Miao Miao tells me. Even though Miao Miao has since filed a complaint with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) over her unpaid wages and the lack of an airplane ticket, she is unable to

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6 Miao Miao is the only female worker I had ever come across at the NGO.
dispute her abrupt and unjust firing. The Singapore government is simply not involved in the firing of workers; as Vina (an NGO worker) tells me, “that [unfair termination] is for the court.” The only recourse workers would have in this situation would be to sue their employers for termination without cause. The law, as Kamari Clarke (2009) reminds us, is unfortunately both a painfully slow and expensive process that offers no guarantees. I shall further explore both the bureaucratic and legal processes in the next chapters. Miao Miao spent the next month waiting for her salary and plane ticket. After weeks of waiting, Miao Miao finally received her outstanding wages and ticket home. Unfortunately, she ultimately did not manage to work long enough to accrue the 30,000 Yuan (SGD 6,800) she paid in labor agents fees back in China.

Both Uddin and Miao Miao’s stories point to the involvement of employment agents within this economy of transnational labor. The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) is a key trading body in Bangladesh that currently has approximately 1,100 government-approved, member agencies (Baira). As of 2009, these various agencies under the BAIRA have recruited 5.5 million Bangladeshis for jobs abroad (ibid). Although there is technically no governmental organization that ‘oversees’ labor agencies in China, private employment agencies are not in short supply. According to China’s Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the total number of Chinese workers who acquired jobs overseas through employment agencies was 27 million in 2011 (Liu 2014). It was therefore unsurprising that my informants, too, had undertaken the tedious route of utilizing a middleman in order to find a job in Singapore.

An agent is a person who typically organizes transactions between two other parties. One would think that paying an agent would be a means to ease the transactional process between these two parties. And yet, one does not simply go to an agent and leave with a job. The process
is often a convoluted one riddled with ambiguities. One Chinese worker, Huang, relates his fateful experience with a labor agent back home. With a mixture of sadness and regret, he tells me he had paid massively high agent fees, only to come to Singapore and discover that there was in fact no legal job available. As fate would have it, the employment agent in question had applied for a visitor’s visa instead of a work visa, leaving Huang unable to work legally in Singapore.\(^7\) When I ask Huang why he had accepted the incorrect visa, he explains that both the arrival card (that his agent had already filled out) and the Singaporean visa stamped on his passport had been written in English. Unable to leave Singapore because he had borrowed so much money from friends and family in order to pay the agency fees in the first place, let alone pay for an airplane ticket home, Huang had little choice but to resort to a life of illegal, ad-hoc work for various employers on different construction projects that provided no sense of security whatsoever. He has remained undocumented in Singapore for 8 years now. I discovered that Huang had paid a Chinese agent the equivalent of SGD 7,500. Curious about the remarkable discrepancy in fees—I recalled that Uddin had paid SGD 9,000—I asked Huang if it was common for Bangladeshis to pay a much higher rate than their Chinese counterparts. Shrugging his shoulders, Huang informs me that there is already no standardized rate within China, much less across Bangladesh and China. He continues, “there are so many agents in China; it’s hard to know which one to go to.” Indeed, the sheer number of agents is overwhelming enough, but the process is even more difficult in the context of a lack of transparency. According to Huang, it was not common practice for agents to provide workers with much information about the company that they are matched with. “They only say that they will give you a good company.

\(^7\) It is more expedient to apply for a tourist visa than a work permit, as the latter involves an additional process of MOM verifying that the worker indeed passed his skills test in order to be eligible for the job.
What is good or bad, you don’t know. And you don’t really have a choice but to hope for the best. What happens next depends on fate.”

The precarious process of navigating various employment agencies is not only an exhausting and tiresome one; it also carries profound legal consequences for those who are not so fortunate. Since Huang commenced his journey 8 years ago as an undocumented migrant worker, the economic uncertainty he thought he had left behind in China persists in Singapore. Today, not only is his life and livelihood dependent on the state of the Singaporean economy—as all workers are—he is also at the mercy of employers who know that he will not be able to report any injuries or unpaid wages to the government without risking deportation himself. To be a migrant worker is to inhabit unpredictability; Huang does not know if he will have a job when his current construction project wraps up in 3 days. He also lives in fear that he may injure himself on the worksite. “I have been lucky in the sense that I have worked in Singapore for 8 years without meeting an injury, but I worry that something could happen to me one day. What will I do then? How would I afford my medical bills?” It would be impossible for Huang to file any legal claims with the Ministry of Manpower without implicating himself and his lack of a legal status. In the event that he injures himself seriously, and subsequently loses his informal jobs with different contractors, Huang will have to return to his wife and daughters in China and face the possibility of permanent unemployment.

As I tried (and failed) to muster up a response beyond what could only be an unhelpful platitude to Huang’s legal predicament, he continues, “I’m not sure what to do. I’ve thought about leaving Singapore and coming in again with a proper work visa, but the moment I try to leave, they will know that I have overstayed my visitor’s visa.” It was then that I remembered that Singaporean passport control—like that of many other Asian countries—is structured
differently from its European and North American counterparts. One must go through
Singaporean passport control twice—once while entering and another time while exiting. If
Huang were to leave Singapore, the immigration agent at passport control would realize that he
had been staying in Singapore without appropriate legal documents for the past 8 years, and
would bar him from re-entering the country again. Such is the precarious state of liminality that
encapsulates Huang’s circumstances. Huang’s legal bind constructs him as neither a tourist
(visitor) nor a migrant worker. Instead, he is in some sense structurally invisible; he is
technically a breathing body in Singapore, but his lack of legal status renders him an invisible
body that is not supposed to be there.

**On the Job**

As I have alluded to earlier, possessing the legal status as a migrant worker in Singapore
does not preclude one from the uncertainties of the transnational labor system. A common issue
raised by workers and NGO staff alike was that of wages—from irregular payments to withheld
wages. On one balmy evening, I sit with a few workers outside of Healthserve’s office. It is a
Tuesday, and Healthserve has converted its office space into a highly popular makeshift clinic.
While they wait for their names to be called, two Bangladeshi workers, Prakash and Anu
generously entertain my overtures. Prakash is a shipyard worker who works for Hip Yiap
construction (a subcontractor). He tells me that his salary is completely dependent on the amount
of work he gets. “No ship, no work, no money” is his succinct summary of the unpredictable
work environment that many workers have to withstand. He has experienced going for a month
without work, during which time he made ends meet by borrowing money from various friends.
Anu, another shipyard worker who fixes rigs, chimes in to say that their work is often dependent
on the weather—they have to suspend work on rainy days and do not receive any pay for those days, despite their inability to control the weather. It is such that the amounts recorded on Prakash’s monthly pay slips fluctuated wildly, from that of SGD 500 to SGD 900. In today’s unpredictable economy, having a 1-year contract does not necessarily mean that one will have 12 months of steady work. Prakash may be employed on paper, but his ‘by-the-hour’ wage rate erodes any sense of financial stability. He no longer obtains a salary that covers the entire range of economic needs of a person who works; he is instead paid for his occasional, temporary services.

Despite such fluctuations in wages, monthly deductions by employers for accommodation, utilities or contestable items remain constant. Singapore’s Employment Act draws a distinction between authorized and unauthorized deductions, wherein authorized deductions are allowed for work absenteeism, damage or loss of goods, meal provision (at the request of the employee), accommodation supplied by the employer, recovery for loans and income tax, among others. Unauthorized deductions on the other hand are those involving the recovery of employment-related expenses, such as the monthly foreign worker levy and security bond that all employers must pay. Even though the Employment Act appears to provide a relatively exhaustive list of authorized and unauthorized deductions, quite a few employers often exploit the system by simply labeling any and all deductions under the broad umbrella of “loans”—a technically legal deduction. When I asked Prakash what the $300 “loan” on his salary receipt entailed, he tells me dryly, “$100 is for housing, the rest… I don’t know. You have to ask my boss.” Insisting that he had not in fact borrowed any money from his employer—“Do you think he would even lend me any money?”—Prakash conjectures that the remaining $200 could have been a means for his employer to obtain as much profit as possible. In any case, they
are illegal deductions. The lack of consistency between payments as well as among workers led to a general perception that their company, a subcontractor, operated on an arbitrary and unjust wage system that was dependent on a combination of the timing of payments the subcontractor receives from the main contractor and how much profit the company needs to keep from these payments.

Unsurprisingly, workers like Prakash have no choice but to accept these deductions—be they authorized or unauthorized. At a time when shipyard work is already so precarious—heavily dependent on the health of the Singaporean economy (that is ultimately connected to the larger global economy) and unpredictable weather conditions—Prakash has resigned himself to taking whatever he can get. When I pointed to my copy of the Employment Act and asked Prakash why he chose not to file a complaint with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), he shook his head and kindly disabused me of my naiveté, “I complain [and] then what? Maybe MOM will ask [my] boss to pay, but then I[‘ll have] no job.” This fear of retribution was something I often encountered during my conversations with various workers, be they Chinese or Bangladeshi. Prakash’s cynicism reflects his self-awareness and recognition of how replaceable he is. After all, “[there are] so many people [who] want to work in Singapore.” It is in fact this widespread desire that maintains Singapore’s ability to promulgate the myth that working in the city-state is an illustrious experience one would be blessed to have. The myth in turn continues to attract a significant supply of workers to Singapore, resulting in more workers than there are jobs available. Not only does the economics of supply and demand contribute to both employers and workers’ understanding alike that workers should not complain if they want to keep their jobs, the high influx of workers attempting to come to Singapore also reinforces the myth of Singapore as a desirable place to work. What ensues is thus a continuous cycle of precarity.
Even if Prakash had filed a claim with the Ministry of Manpower, disputes over salary amounts—according to NGO staff—are often even harder to resolve than work injuries, as the salary slips that workers receive are often vague scraps of paper, sometimes consisting of no more than a stamp of the company’s logo on the back of a used envelope with the wages hastily stuffed inside. Once the money has been removed, the remaining pieces of paper do not provide any form of admissible evidence of how much the worker has received. That workers’ salaries are still not electronically deposited into bank accounts leaves the process of payment shrouded in a cloud of ambiguity—hardly a conducive backdrop for solving wage disputes.

Withheld wages was also a common complaint among the Chinese construction workers I met. The most common waiting period was between 2 to 3 months. Most surprisingly, I discovered that quite a few workers actually had technically legal (government-approved) contracts that somehow stipulated the withholding of wages as a “good-behaviour bond.” Below is an example of a particular employment contract clause:

“Under no circumstances should Party B [the worker] carry out protests, petitions, or cause any trouble. If an incident of any sort occurs, Party A [the company] reserves the right to fire any of these troublemakers immediately as well as to deduct their salaries accordingly (as indicated in the good-behaviour bond).”

Equal parts flummoxed and appalled by the crass concept of a “good-behaviour bond,” I realized that the act of withholding workers’ wages operated as a form of discipline and punishment. Not only would workers be dissuaded from ‘misbehaving’ at work, they would also be deterred from complaining about the withholding of wages, lest their complaints be used as grounds to deduct their forthcoming salaries. If they stepped out of line, they could lose their jobs. The uncertainty of not knowing if one will be either fired or punished through deductions of one’s salary thus
reinforces good behavior. Such techniques of discipline that originate from institutions such as factories, schools, and hospitals, Foucault (1975) has argued, serve a twofold function. As a form of cultivation, they augment and optimize the capacities of bodies while simultaneously rendering them docile so they can be tethered to and integrated into the production machine.

Regular underpayment of wages is another noted complaint. Cai, a Chinese worker, tells me that because he is paid according to the number of days worked, and not by the hour, his employer has figured out a way to keep his salary to a minimum: by increasing Cai’s official daily working hours from 8 to 12 hours. This way, his employer receives 4 hours of free labor per day. Yet another tactic of absconding from paying one’s worker appropriately is deducting overtime work and/or work done on days off or during public holidays. Other methods include dividing salaries into ‘fixed’ and ‘variable’ components, where the fixed amount for regular work hours is pegged at a much lower rate, and only variable hours such as overtime work are paid at the normal salaried rate. The great variety of tactics employed here, while certainly creative, indicates the lack of a consistent rule of calculating wages. My conversations with multiple migrant workers (who worked for different companies) were always enlightening in that workers would contradict each other’s stories with their individual experiences. They, too, seemed confused about what the law ought to be—should one be paid by the hour, or by the day? The Employment Act, unfortunately, does not provide one with any clarity. Employers are free to stipulate whichever form of wage payment they prefer. In fact, I came across a Chinese worker, Yong, whose contract contained two salary clauses, one stating a basic hourly rate of $X+ overtime work at 1.5 times $X, and the other stating a (higher) flat rate of $Y, including all overtime pay. The value of X is significantly smaller than Y, and calculations indicate that Yong would be better off with the flat rate of Y. However, his employer insisted on paying him with
the first method of calculation ($X + \text{overtime pay at } 1.5 \times X$). The difficulty is that the Employment Act does not stipulate that having two contradictory clauses is illegal. Employers can then utilize this latent ambiguity in the law, to calculate their workers’ salaries according to whichever clause that is favorable to them—this, of course, ultimately depends on how many hours of overtime work the worker does. The structural ambiguity of the law not only upholds the legitimacy of multiple payment provisions in an employment contract, but also magnifies the uncertainty that workers encounter on a daily basis.

If the confusing array of payment disputes weren’t enough, unpredictable work schedules, excessive work hours, and poor monetary compensation are typical conditions that many of the workers face. Some construction workers have reported polarizing work schedules, from intensive 12-15 hour work days to weeks of no work (during which time they are not paid). Ling and Yi, Chinese construction workers who have been building HDB flats in the Sengkang area, lamented their long work shifts (6.30am to 1am), which did not include remuneration for overtime work. When the men, exhausted, refused to continue working overtime, their employer threatened to cut their wages. After one such shift, the men returned to their dormitories to rest, only to be summoned back to work a mere 5 hours later. Another worker, Xing, was forced to put in a 26-hour shift. This brutal shift followed with 3 consecutive days of 13-hour labor. Xing worked for an inexplicable total of 369 hours over a period of 1 month. Below is a scanned copy of Xing’s timecard that indicates the number of hours he has worked each day. I have redacted his boss’ signature.
The issue of rest days is a contentious one. Whenever I relayed my dismay to Colin, the director of Healthserve, he often responded with the comment that “some migrants themselves agree to or request work on rest days to increase their incomes” — this was an attempt to “balance [my] perspectives.” While there may certainly be a degree of truth in Colin’s statement, I am uncomfortable with this line of argument being used to legitimize situations in which other workers — particularly those who are not paid by the hour or by the number of days worked, but are instead given fixed monthly salaries — are coerced into working arguably inhumane hours.

Section 37 of the Employment Act in Singapore stipulates that the pay rate of work done on what is meant to be a rest day depends on whether it was the employee who requested work or the employer who asked the employee to work, in addition to the number of hours worked on that
day—the rate is double if work was done at the employer’s request and if working hours are more than half of the employee’s “normal hours of work.” It is clear here, that the phrase “normal hours of work” can be open to dispute, as not all workers have consistent working hours. Furthermore, there is ambiguity over what would constitute “normal hours of work” in such cases. The Employment Act does not stipulate who ought to bear the burden of proof: is it the employer or the employee? Nor does the Act specify how employers and employees alike should go about obtaining proof that the other party had been the one to initiate the suggestion of work. These loopholes in the Employment Act allow wily employers to coerce workers into working on rest days without paying penalty rates, while still officially operating within the confines of the law.

As this chapter has shown thus far, the everyday experiences of migrant workers are not consistent across all workers. While some workers reported random deductions to their salaries, others reported not receiving their wages at all. In a similar vein, some workers claimed they were paid by a fixed hourly rate, while others described a fixed monthly salary. These examples of ambiguous inconsistencies highlight a system of unpredictability. Employers are able to exploit legal loopholes to their benefit, thus rendering less powerful migrant workers ensnared in a system of precarity.
Chapter 2. An Assemblage of Labor

On one of the last days of fieldwork, a clinic volunteer at Healthserve turned to me for a succinct summary of my ‘findings’. I alluded to the different ‘themes’ that were prominent when suddenly the volunteer cut me off, “Okay, but then, what are you saying? What is to be done?” I reacted to that question with a mixture of impatience and annoyance. On the face of it, it seems to suggest a need for a prescriptive answer—a panacea, if you will. But that query is vital. It struck me as I poured over my fieldnotes when I got back to the States. What is to be done amid the stories documented here? This chapter is thus a response to that urgent question.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, much of the suffering workers endure suggests a puzzling marriage of ambiguity and arbitrariness that confounds typical notions of Singapore as an orderly city-state. In this chapter, I consider why the rule of law appears to be so fluid by positing that the aforementioned employers in the last chapter are able to manipulate legal rules to their favor not only as a result of a differentiation in power, but also because there are so many actors in Singapore’s assemblage of labor: workers, employers, agents, bureaucrats, NGO workers, and developers. Individual actors are able to justify their self-interest by pushing off responsibility to others. I argue that seeing the system of injustice through the lens of an assemblage allows us to discern the urban as a problem-space in which a cast of disparate actors—migrant workers, employers, NGOs, bureaucrats, and capitalists—articulate their individual material and ideological desires. I am not referring to Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong’s (2005) conception of “global assemblages” here, though I must admit that it has inspired a more nuanced method of engaging with complex, systemic structures. Rather, I use assemblages to exemplify the “friction” that rubs one actor against the other(s) in order to disrupt a homogenizing account of suffering (Tsing 2005). It is tempting to attribute the exploitation of
workers to one particular entity, because doing so would provide us with more imaginable possibilities for change. The ever-present question of “What is to be done?” would then become a far less daunting one. Instead, I argue that it would be unproductive and inaccurate to reduce the precarious experiences of migrant workers to a singular cause. To be clear, to speak of an assemblage of actors is not to absolve anyone of responsibility. Rather, it is to recognize our shared complicity in propagating inequality. I will therefore spend the rest of this chapter illustrating my understandings of the different actors that make up this assemblage. I contextualize different actors’ complicity in the exploitation of workers within a larger economic-cum-political structure that complicates the rather dualistic binary framework of perpetrator vs. victim.

**Agents and Employers**

It is a widely accepted fact amongst both NGO employees and migrant workers that Singaporean agents (who provide employers with workers) often collude with Bangladeshi and Chinese agents (who duly provide workers) and employers in a corrupt system of “kickbacks.” According to the staff I have spoken to across two different NGOs, Singaporean agents reportedly offer employers under-the-table cash incentives of SGD 2000 to SGD 3000 to hire migrant workers; the more unscrupulous employers would hire workers they did not even need, only to fire them a few months later just to collect these cash payments. This has also been supported by articles written in *The Straits Times* (2010, 2013), although the *Times* does not specify the cash amounts. As we have seen earlier with Uddin and Miao Miao, many migrant workers are unable to recoup the recruitment fees that have paid (usually ranging from SGD 7,000- 9,000) only after a few months of work.
Naturally, Singaporean agents—having bribed employers to hire workers—will charge their Bangladeshi and Chinese counterparts the cost of these kickbacks, and these agents consequently pass along this ‘recruitment fee’ to locals who are searching for jobs. *The Straits Times* has reported in a 2008 article that “the more brazen agents might even call or fax owners to offer kickbacks.” A Bangladeshi worker I spoke to summed up the web of actors rather succinctly: “Singapore boss. Singapore agent. Bangla agent. All Alibaba (unscrupulous).”

Both fascinated and disturbed by the unflinchingly pragmatic, capitalist practices that were described, I decided to pay local Singaporean employment agencies a few visits to hear their sides of the story. Of all my attempts, only one agent was willing to speak to me once I admitted that I was not in fact looking for a job, nor to hire any workers, but was instead a nosy student-researcher hoping to find some answers. I had a fairly brief conversation with the manager at a local Singaporean agency named Peter, who informed me that his primary clients were actually employers who were looking for workers. His job was then to “connect with” agents in Bangladesh, India and China who would provide the missing piece to the puzzle: the workers. While Peter acknowledged that “probably 50 percent” of his clients were actually paying their workers less than the wages promised in the signed contracts, he maintained that he had no control over this part of the process. Folding his arms nonchalantly on a mahogany desk, he told me, “Look, business is tough. There are many agencies, competitors. Living in Singapore is not cheap you know. I will lose my business if I tell employers to pay workers more. What they [employers] do is their business, not mine. I’m just the third party.” Peter saw himself as merely brokering a *business* transaction—a necessary one at that if he wanted to survive in a city with a tremendously high cost of living. And yet the rather prosaic manner with which he described the ‘business transaction’ was unnerving in its implicit banality. Peter clearly did not
have a negative will towards migrants, nor was he pleased by the undeniable exploitation that many workers face(d)—he was just doing his job. It was then that I realized that he was not in fact impervious to the system of inequality. To be clear, I am not absolving agents of their complicity in fostering precarious conditions that undoubtedly exploit migrant workers. Rather, I am pointing to the possibility of inhabiting two positions at once. Agents are simultaneously vulnerable and complicit in a heinous economy of exploitation.

At a time where capitalism has triumphed over all else, no ‘entrepreneurial’ undertaking is outré. Jean and John Comaroff (2000: 311) have argued that in this era of “securing instant returns,” we are unsurprisingly witnessing the proliferation of “occult economies.” The Comaroffs refer to these “occult economies” as economies with “a material aspect founded on the effort to conjure wealth by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason” (ibid). They are “occult” in the sense that their “spectral enchantments” impart an air of ‘magic’. To put it more plainly, the prevalence of “occult economies” indicates the undying faith—and expectations—many have placed in the capitalist system and its promises. The actions of labor agents indicate the extent to which we have uncritically bought into millennial capitalism’s promises of immediate rewards. In this case, the various practices and schemes that agents conjure and subsequently actualize—both legal and illegal, formal and informal—in order to accumulate more capital represent capitalism as a “pure religious cult, [and] perhaps the most extreme there ever was” (Benjamin 1996: 259). Like a religion, capitalism promises to “satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion” (ibid). In fact, I would argue that capitalism’s ferocity lies not just in its effectiveness at postponing one’s financial worries about the future, but also in its ability to quell moral discomfort and reasoning in the face of never-ending capital accumulation.
When I finally asked Peter about the *Straits Times* article, he tersely denied that he was one of the Singaporean agents engaged in unscrupulous business practices, he visibly withdrew in silence after my question. My welcome now clearly overstay, I awkwardly thanked him for his time and left without a real sense of whether I had struck a nerve or whether that particular question made him feel inadvertently accused of both immoral and illegal conduct. What remained clear, however, was the impossibility of viewing agents as separate from the extensive assemblage of actors and their attendant actions that contribute to the suffering of migrant workers.

It is important too, to note that the relationships between the elements in an assemblage are not stable; instead, it might be instructive to theorize them through Anna Tsing’s (2005) concept of ‘friction’. Friction reminds us of the oft-contentious “grip[s] of encounter” that need to happen before an assemblage can even be formed (2005: 5). Indeed, while agents collude with employers in order to rake in more disposable income, their alliance is far from secure, as there is always the risk that the Singaporean government could investigate and intervene. On one hand, employers prima facie hold a stronger bargaining chip, since agents require the cooperation of employers (hiring more workers than needed before repatriating them after a mere few months of work) in order to carry out this system. And yet, employers are also the ones that bear more risk. Last year, a 2015 *Straits Times* article reports that “Fifteen employers were convicted of receiving kickbacks.” Furthermore, “the managing director of a construction company was jailed for three weeks and fined $169,000 for receiving more than $85,000 in kickbacks.” There were, however, no apparent reports of agents being convicted. In fact, another *Straits Times* piece notes that the Ministry of Manpower has “warned errant work agents” against unscrupulous business practices.
On a particularly hot and humid day, Jeff (a Healthserve staff worker) and I accompanied a Chinese worker, QiHao to a meeting his boss. QiHao had suffered a back injury and wanted to return to China, but there was a contentious disagreement between him and his boss over the payment of outstanding wages. An icy meeting quickly devolved into a shouting match as QiHao called his boss a “騙子” (a liar and/or a cheat), and was in return condemned as an uncouth country bumpkin. Seeing as nothing would be resolved during this meeting, Jeff quickly led QiHao out of the room. I instead lingered about, hoping to capitalize on QiHao’s boss’ fury—perhaps he may even answer my questions! Mr. Tan, a Singaporean Chinese man, did not disappoint; calling QiHao a “lazy worker [who] always t[ook] short-cuts,” he proceeded to declare that “all these PRCs [mainland Chinese people] workers are the same: [they] only know how to talk loudly.” From my personal knowledge, many (Chinese) Singaporeans and Malaysians tend to view mainlanders as inferior and uncultured because they do not speak English and often talk in a louder volume in public. As I scrambled to hide my horror—I unfortunately do not possess a terribly convincing poker face—and find a non-committal reply beyond that of an ineloquent grunt, Mr. Tan finally paused to ask me who I was and where I was from. After assuring him that I was technically Malaysian, Mr. Tan relaxed a little and agreed to chat for a few minutes. Having learnt my lesson from my previous encounter with Peter, I asked Mr. Tan as casually as possible what he thought of the accounts in the Straits Times (about employers who hired workers just to get kickbacks from agents). Mr. Tan prefaced his reply with the careful declaration that he “definitely d[id] not do that,” before cautioning me to “be fair.”

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8 Workers who come to Healthserve tend to view the NGO as the last avenue of possibility. As such, they no longer fear the repercussions of appealing to an outside agency to help them.

9 I discovered early on in my fieldwork that once I mentioned I was a student at an American university, people usually reacted with either excessive reverence and admiration, or a reluctance to talk any further. In anticipation of these responses, I often felt the reflexive need to declare that I had grown up in Brunei (a neighboring country in South East Asia) and that I still hold the Malaysian passport, despite having lived in both Canada and the US.
“You think it’s so easy being a boss? 小姐 [young lady, miss], I’m just a sub-contractor—I have my boss too. I also need to answer to him. Everybody has someone to answer to.” Gesturing to the ceiling, he continues rather paternalistically, “Money doesn’t fall from the sky. You either have to work hard or marry well.” While I fought the urge to tell him that even marrying “well” would require hard work, Mr. Tan observes that “there is so much pressure these days to cut corners.” Referring to the constant pushback from real-estate developers, he says, “Developers want to make money, so they ask contractors for cheap prices. There are so many contractors around that you have no choice [but to accept said price].” It is unsurprising then, that many contractors in turn try to pay their workers as little as possible, sometimes even choosing not to pay them at all. As projects become more ambitious in scale, they also require more capital. A common strategy is thus to engage in “labor management” where large contracting companies hand down portions of the job to subcontractors (Xiang 2012: 727). As labor moves down this supply chain, each party takes their cut of profit, and the workers at the bottom of the chain are left with very little. While certainly morally inexcusable, the tragic reality is that everyone is merely trying to obtain a slice of the pie. With the ever-present possibility of another recession looming over our heads, capitalism demands that we grab as much as we can now. Time, after all, is money.

My conversations with Peter and Mr. Tan were particularly unnerving as they revealed the vulnerability that agents and employers, too, experience. No longer is the picture as straightforward as that of agents and employers arbitrarily exploiting migrant workers. Rather, it calls our attention to the ways in which we are mutually embedded within larger, unequal structures of power that cannot be neatly deconstructed. To think deeply about human suffering is to wrestle with the very systems that give rise to such violence, which means fixating less on
assigning blame to certain individuals, and being more attentive to the *structural* conditions that perpetuate said hardship to begin with. I now turn to the work injury compensation process in order to examine the role of the bureaucrat within the assemblage of vulnerability.

**Kashem’s Story**

Kashem is a Bangladeshi steel welder for a Singaporean construction company. After experiencing severe pain in his wrist, Kashem informed his boss that he may not be able to finish his work (cutting, grinding, and welding together steel), and requested for another worker to help him. His boss, however, told him that all the other workers had their own share of work to do, and if Kashem did not wish to do his job, he ought to quit. Afraid of losing his job, Kashem continued putting in long hours. Two weeks later, the pain reached excruciating heights, and Kashem could not even move his wrist, let alone work. He was finally able to convince his boss to take him to the hospital. After an X-Ray scan, the doctor recommended that Kashem undergo an operation for the fracture in his wrist as soon as possible in order to maximize odds of a full recovery. Unfortunately, he refused to operate on Kashem without authorization from his employer. The fear was that Kashem would not be able to pay for the operation, and the hospital would therefore have to bear the medical expenses. As such, the doctor requested that Kashem return with a letter of authorization from his boss, stipulating that the company would cover any and all medical bills. The fact that Kashem could technically survive without the surgery—his wrist was not considered a medical emergency—allows Singaporean hospitals to refuse treatment on the basis that there is reasonable doubt he would not be able to bear his medical expenses. Not only is this practice arguably unethical, especially in the context of one’s professional and ethical duties as a healthcare provider, but it also sets up Kashem in a Catch-22.
Without a letter of guarantee, the hospital will not treat him. But, at the same time, the hospital’s refusal to treat him in fact makes it easier for his boss to escape his legal obligations because there technically have not been any medical expenses incurred just yet. While this arguably inhumane practice may be normal in a country like the United States where universal healthcare is not a priority, it is certainly worth noting in the context of Singapore. Although Singapore’s healthcare system is praised widely as efficient and accessible due to heavy government subsidies and price controls, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that such affordability and efficiency in care does not extend to foreigners, especially poorly paid migrant workers.

To make matters worse, Kashem’s doctor informed him that the injury was a time-sensitive one. “If I don’t go for it [surgery] soon,” Kashem tells me, “the doctor said I may not be able to recover.” Alas, his boss refused to pay for the operation, despite the fact he was technically mandated Singapore’s Employment Act to do so (Singapore Statutes Online 2015). His boss’ excuse was that the procedure was unnecessary. “He [boss] told me to just take pain-killers. I was supposed to hope that my wrist would heal over time.” The reasoning that the surgery was nonessential is a contradictory one that further highlights the fluidity with which rules and laws are invoked and applied in Singapore. Kashem’s boss had earlier coerced his employee to work while in pain, citing that he must “do his job.” And yet, even though he is clearly unable to do his job right now, Kashem’s boss still does not see it as necessary to pay for the surgery that will allow Kashem to return to work. In this instance, the boss would rather have an ‘unproductive’ employee than expend the cost of an expensive medical procedure. That he is able to cite and discard laws willy-nilly highlights the difference in power between workers and

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10 In 2014, Bloomberg ranked Singapore’s healthcare system as the most efficient in the world.
their employers. However, that observation is not complete without asking how it is that the law can be so malleable.

During this time, Kashem’s boss informed him that he would not be renewing his work permit that would expire in two months’ time. Not only would he be soon out of work, the odds of him finding another job were slim in light of his wrist injury. Instead of authorizing the surgery, his boss requested that Kashem sign an agreement that would absolve the company from all responsibility. The agreement reads:

I, Kashem have requested to be treated for my wrist injury in Singapore. Because the injury was not work related, I undertake to bear all medical expenses (including doctors’ consultation fees, surgical fees, cost of medication, hospitalization fees, physical therapy as well as any treatment thereafter etc), not covered by the company’s medical insurance. These expenses have nothing to do with the company. As I am unable to work normally, the company will arrange for paid leave and nothing more, as per Singapore's Labour Law. Once my work permit expires, I will return to my home country.

Appalled by his boss’ dishonesty, gall, and general lack of appreciation, Kashem refused to sign the agreement. “Where else could the injury have occurred? I spend 14 hours a day working for him. I go home to eat and sleep. I wake up the next day and [the cycle] repeats. I don’t get days off.” I mentioned to Kashem that his company must have had to purchase employee insurance prior to hiring him. This was indeed the case, but because the injury was not life threatening in the medical sense, insurance would not cover the operation costs. It was precisely this reason that his employer refused to sign off on the operation, as he would have to pay out of pocket. Desperate for a remedy of some sort, Kashem found out about Healthserve through his

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11 While Kashem’s medical condition may not be deemed as life threatening in the eyes of the insurance company and the hospital, it is clear that Kashem’s livelihood is in fact under threat. How is he to survive without a job?
colleagues. With the assistance of a social worker, he decided to file a work injury claim with MOM. He hoped that the government would force his boss to pay for the operation.

**Bureaucratic Banalities: Worker-Bureaucrat Relations**

The bureaucratic process, unfortunately, is not a kind one for those with time-sensitive predicaments. During the weeks following his report, Kashem met with an MOM officer twice. “The first time was to explain my situation. She [the officer] looked very harassed… I can relate. She told me that I should come back in a week. I waited for 2 weeks, but there was still no news. After I chased her, she set up another meeting just to tell me that she needed more time. She said, ‘There are so many workers. What can I do?’ I started to get really nervous because I couldn’t wait.” And yet, Kashem had no choice but to wait. As Javier Auyero (2012: 157) has argued, the frustration that the vulnerable experience while they wait for remedies through the bureaucratic process “embod[ies] the everyday reconstruction of political domination.” Citing Schwartz, Auyero (2012: 7) reminds us that to be kept waiting is to be “subject of an assertion that one’s own time (and therefore, one’s social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait.” Indeed, Kashem waits in nervous anticipation for his second meeting with the MOM officer, only to be disappointed with a 5-minute conversation where he is told that he will have to continue waiting indefinitely. While waiting is certainly not unique to the Singaporean bureaucracy, it is arguably a process that we have taken for granted. The mundane bureaucracy that we have normalized to be “in the order of things” has wildly different consequences for different people (Auyero 2012: 157). Waiting for the government to process a driver’s license may not be the end of the world for anyone who is not a 16-year old, but waiting, in Kashem’s case meant losing the possibility of regaining the full function of his wrist.
During this period of time, Kashem returned to his doctor (approximately one month after his first consult) for a new X-Ray scan. His doctor informed him that that there would no longer be a point in operating—the window of possibility for a full recovery had passed. Kashem’s only recourse would be to manage and alleviate the pain with medication. He would not be able to work in the construction industry anymore. The most he could hope for was a generous compensation package from the government. And even that would take time.

My initial reaction to Kashem’s account was that of rage and disgust; I cursed both his employer and the Ministry of Manpower for their complicity in prolonging his suffering. Kashem instead surprised me with an immense amount of grace and profundity in the face of a tragic situation. He tells me, “Look, they [MOM officers] aren’t out to get me. The process is slow and I’m sadly its collateral damage.” Gesturing toward the six other workers sitting beside him, each with their own case against the Ministry, Kashem reminds me of the multitude of cases that bureaucrats have to contend with everyday. The “evil” in the bureaucratic process, as Hannah Arendt describes in her account of Eichmann’s horrific crimes, is in fact a “banal” one (Arendt 1964). To Arendt, Eichmann indeed played an instrumental part in carrying out unspeakable crimes against Jews, but she controversially contends that he did this neither out of anti-Semitism nor wilful malice, but out of a more prosaic reason: bureaucratic obedience. I thus take up Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil” to demonstrate how it would be accurate to characterize the bureaucrats in question as diabolical masterminds who are vindictively trying to destroy Kashem’s life. In truth, they are overworked government servants who followed the paperwork-heavy process and failed to provide Kashem with a timely remedy. As Akhil Gupta (2012: 149) has argued, the bureaucratic process is one that is imbued with excess writing. We must recognize writing as “the central activity of bureaucracies [because] writing… does not
merely record what happened but is the main activity that takes place in bureaucratic work.” When a bureaucrat promises to take care of a situation, “it means he will make the appropriate notations on a file and pass it forward” (ibid). This is indeed true of Kashem’s case, as the final assessment report he received 2.5 months after filing the claim contained a copy of the MOM officer’s communications with other bureaucrats. There were instructions hastily written in cursive for one officer to go to Kashem’s (former) workplace to interview his boss, and for another to visit his doctor in order to verify the facts of his medical condition. One can already imagine how much coordination it would take for these meetings to materialize, let alone the time it would take for the case to be processed and approved by a supervisor overseeing the process. The system is set up in such a way that the burden of proof falls on those who are suffering, even though the odds of those injuries taking place outside the workplace are very low. While not necessarily vindictive, MOM officers’ adherence to the list of bureaucratic set of rules inevitably amplifies the violence built within the system.

One injured worker, JunHao, tells me of his difficult time with an MOM officer. “I had accrued a bunch of medical bills over the past 6 months. I visited the doctor something like 7 or 8 times. These bills I paid for out of my own pocket. I told the officer, and she asked me point blank, for the total sum. She wanted me to tell her immediately!” With a wry smile, he says, “My math is pretty good, but even I can’t add up all those numbers so quickly. She was staring at me impatiently so I just estimated a total of $1300 in my head. JunHao’s math, as it turns out, was indeed pretty decent. After adding up all the bills at home, he found out the real figure was close: $1357.16. When he informed the same MOM officer at his next meeting, she told him that he would not be getting back the difference of $57.16. He continues, “She said ‘You declared the number. I put that down in writing. Once I’ve written it down, I can’t just scratch it out and put
down a new number. I have to fill in a new form, with all your details, and an explanation for why the figure was wrong in the first place.” He tried arguing that he had not had the time (nor a calculator) to do the arithmetic properly, but the officer charged him with irresponsibility. “She said ‘How can you not know the number? And now you want me to do extra paperwork to correct your mistake? I don’t have time for this!’ At that point how can I say anything else?” Shaking his head, JunHao tells me that his frustration “wasn’t even about the money.” Rather, he was amazed by the particularities of the system. “I don’t even blame her too much. Sure, she was not a nice person to begin with, but it’s ridiculous that there is a process. Who would’ve thought it’d be a big deal to just change a few numbers? It’s not like I was asking her to change it after my case was complete.” The pettiness of JunHao’s case reveals the ways in which the bureaucratic system at large makes it difficult for bureaucrats to serve migrants efficiently. JunHao lost $57.16 not because the bureaucrat deliberately wanted to squeeze him out of that sum, but because the structure of bureaucracy in itself discourages her from going the extra mile to help him. It is useful to recognize that individual bureaucratic action is often banal in its intent, for it allows us to better understand the impersonal violence that is built into structures of power. To do so is not to absolve individual bureaucrats of their complicity in the suffering of workers, but to “attend carefully to the precise circumstances under which [bureaucratic] writing collaborates with structural violence” (Gupta 2012: 188).

**Government of InAction**

In this section, I further extend the Arendtian concept of the ‘banality of evil’ (from that of obedience) to include bureaucratic and banal acts of inaction that stem from indifference/willful ignorance. It is important for us to pay attention to examples of state indifference in order to deconstruct the structural violence that is at work. Using the Work Injury
Compensation handbook, I demonstrate how its existence actually bolsters the Singaporean government’s inaction towards addressing the larger, structural problem of workers being exploited by employers, and inevitably ends up contributing to these imbalances in power.

About one month into my fieldwork, I met Xu ZhenBing, an employee of Hiap Yick Construction, a subcontractor that supplied workers to Ssangyong Engineering, the main contractor for Singapore’s (in)famously lavish Marina Bay Sands casino. ZhenBing came to Healthserve fairly regularly, and every time he left, I noticed Healthserve’s social workers speaking about the details of his case in rather hushed tones. I eventually found out that he had filed a Work Injury Compensation claim for two separate injuries: a growth in his throat and multiple toe fractures. He was also seeking reimbursement for his medical expenses, as he had used up his own savings to pay for treatment after his boss had refused to pay up. On November 18th, 2014, ZhenBing and a few other workers accompanied their boss to a construction worksite. As they were leaving the site, his boss hopped into the truck and started driving without looking to see if all the workers had actually climbed into the back of the vehicle. ZhenBing had only gotten one foot into the truck, before he fell backwards due to the motion of the vehicle. In what followed to be a gruesome turn of events, his boss ended up running over ZhenBing’s right foot by accident. “[There was] blood everywhere. He took me [to] see [the] company doctor in the factory. Doctor cleaned [up] the blood and gave painkiller[s],” ZhenBing tells me. Even though ZhenBing pleaded with his boss to take him to the emergency room, his boss insisted that the company doctor would be good enough. Company doctors, according to both migrant workers and NGO staff alike, are often disreputable doctors with questionable degrees and certification. Companies hire them because they are cheap and docile. In essence, their ethical and professional duties as supposed practitioners are not to their patients (migrant workers) but to the
people signing their paychecks. According to ZhenBing, this company doctor was infamous for ‘treating’ all kinds of injuries with painkillers— from headaches to sinus infections, and worse still, a case where one worker lost his wrist in a work-related accident.

On the night of the accident, ZhenBing was unable to sleep due to the persistent pain. The next day, he insisted to his boss that he check into an actual hospital. After some arguing, his boss finally relented and sent his daughter (a supervisor in the factory) to accompany ZhenBing to the hospital. The doctor at Tan Tock Seng hospital took him in for an X-Ray, and gave him a walking cast. Whilst at the hospital, ZhenBing decided to ask the doctor to take a look at his throat as well, as he had been experiencing a persistent discomfort for quite a few months now. The doctor then identified the lump in his throat, and conjectured that it was “probably due to poisonous [welding] fumes” that ZhenBing had been exposed to for years now. ZhenBing had to make 5 subsequent trips to the hospital over a period of 3 months. Like ZhenBing, he was eventually fired (2.5 months after his accident) due to his lack of ‘productivity’¹², and was waiting for his injury compensation claim with MOM to be processed. As a Healthserve employee once told me, “No one likes injured workers.”¹³

I ended up accompanying ZhenBing to one of his mediation meetings with an MOM officer after Healthserve had filed the paperwork for a compensation claim with the government. ZhenBing hoped that my proficiency in English would make the officer more sympathetic to his plight. I, in turn, leaped at the opportunity in hopes that I would be able to speak to a bureaucrat

¹² Using Marx, David Harvey has argued that “the capitalist form of accumulation rests upon a certain violence which the capitalist class inflicts upon labour” (1989: 103). Labourers have to “trade the commodity they have [their labour]” in order to accumulate capital, and a labourer is only seen as productive if s/he is a source of additional wealth to the capitalist to the extent that s/he is capable of performing what Marx has titled ‘surplus-labour’. But these laborers are also “in competition with each other for employment while the work process is under the command of the capitalist” (Harvey 1989: 103). It is clear, then, that the ball is in the court of the “capitalist.” This is especially salient in the context of Singapore as there is no shortage of migrant workers who are in need of a construction job.

¹³ The NGO employee in question was referring not just to bosses, but also to the Healthserve employees. I discovered that Healthserve’s social workers often treated migrant workers with a degree of wariness and distrust.
at length. However, the case officer, a Singaporean Chinese man, was far from impressed, and refused to let me sit in on the mediation. As ZhenBing and the officer emerged from the room half an hour later—both looking frustrated—I hurriedly explained the situation in apprehension that there may have been some form of a communication breakdown. The case officer bristled with annoyance: “Don’t meddle. You are not involved here.” Undeterred, I asked him for a few minutes of his time, to which he responded: “You study in America, right? Surely you should know that China is having a slow down. Of course our economy is also affected. I know it’s trendy to be on the side of poor workers, but don’t forget, we are all weathering this storm. Employers are also suffering—they have to live too.” While I stood in silence, unsure or what to do or say, he continued, “Look, do I feel bad for him [ZhenBing]? Of course I do; I’m a human being too. He will get back his money (the hospital fees). We’ll also give him some compensation for his injuries. My hands are tied otherwise. My job isn’t to fix the system. I’m just here to give them whatever I can.” I mention the relatively inconsequential punishments (government-issued warnings and fines) employers receive even in light of misconduct: after all, aren’t these monetary fines just slaps on the wrist—the mere costs of doing business in today’s economy? Frowning, the bureaucrat’s tone sharpens: “So what should we do? Shut them down? Put them out of business? Yes, there are some bad companies and employers out there, but what can I do? You [points to the notebook and pen in my hand] shouldn’t forget that our economy needs them. Who else is going to help us build our buildings? Those ang mohs (white people) respect my Singaporean passport because we are modern. We can’t go back.” After a brief pause, the officer gestures to our surroundings, and declares, “This is the system. We all have to make do.”
The “system,” as I have been told, exists, and will provide the worker will some sort of relief eventually. But at the same time, it is clear that the Ministry has no intention to pursue the case past the point of furnishing ZhenBing with a sum of money in order to get him to go away. There is no indication of an attempt to properly sanction dishonest bosses in order to prevent such an occurrence from happening again. To the bureaucrat, it is enough to levy a fee and/or a warning; but structural change is incommensurable with the preservation of Singapore’s reputation. The priority here is to clearly preserve Singapore’s glitzy brand as a successful, global, worlding city that, like Dubai, “attracts an array of investors” due to its promise of wealth and upward mobility (Haines 2011:171). The MOM officer’s words also reflect the “powerful story of modernity,” that Timothy Mitchell argued has everything to do with “temporality” (Mitchell in Roy 2011: 328). To the officer, the Singaporean passport grants him not only visa-free access to most countries in the world, but more importantly, respect from ang mohs. Achieving such regard is as close as a post-colonial can get to attaining modernity’s promises, and he cannot “go back.” Singapore, with its revered reputation as a global city and attendant skyscrapers, cannot possibly regress. Time, in the eyes of the modern, only marches forward in a linear fashion (Ferguson 1999). It is for this very reason that the government is not terribly invested in protecting migrant workers, at least not when it comes at the risk of damaging relations with foreign companies that have come to set up shop in Singapore. Ananya Roy (2011: 313) has written about “worlding” as a form of “speculative urbanism,” that involves not just “information technology, finance capital and real-estate development, but also the anticipatory politics of residents and transients, citizens and migrants.” In this case, the government anticipates the necessity (and practicality) of “developing a reflexive attitude toward confronting a society in flux”: It is far more beneficial to the state to somewhat placate wronged workers.
with meager sums of money than it is to blacklist and punish exploitative companies (Ong and Zhang 2008: 16). The bureaucrat’s action of inaction cannot be disentangled from the relationship between the worker and his employer. It is precisely because of the government’s refusal to greatly offend companies in fear that they will lose foreign investment that provides employers with the fluidity of following and ignoring the rules of law as they see fit (as I have denoted in both chapter 1 and in the first section of chapter 2). What remains even more unsettling is that this governmental policy of inaction is not one that maliciously plots to destroy workers’ lives, but is instead a mundane, self-interested policy of non-policy that conveniently masks the continuous, systemic exploitation of poor migrant workers. The banality of the government’s inaction serves as a grim reminder that harm does not always occur in overtly condemnable forms. They can in fact exist in the quietest of ways that often elide our attention. What is so eerily powerful and effective about Singapore’s existing system is that it maintains a veneer of structure and transparency. That Singapore even “has a system,” in contrast to the comparatively chaotic Bangladeshi and Chinese ways of governing, facilitates the rarely contested notion that Singapore is a country of law and order.

(De)Humanization through Mundane Scientific Formulas

True to the MOM officer’s word, ZhenBing did receive a notice of assessment of compensation. However, it took 4 months for MOM to process the claim. His “claim [was] found valid,” and he was subsequently compensated with SGD 5607.72. This amount was calculated according to the following formula: % of Permanent Incapacity x Average Monthly Earnings x Multiplying Factor (Ministry of Manpower WICA Handbook). ZhenBing was found to have a ‘permanent incapacity’ of 3%, his average monthly salary was $1,416.09, and his multiplying
factor was 132. I will first tackle the ‘science’ behind the ‘multiplying factor’ before proceeding to the technical details of one’s “permanent incapacity.” The multiplying factor is decided by one’s age; the older a worker, the lower his ‘multiplying factor’ will be. The idea is that an older worker will have lost less than a younger counterpart, as the younger person is assumed to have more years of productivity left in him. Below is a chart from Page 26 of the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA) handbook that demonstrates how multiplying factors are decided.

Table 1. Table of Age Multiplying Factor. Scanned by author from Work Injury Compensation Workbook.
While one can perhaps understand the slightly disturbing, but unfortunately normalized, utilitarian logic of productivity, the compensation act does not tell us how the government has decided upon those numbers. For example, why is 140 assigned to someone who is 42 years old? Such a “production of arbitrariness,” Gupta has argued, allows the state to maintain its façade as “rational” (2012: 14). Indeed, the handbook, armed with its litany of charts, tables, lists, and algorithmic formulas, imparts the appearance of total rationalism, but further inspection discharges the unexplained gaps in logic. And yet, such arbitrariness is not arbitrary in its consequences; rather, it constitutes the very mechanisms required to decide who gets what, and when (Gupta 2012: 24).

I flipped to the last page of ZhenBing’s assessment in an attempt to understand why he was found to be “3% permanently incapacitated.” In accordance to the WICA, one’s percentage of permanent incapacity is “based on [the patient’s] doctor’s assessment after the employee’s medical condition stabilizes. The doctor makes the assessment based on a set of guidelines in the ‘Guide to the Assessment of Traumatic Injuries and Occupational Diseases for Workmen’s Compensation’” (WICA 2011: 7). ZhenBing’s doctor had decided that he was 3% permanently incapacitated in total, 2% for the fracture on his big toe, and 1% for his second toe.

The Ministry followed up with the hospital on April 4th, 2015, and inquired on the following:

i) If there is a possible duplication of award for right big toe fracture 2% and restriction of movement right big toe 1%; ii) If yes, please advise if you are agreeable to the final Permanent Incapacity (PI) Award of 2% for right big toe; iii) If assessment for right second toe injury (1% PI) is related to accident on November 18th, 2014 as employer only reported right big toe injury; iv) Confirm the final award solely for injury resulting from the accident on November 18th, 2014.” The questions above reveal the level of precision and caution that the government takes to ensure the worker is compensated with the ‘correct’ amount—no more, and no less. As such, the worker is defined solely through his specific anatomy—from his “right big toe” to his “right second toe.”
In this instance, ZhenBing’s two toes are somehow worth “3%” of his body. The hospital responded 2 months later to say that the 3% PI assessment was not in fact a “duplicate” award. The breakdown was as follows: “2% (Note: phalangeal fracture with angulation= 2% page 52 subsection Big toe); 1% (Note: Active extension at MTPJ of right second toe 0-30 degree= 1% page 47 subsection (1a)).” The assessment of the second toe on the right foot was deemed as “related to [the] accident on November 18th, 2014.” Seth Holmes, following Anspach (1988) and Good (1994), has written about how physicians have been “trained to focus on biological and behavioral inputs into health,” instead of seeing patients as whole, human beings with social, economic, and political backgrounds (Holmes 2012: 6). ZhenBing, in this instance, is not viewed (by both physicians and bureaucrats) contextually as a worker who has suffered physical and psychological harm, nor someone who has lost his job because of his accident, nor a person with a family to feed. Writing of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Adriana Petryna (2003) details the ways in which Ukrainian sufferers must prove their sickness in order to become eligible for biomedical resources and human rights. As she describes, “the damaged biology of a population has become the grounds for social membership and the basis for staking citizenship claims” (Petryna 2003: 5). Citizen-sufferers are thus defined according to the linkages they can form between their biology and the state. While not citizens, migrant workers, too, are cognizant of the troubling irony that governs their situations. As ZhenBing recalls humiliating experiences in the hospital where his doctor would often patronize him, he tells me he finds himself alternating between the desire for his health to improve and for it to plummet. On one hand, he does not wish to endure the chronic pain of a leg injury, but on the other hand, it is only sickness that can persuade the government to give him the largest financial compensation package.

While MOM officers do not process workers’ cases with the malicious intent to
dehumanize them, its scientific language and scope still ends up doing so. There is no consideration whatsoever of how those two toes have affected the rest of his being—he is not compensated for anything else but that physical injury. Written bureaucratic discourse is infamous for its vague and passive characterizations. As Charrow (1982: 183) puts it, “the effect is to create an impersonal tone, and to eliminate information about who is responsible for what.” One might be able to say that there is a productive capacity to such discourse. Writing about a worker’s toes instead of his personhood produces a stripped down image of bodily injury that decontextualizes trauma, and hereby allows bureaucrats to distance themselves from the blatant injustices workers suffer and the consequential roles their (in)action play in intensifying that pain.

To the worker, however, a toe fracture isn’t just an injury. It is representative of one’s personhood. As I spoke with dozens of injured workers during my fieldwork, I noticed that many workers carried around stacks of papers with them. Whenever I asked them to contextualize their injuries, most would whip out their employment contracts, medical bills and MOM papers of correspondence and documentation. These papers serve not only as receipts in order to claim monetary reimbursement from the government, but also as a record of one’s trauma and grievances. In ZhenBing’s words, “Sometimes I can’t believe this is my life. I don’t understand how I got here. How did I become this useless person who has to hope for the best? I never used to rely on anyone. I’ve worked hard all my life. Did you know I worked in Sudan for two years?” I shook my head. ZhenBing continues, “Yes, two years. The work was just as hard as it is here. I left because I heard Singapore paid better. I also couldn’t tolerate the sun. [smiles slightly] You complain about the heat here all the time, but you haven’t experienced real sun.” After a brief pause, he looks at the stack of papers in his hand, and waves them slightly in the air: “Sometimes
I want to forget it all, and pretend this is just a bad dream, but these [documents] force me to remember. This is who I am now. I’m not a worker anymore. I’m someone who has to rely on the goodwill of strangers [both Healthserve’s and the Singaporean government], while my wife and son are at home.” The accretion of papers reflects a devastating transformation of identity, as ZhenBing grapples with his limited possibilities. I am reminded of Andrea Muehlebach’s (2011: 69) sensitive portrayal of the debilitating sense of “absolute non-usefulness” that accompanied Italian workers who were left unemployed after factories had downsized. She describes the existential crises many suffered after “spend[ing] a lifetime constructing their sense of self through work” (Muehlebach ibid). ZhenBing, who had been working since he was 14 years old, cannot quite accept that he can’t be “a worker anymore [my emphasis].” The loss of one’s identity, then, is also a temporal struggle with atemporality. In a modern world of linearity where we are so fixated on the future—on what comes next—there is inevitably a crisis of personhood when we cannot see the path forward; we are thus unable to place ourselves temporally in a linear scale of development. And yet, these papers cannot just represent searing losses, but also paradoxically must signify hope. After all, ZhenBing continues to pursue his financial settlement claim by hanging onto these bills and governmental correspondence papers in the hopes that he will get something. The possibilities for the future, then, end and begin with these written documents, as they continue to haunt each other.

Later, I peered at ZhenBing’s assessment papers while he voiced his concerns: “I don’t know if I should appeal. 3% (% of Permanent Incapacity) is so low. They didn’t even give me anything for my throat.” The dilemma to decide whether or not to submit an appeal is a serious one. The appeals process is a pricey undertaking that offers no guarantees or assurances. The objecting party will have to “pay the Medical Board fee of $357 and the costs of any medical
tests required by the Work Injury Compensation Medical Board” that comprises of “two senior from restructured hospitals” (WICA 2011: 16). Lastly, the Board has the ability to increase, deduct, or maintain the compensation awarded, depending on their “final assessment” (ibid). There is also no timeline provided as to how long the appeals process will take. And yet, the initial notice of assessment that ZhenBing received stipulates that “any party who wishes to dispute this assessment must give notice of his objection using the attached prescribed form, stating PRECISELY all grounds of objection WITHIN 14 DAYS from the date of service of this Notice. The Ministry will inform all parties if an objection is received. Any ground of objection received outside this 14-day period shall be disregarded.” It is striking that the Ministry of Manpower demands an immediate reply from any party who wishes to object to the assessment, but places no such strict timelines on the functioning of its bureaucracy or on the doctors who are to make these important permanent incapacity assessments. As noted above, ZhenBing’s doctor only responded to the Ministry’s query two months after the letter was mailed, despite the fact that the officer had specifically requested a response “within 14 days from the date of this letter.” Due to this delay, ZhenBing was forced to sit idly by, without a job and an attendant salary, while he awaited his uncertain fate. He had to “borrow [money] from relatives” to keep himself afloat. Once again, we witness banal, ‘normal’, bureaucratic practices that do not specifically have the intention to harm anyone, but inevitably force the powerless to pay the price. Dates and deadlines have the fluid and therefore productive power to enable bureaucrats to create and apply rules as they see fit.

(Non)Advocacy

The relationship between the migrant worker and the bureaucrat, as delineated above, is
not static. I continue to thread the entanglements and precarious relations between the different stakeholders in this assemblage of labor by considering the ways in which NGO staff workers influence the Singaporean government’s policies toward migrant workers. In this section I demonstrate that Healthserve’s staff does an admirable job of educating the Singaporean public and assisting migrant workers with their grievances against their employers, but deliberately abstains from political advocacy work in order to maintain its comfortable relationship with the government. In this way, Healthserve’s (limited) involvement—for better or for worse—shapes possibilities of justice for the migrant worker.

Healthserve is a small, non-governmental organization that provides various services to migrant workers, from assigning case workers to help with governmental claims, to running a heavily subsidized clinic twice a week that charges a flat fee of SGD $5 (for both consultation and medicine). The organization also runs a daily meal program, where somewhere between 20-25 migrant workers are provided with lunch and dinner at no cost, and occasional legal and counseling services for workers, depending on the availability of pro-bono lawyers/volunteers. Lastly, Healthserve organizes different community events at least once a month, from carnivals to movie screenings. These events are designed to encourage “volunteers and migrants to interact and get to know each other better.”

On my very first day of fieldwork, I met the executive director, Colin, who provided me with a quick tour of the organization’s premises. We had barely spoken for all of a few minutes, before he mentioned that Healthserve was different from the other more vocal (and thus, well-known) NGOs in town, HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) and TWC2 (Transient Workers Count Too). Healthserve, according to Colin, is decidedly “not [an] activist” organization. “We don’t believe in bashing the government like HOME and TWC2;
we’re more moderate. Instead, we think it’s useful to work with the government to get things done. All this yelling and screaming can’t do much. Yes, you get a lot of press coverage and attention, but you just end up offending the party you’re trying to get on your side,” Colin tells me. This conflation of activism with self-indulgent vitriol would be a recurring theme throughout my time at Healthserve.

Every month or so, the largest room in Healthserve’s office transforms into a makeshift avenue for an informal dinner party. A few representatives from Healthserve’s staff will stay past working hours to treat 15 or so migrant workers to a dinner. Deborah and Eric, Healthserve’s case worker and social events coordinator respectively, catered Indian food from a nearby restaurant, and we drove over in a large van to pick up the food. During the car ride, Eric remarks to Deb that Healthserve had just received another large donation—approximately SGD 300,000. “So much money [coming in] lately. [chuckles] Don’t know what we’re going to do with it,” he jokes, “Maybe we can buy another van.” I quickly learned that Healthserve has been receiving a slew of donations from different foundations and corporations. According to Eric, this money has essentially left the two large migrant-focused NGOs mentioned above, HOME and TWC2, and flowed into Healthserve. Deb, having left HOME for Healthserve a month ago, confirms her former employer’s monetary struggles. Puzzled, I asked Eric if he knew why donors would choose to contribute to a much smaller (and newer) NGO, instead of the two most prominent local NGOs in Singapore. He replies that it’s because “they [HOME and TWC2] are too vocal! Jolovan [the director of HOME] has been going to the media, talking loudly, drawing attention to himself.”

Indeed, Jolovan had written a public letter on Facebook to acting Minister of Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin in 2013. After detailing a long list of the Ministry’s policies that Wham asserts
have “resulted in serious human rights violations,” he closes with scathing indictment that “even though we [HOME] have again and again surfaced issues that have been prominently reported in the news in the past month to your Ministry, the same old problems continue to fester, and your Ministry continues to issue platitudes to project a good but ultimately empty image of itself.”

This was not the first skirmish between HOME and MOM. In 2012, MOM released a public note on Facebook critiquing HOME’s methods: “Engagement needs to be carried out in a professional manner based on mutual respect, trust and within the law. MOM has always reiterated to NGOs that there are proper and ready channels for workers to address their employment disputes including working with MOM or their trade unions. We encourage NGOs that know of workers who need help to refer them to MOM.” While TWC2 has not attracted as much attention in the public sphere, it certainly has not shied away from criticizing the Ministry either. These are just a few examples of the headlines on TWC2’s websites: “MOM tough on worker, lets employer run rings around laws,” “MOM needs to be more proactive than reactive over salary complains by foreign workers,” and “MOM Gives Excuse that Workers Can Always Request for Wages through Bank.”

Unlike HOME and TWC2, Healthserve refrains from overtly political statements. Healthserve’s website and social media websites are devoted to the services they provide: news about the opening of a dental clinic, community events, projects, etc. During a private conversation with Deb a few weeks later, she tells me frankly that Healthserve “prefers not to rock the boat.” The organization will continue to provide legal and medical services, but does not wish to entrench itself too deeply in politics. “Well, when your Board of Directors are people with ties to powerful people in the government, it isn’t terribly surprising.” After some sleuthing on the Internet, I discover that the Chairwoman of the Finance and Fund Raising Committee
serves as the Executive Director of the Fullerton Asset Fund Management Company, a unit of the government owned investment company, Temasek Holdings. Furthermore, the Chairman of the HR Committee is a partner at Lee and Lee, a law firm founded by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that handles all housing contracts for government-owned apartments, and specializes in representing “licensed housing developers in the sale of residential housing developments acting and assisting in transactions involving acquisition and disposal of major commercial buildings in Singapore.” With a Board that is intimately connected to private companies that serve the interests of the government and real-estate developers, it is not unexpected that Healthserve would choose to maintain a tone of ‘neutrality’ in the public sphere. It is not my intention to denounce Healthserve in absolute terms—from what I have witnessed, there is much to recommend in the NGO’s provision of subsidized healthcare, for example. However, it is also important to examine the ways in which Healthserve’s actions might preserve the status quo of injustice. As such, I analyze Healthserve’s attitude toward injured workers in the following pages in order to argue that the NGO operates as a palliative care center, and therefore inevitably contributes to the suffering of workers the organization wishes to alleviate.

Outside Healthserve’s office lays a collection of plastic chairs that are meant for injured migrant workers who ‘hang out’ at Healthserve’s quarters, while they wait for their bureaucratic claims to be processed. I had just started talking to an injured Chinese worker, ZhanWei, when Eric walks up to us. In a tone of clear irritation, Eric remarks to ZhanWei in Mandarin, “wah, you’re still here?!” ZhanWei sheepishly nods his head as he acknowledges Eric’s presence. The encounter escalates in tension when Eric begins to chastise ZhanWei for “dragging his feet.” Apparently ZhanWei has “put off returning to China” for 6 months. Eric tells ZhanWei to “go home” and walks into the office. Cheeks coloring with embarrassment, ZhanWei excuses himself
to make a phone call. I approach Eric a little later, during which time he explains that ZhanWei had chosen not to file a claim with the government, but instead elected to hire a pro-bono lawyer in the hopes of obtaining a larger settlement. The judge had ruled against ZhanWei a few months ago, and ZhanWei was in the process of appealing. The appeals process, like all other legal proceedings, is a lengthy one, and most workers who elect to go through this route often return home, while their lawyers litigate on their behalf from Singapore. ZhanWei, however, has deviated from this tradition.

Eric tells me: “There are many migrants who just want to stay here. They don’t have to go to work, and we will feed them twice a day. This one is especially bad—dragging his feet for so many months even after I’ve scolded him so many times!” Having spoken to many workers who have been anxiously waiting to return to their loved ones, I asked Eric why ZhanWei wouldn’t want to go back to China. “That’s because he has so many problems there! Did you know he is divorced? Yeah, his wife left him for another man… She took their son with her. He also has money problems. There are loansharks waiting for him. He must fear for his life. I wouldn’t want to go back either.” In a remarkable display of apathy, Eric unfeelingly insists that ZhanWei “just has to face the music.” After all, “nobody asked him [ZhanWei] to borrow money from loansharks. [He is] asking for trouble! Now he has to pay the price.” Sensing my discomfort, Eric adds that he does “feel bad, but Healthserve simply can’t bear the burden any longer. There are too many other workers out there who need our help more.” It is clear that humanitarian work involves politicized decision-making, as humanitarian workers often calibrate who is most ‘worthy’ to receive compassion and aid (Fassin 2011). Because ZhanWei had committed what Eric views as a moral transgression by borrowing money from a loanshark, he is thereby deemed unworthy—or, at the very least, less worthy than—of Healthserve’s assistance.
When I asked Colin about this notion of migrant workers over-staying their welcome at the NGO, he responds candidly, “Our job is to facilitate the process of getting them home [my emphasis]. They run into trouble—they are injured, they don’t get their wages—so they come to us. We help them file whatever claims they need. We let them know what their best options are. Then we encourage them to go home.” Why the rush to send them packing? “Look… We’ve done our jobs. We’ve done our civic duty. I understand that we [Singaporeans] are the ones who need these workers [to build our infrastructure]. Of course it only feels right that we give back. So we feed them, we help them. But I don’t think it’s fair for them to expect more.” I ask Colin why not. What are Singapore’s responsibilities toward these workers? He responds rather irritably, “Why is the responsibility always on us? Why aren’t their countries [Bangladesh and China] doing more to protect their workers? I guess this is the difference in development. I know that if I were in trouble working overseas, I would expect my government to help me. And I think my embassy would.” Colin’s acknowledgment that migrant workers are responsible for the literal construction of Singapore as a global city reveals the mixture of guilt and discomfort he feels as a Singaporean citizen. The exploitation of workers is not a coincidence; even though Singapore markets itself as a city of possibilities, its success depends on the very exploitation of the workers that build the city. Partha Chatterjee rightly notes that such a project of nation-building is fragile, as it must “keep the contradictions between capital and the people in perpetual suspension” (Chatterjee 1986: 168). It is this uneasiness that propels Eric and Colin to encourage the return of workers to their home countries. After workers have been fed, their claims have been filed, there is nothing more that Singapore owes. She has paid her debt. As Eric tells me a few weeks later, “At least Singapore is doing something. We have a system. Is the system perfect? No, of course not! But it’s better than having no system at all—you think China has a
system? Activists are always so eager to paint us in a bad light, but at least we try to give them some compensation. You can be sure Bangladesh isn’t doing anything for their citizens.” Eric’s message is clear: Healthserve will provide palliative care, but the onus is on the governments of China and Bangladesh to enact any form of structural change.

This chapter has argued for the importance of understanding the injustices of the migrant labor system in Singapore through a lens of assemblages. While one might be tempted to attribute most of the blame to immoral employers, it is imperative that we consider the other actors (bureaucrats, NGO workers, developers) that also contribute to the perpetuation of sustained inequality. I have further argued for the need to take seriously Hannah Arendt’s call that we examine the mundanity of the everyday, and contend that the grievous inequalities and pain that vulnerable workers’ experience are not the results of diabolical plans, but the consequences of an assemblage of actors who wilfully ignore and discard visible signs of inequality in order to survive in an age of millennial capitalism. Individuals often do not act in an overly deterministic manner of concocting plans for the specific purpose of hurting the vulnerable, but instead, often act by not acting, wilfully ignoring the inequalities before their very eyes, and consequently contributing to an untenably oppressive system that often strips the migrant worker of his (already limited) options. This chapter thus contributes to current anthropological literature that has called for a destabilization of the larger, shadowy, all-knowing figure of the state. There is indeed no monolithic state that singularly governs this system of inequality. Rather, a complex network of actors/actants/actions renders it difficult to apportion blame neatly. Like Hydra the mythical Greek snake that possessed more heads than the vase-painters could paint, the system that migrant workers have to endure is a complex, multi-faceted
one that cannot be easily dismantled, and forces us to reckon with the way we think about the nature of political action and justice.
Chapter 3. ImPossibilities: Waiting and Hoping

Where Do We Go From Here?

The question of hope[lessness] is one that is pertinent to our times. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the precarity and blatant inequality that migrant workers experience is not a problem that can be solved easily. And yet, I want to be explicit in clarifying that my formulation of an assemblage of transnational labor is not meant to be a theoretical project that precludes all possibilities. Nor is it a project that prescribes solutions to what I contend to be a complex intertwining of social actors and institutions. Rather, I respond to the question of possibilities (and their limitations) by dwelling on the affective parameters of hope. I take seriously Vincent Crapanzano’s call for anthropologists to attend to hope as a form of social analysis by “delineat[ing] some of the parameters of what we take to be hope and to reflect on its possible usage in ethnographic and other cultural and psychological descriptions—in other words, to look critically (in so far as that is possible) at the discursive and metadiscursive range of ‘hope’” (2003:4). There have been a number of intellectuals who have written about hope as a form of possibility that can subvert global capitalism from within. Through an analytical lens that aims to expose the cracks—and ensuing openings—of capitalism, Frederic Jameson seeks to uncover utopian material in the midst of mass culture (Jameson 1991; see also Robertson 1992, Ivy 1995: 243–247;), while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri consider the emancipatory potential in the rhetoric of globalization itself (Hardt and Negri 2000; Karatani 2003; see also Turner 2002:76–77). In a search for an alternative to global capitalism, David Harvey (2000:17), following Gramsci, declares that “the inability to find an ‘optimism of the intellect’” only impedes possibility for progressive politics. These studies therefore share the common endeavor for a
model of hope. I do not purport to undertake such a daunting task; rather, I hope to urge the
reader to reconsider what it means to hope in a world that where hope seems to be less possible
each day—to engage in a theoretical exploration of hope as “category of social and
psychological analysis” (Crpanzano 2003: 3).

First, I explore the temporal dimensions of hope through conversations with Healthserve
staff. I argue that Healthserve engages in the ‘deferral of hope’ as a way to cope with their guilt
and discomfort. Secondly, I turn to ‘waiting’ as an analytical frame in order to conceptualize the
possibilities of hope for migrant workers. As workers pass time by waiting, they engage in a
contradictory process of simultaneous despair and optimism.

The Deferral of Hope

Every Friday afternoon, Healthserve brings in a therapist to counsel migrant workers.
Jessica is a tall and fashionably dressed woman. After agreeing to let me sit in on her session
with a Chinese worker named Wang DaShan, she ushers us both into an air-conditioned room,
and takes out a notebook and pen. The session commences with a quick exchange of pleasantries
and introductions. “DaShan, last week, you were very upset and angry. Everything in your life
was not going well—your foot injury was causing you pain, and you were obviously angry with
MOM. But we concluded the session with a homework assignment, where I asked you to move
beyond anger. To think about the future.” Jessica summarizes in Mandarin. DaShan nods.
Smiling encouragingly, Jessica asks, “So how do you feel today?” The room is silent, as DaShan
appears to weigh his answer carefully. “Well, I’m still frustrated. I had a meeting with an MOM
officer yesterday, and he refused to see the pictures I had taken of my work site. I know what the
government is trying to do. They’re just trying to buy me out. Offer some money and pretend the problem is fixed.” The smile on Jessica’s face slips, and she holds up her hand to interrupt him.

“Mhmm, I understand. I understand your frustration. But again, you have to try to move past this. You can’t keep holding onto this anger. It’s not good for you,” she says.

“I’m just trying to explain the situation to you,” DaShan replies. Jessica sighs, “I think you shouldn’t go back to MOM. You have obviously made the officer unhappy, and going back is not going to help your case either. You have to learn to be less combative. More cooperative and agreeable.”

An awkward silence fills the room once more, before Jessica finally speaks. “Let’s try this again. DaShan, I want you to tell me about your home. [looks at her notes] You’re from Shaanxi, are you not? What is it like there? What are you looking forward to when you finally get to go home?”

Looking down at his feet, DaShan responds reluctantly, “My son is there. He’s 13-years old. My wife called last week to say he seems to be doing well in school.” There is a palpable shift in atmosphere, and Jessica’s face brightens. He is moving in the right direction.

“Good! Your son sounds like a delight! Now, okay, let’s go over what I assigned you to think about last week.” She turns to me to explain, “I asked him to think of three different job scenarios for when he goes back home. What can you imagine doing?”

DaShan obliges, and fishes for the piece of paper in his bag. He has written down these possibilities: “The first option is to start my own business. Right now I am the one creating all the steel rods for my boss. I do all of the welding. So maybe I can start something at home.”

Nodding her head while jotting down notes, Jessica responds, “Good, I’m glad you’re starting to think about this. It’s important to move forward. To let go of the bitterness. What else?” “The second option is to go into the agriculture business. My wife and parents do some light subsistence farming now, but maybe I can expand it into something else?” I sense the hint of doubt creeping into DaShan’s speech, as he moves into the final (brief) scenario: “The only other
thing I could think of is fishing. That’s it.” Jessica either does not notice, or chooses to ignore DaShan’s hesitance. Instead, she tells him, “Okay, now that you have these three possibilities, let’s discuss further. Which would you prefer to do?” DaShan indicates that he would prefer to start his own steel business, “I already know how to weld. At least I wouldn’t have to learn how to do that.” At this point, DaShan’s cell phone rings, and he leaves the room to take the call.

I turn to ask Jessica why she volunteers with Healthserve. Switching to English, she tells me,

“These migrants need help, not just material assistance, but also emotional and spiritual support. How else are they going to be able to live? Yes, we can provide them with money for transportation. We can give them food. But there is nothing here [Singapore] for them anymore. This part of their journey is over, so there’s no point crying over spilt milk. Sooner or later they must return home. And so we are preparing for that. We are giving them mental preparation for the future. Some hope.”

“And hope involves… home? Why is that?” I ask.

Folding back her arms, Jessica nods, “Yes, where else? What else can we offer them? They came to Singapore hoping to make a comfortable living for their family. It’s so sad. He was painting something and fell from 4 stories and broke his back. He’s got chronic back pain—needs to sit down after standing for a couple of hours. MOM will give him some money, and he’ll have to go home. My concern is that he doesn’t seem to be thinking about that. He isn’t thinking about life after the compensation kicks in. He is only focusing on the present. MOM this. MOM that. But he needs to think about the future. What is he going to make of his life? [pauses] And besides, this is the most we can do for him. To help him plan for the future. Because we both know the future isn’t here.”

Before I could respond, DaShan returns to the room, and we resume the counselling session. As Jessica continues to urge him to let go of his resentment and look ahead, DaShan remarks that he isn’t sure of how he will be able to realize any of the three scenarios we have just discussed. “Where am I going to get the funds to do any of this? It’s true that I have the skills to do the welding… But where is my capital? And how I am going to expand the farm? My family barely produces enough crops for our own consumption—how are we going to turn a profit?”
Sensing DaShan’s distress, Jessica coaxes him not to spiral down the rabbit hole of despair, “You cannot think that way! Don’t forget, you will have some money from the government once your case is closed. The question is just whether or not you should spend it on this venture. Now, we are unfortunately out of time today, but I want you to think about this more. Who can you talk to back home? Can you start a partnership with someone. I suggest you write down a plan for all of these scenarios. You need some sort of balance sheet in order to figure out the respective costs. That is the best way to make a decision.”

Hope, according to Jessica, involves thinking toward the future. DaShan must forget his past—the pain of breaking his back and its ensuing consequences. It is only by looking to the future that his present will become more tolerable; planning for a life after Singapore might ease the pain of injustice he is currently experiencing. And yet, there is more than just temporality at stake here. Jessica’s pep talk consistently melds the future with China. As she tells me, “the future [for DaShan] isn’t here” in Singapore. Any hope for a better life lies in China—even though the search of a better life is precisely why he had left his home in the first place. It does not seem to occur to Jessica that DaShan is unlikely to realise his dreams at home. Neither does it seem to matter to her that DaShan does not seem enthused about the future. After all, what is his future? From Jessica’s perspective, hope is thereby deferred—it is always to come. It is precisely this temporal quality of hope that allows Healthserve’s staff and volunteers to cope with their own discomfort and feelings of hopelessness. During one of my conversations with Colin, he reiterates the claim that workers would be “better off going home.” Irritated by what I perceived to be an insensitive push to rid Healthserve of all migrant workers, I ask him if this was an acknowledgment that Singapore has failed to fulfill its glamorous promises of a better life. He shoots me a look of surprise, and offers a frank response in return: “Yes. I think we have
all let them down to a certain degree—all the governments and even Singaporeans in general. It’s why I left my job as a pastor to work at Healthserve. I want to make a difference because I’ve already benefited from their [workers’] labor. The least I can do is give something back.” A little taken-aback by his candor, I ask Colin why he thinks workers would be better off at home, especially when one considers the fact that workers had no choice but to leave their families to make the trek to Singapore in the first place. After a brief pause, he acknowledges that he isn’t sure if workers will have more comfortable lives when they go home. Indeed, there is no evidence that would suggest life in Bangladesh and China today would be considerably different from the very conditions workers had left. In a rare moment of vulnerable introspection, Colin admits that he “prefer[s] to believe that [workers] will be luckier this time around.” After all, “how much misfortune can one have?” Thus, the act of deferring migrant workers’ hopes back to the countries they came from is to alleviate one’s guilt and preserve one’s hope that the suffering of workers will not be for naught. It is to acknowledge and cope with the discomfort of our complicity.

Waiting

Waiting is a universal occurrence that punctuates modern everyday life. It is an activity that often encompasses an anticipation for something. We have always waited for rain, sunshine, births, deaths, etc. And yet, waiting in the modern twenty-first century also involves what Craig Jeffrey (2010: 3) has called “the increasing regimentation and bureaucratization of time”—traffic jams, hospitals, bureaucratic paperwork, etc. There is an existing collection of literature surrounding waiting as a relational social condition, but they are often written about vis-à-vis powerful political institutions, such as the nation-state. Javier Auyero (2011: 5) has argued that
poor people’s waiting experiences at welfare offices reflect the state’s intentions to mold the poor as compliant “patients of the state.” waiting something that Javier Auyero has also depicted in his ethnography of poor people’s waiting experiences at welfare offices. But sometimes, we simply wait. In a slightly different formulation of temporal politics, Jeffrey (2010) contests Partha Chatterjee’s (2004) theorization of political society as inherently distinct from civil society by arguing that waiting may be the social soil in which a progressive politics can bloom. For Jeffrey, waiting is thus not aimless self-pity, but a purposeful form of politics where men wait for returns from higher education in order to secure caste and class privilege. In his analysis of the immigrants yearning to return home, Salim Lakha (2009) conceptualizes waiting as a form of resistance. According to Lakha (2009: 8), the process of waiting to return home is not a temporal period of passive yearning, but an active mode of political resistance against “the various assimilationist social processes to which the immigrant is subjected in the country of immigration.”

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Healthserve often urges migrant workers to return home as soon as possible—once their cases with the Ministry of Manpower are resolved. While most workers share this sentiment, there are quite a few who are more hesitant about the notion of ‘going home’. To Healthserve’s chagrin, these workers choose to delay their cases for as long as possible by refusing to accept proffered settlement offers. As Colin once remarked to me, “They aren’t going to get much better offers. I don’t know what they are waiting for!” Perhaps the answer is that they are simply waiting. The waiting I am speaking of can be described as a form of “timepass,” but unlike Craig Jeffrey’s (2010) usage, I do not refer to waiting as basis for political mobilization. Nor do I focus my attention on waiting as a form of politics vis-à-vis the state. Instead, I understand it as an affective mode of living. It is this
particular phenomenon of waiting for waiting’s sake that I hope to capture. Why do migrant workers wait? How does life occur in the moment of waiting? I argue that waiting is a contradictory and simultaneously affective process of possibility and despair. While waiting often induces frustration and fear, it is also a crucial means of survival. It is by recognising this contradiction that might allow us to better comprehend the notion of hope in the lives of migrant workers.

A couple of afternoons after his counselling session with Jessica, I ask DaShan if there was any news regarding his case. He tells me he has received a SGD$6,000 settlement offer from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) for his back, but he isn’t satisfied with the number of points awarded (4). “I may never work again, and this is my retirement fund? You can be sure I’m going to appeal.” He shakes his head and we sink into a tentative silence. In an attempt to make conversation, I ask DaShan about his family. How was his son doing? I wait for him to declare how much he missed his son, but an expression of bittersweet pensiveness colors his face, and he tells how lucky I am: “What I would give to be young again.” Uncertain of what he meant, I ask him why. An even longer silence ensues. Studiously avoiding my gaze, DaShan confides that even though he is happy that his son seems to be doing well, he cannot help but think about the time he has lost with his son: “I don’t really recognize him.” 

Having worked in Sudan for two years before moving to Singapore, his son had been conceived while he was between jobs. During his 13 years in Singapore, DaShan has returned to China for only 6 trips—a period of 4 months in total. “I call home a lot, and I speak to my wife and son, but I don’t really know what’s happening,” he tells me, “With long-distance phone charges, I can only afford to ask him

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14 The word recognize in this context does not refer to one’s appearance. In Chinese, to ‘recognize’ someone is to know/understand them.
if he’s been eating and sleeping well. Doing well in school.” Pausing slightly, DaShan remarks, “You can’t really know someone without observing the small details. I’m not there to observe the small details. When it comes down to it, I am only his father by name. We don’t really know each other.”

I had expected to hear nostalgic narratives of his son, and yet I eventually realized that memories of his son are ultimately tied to memories of the present—they are painful reminders of his bleak present in Singapore. Talking of his son reminds DaShan of the fact that he has not succeeded in providing his son with a better future, and will likely be unable to do so. The profound loss DaShan experiences—not being able to witness his son growing up—is unfortunately not unique. My conversations with other Chinese and Bangladeshi workers about their home lives also often involved sad recollections of the loss of time that unavoidably comes with the life of being a migrant worker. DaShan tells me, “I know you must think I’m weird. For sitting here, doing nothing. They’re [Healthserve] so annoyed with me, they think I’m sucking up their resources, but it’s not that I don’t want to go home. I do want to go back! But I can’t. I’m not sure of what I will find. I’m not sure of how my son will react when he sees me. I’ve failed him. I’m only 40-years old and I don’t know if I’ll be able to work anymore. Who’s going to hire a guy who can’t even stand up for more than two hours at a time? How can I go home?”

Returning home, then, can never quite be a joyful affair, as you eventually discover the unrecoverable things you have missed—both the large and small details. It is even more difficult when one has to return home with a broken body and the possibility of permanent unemployment. As Ferguson argues, “go[ing] back with any degree of economic or social success requires both economic resources and social preparation” (1999: 127). Homecoming is

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15 Chinese parents often inquire after the health of their children. A typical conversation starter is to ask the person with whom you are conversing if they have eaten.
thus not “something people can *always* do if wage-earning *fails*, [but] is something they can do *only* if wage-earning *succeeds*” (ibid).

Later conversations with DaShan did involve happier, more wistful accounts of the past, but those memories were always of his childhood. Collecting fragrant bamboo leaves as he helped his mother make sticky rice dumplings during the Duanwu Festival (端午节). Playing with his brother’s fish by scooping them up in his hands, and inevitably killing them in the process. Debating which sweet treat to buy with his weekly pocket money. There is a poignant sweetness to these nostalgic memories. Perhaps that is because they are of simpler times—times when DaShan didn’t have to worry constantly about the future. Indeed, the questions of our times seem to be “Where did all the time go? When did things change so much?”

The notable dichotomy between DaShan’s considerably carefree memories of his childhood and sadder recollections of the distant relationship he has with his son reflects his life as a modern. The modern’s life is one incredibly sensitive to time. They have an awareness of accelerated time. They try to cling onto some fragments of the past, as DaShan does with his childhood memories, while mourning the inevitable losses that have come their way. They, like other moderns, marvel at the changes in their world and the foreignness of their life sometimes. They wonder at the differences between the past and the present, and experience the sharpness of these gaps. They inhabit a liminal space of unbelonging. It is perhaps this hyperawareness of temporality that explains why DaShan waits. Everyday, he walks to Healthserve for lunch. He sits on the plastic chairs outside of Healthserve’s office. He chats with other Chinese workers. He strolls around the compound. He hangs out. He waits. I ask him whether he is waiting for anything in particular—perhaps a higher settlement offer from the government? He shakes his head. “It’s not really about that… I’m not expecting [期待] anything. I’m just waiting [等待]."
Passing time.” Seeing the look of confusion on my face, he elaborates, “Being here means I won’t have to see the look of disappointment on my family’s faces. The worry.” With a humourless laugh, he adds, “I know, I’m a coward. But maybe it’s better this way. At least I won’t be a burden to them. No one likes dealing with sick people. I can only imagine how difficult it will be for my wife to hear about me complain of back pain.” Waiting for waiting’s sake is thus a form of survival; it is not an anticipatory politics that provides one with material comfort, but one that presents the illusion of stopping time.

Lauren Berlant’s (2011) conception of “cruel optimism” is helpful in exploring the difficulty we experience in leaving behind certain forms of life that do not seem to work anymore. For Berlant (2011: 24), “cruel optimism” is a relational force wherein individuals are unable to detach themselves from the “compromised conditions of possibility” that are embedded within objects of desire, even if said desires hinder the individual from flourishing and achieving such promises. The individual therefore produces close attachments to certain objects that are usually less about the objects themselves, but more about “the cluster of desires and affects we can manage to keep magnetized to them” (Berlant 2011: 21). In DaShan’s case, remaining in Singapore sustains his proximity to his desire for a better life. Even though he is no longer able to work due to his back injury, his physical presence in Singapore delays the inevitable reality that he will have to return home without the possibility of coming back. It is, however, cruel in that the continuous attachment to impossible hopes inevitably roots him in place—both mentally and physically—by preventing him from moving on, but also paradoxically poses a source of toxic comfort that allows for him to “keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant ibid). As DaShan waits in Singapore, his proximity to his object of desire [making money in Singapore] represents the unlikely, but still possible, possibility of happiness.
Waiting is therefore a form of cruel optimism—a necessary production of “negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently” (Berlant 2011:14).

Contradiction

Waiting is also an emotive process riddled with contradiction. On some days DaShan is more optimistic. He has faith that things will work out. He will spend his savings and the sum he receives from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) on starting his own business. He will turn a profit and provide for his family. “I suppose I have no choice but to have some faith,” he declares. On other days, he is angry and anxious. He cannot believe that this is his life. “What did I do to deserve this fate [命运]? Who did I piss off? Which gods did I anger in my previous life?” Sinking into his chair, he exhales, “I’m like a ticking time bomb. I can explode anytime.” He is frustrated, bored, and worried. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve walked around this place. The rectangular shape. The grass. The windows. These flimsy chairs. They’re etched in my memory. I could probably walk around blindfolded.” He also misses his family—he has not seen his wife and child for over 2 years. And yet, ZhanWei is not ready to ‘go home’ either. When I try to change the subject to the status of his appeal with the government (for higher compensation), he confides that he has mixed feelings. “On one hand, I want to find out right now if they will give me more money, but on the other hand, I also don’t. I’m afraid to. Finding out means this is the end. I’ll have to go back and figure out my next steps.” I ask him if he has thought about what he will do. Will he use the money he receives from the government to finance his ideas? DaShan pulls out the Chinese chess board on loan from Healthserve, and sets it on the chair between us so we can begin a game. Studiously arranging the pieces on the board,
he tells me, “I have thought about it. Sometimes I think everything will be fine. But when I do the math, I’m not sure anymore. The cost of medication for my back. The cost of starting a business. It doesn’t quite add up. I don’t know how I’ll make it work.” I suggest that he reconsider his last idea: fishing. The financial investment would be less costly. “That wasn’t real,” he laughs, “I just made that up because she [Jessica] wanted three ideas. So that was my third idea. There isn’t even enough water around my place that would be conducive to fishing.” The mood lightens, and DaShan appears to be slightly more cheerful.

We are often consumed by the need for consistency—for some sense of commensurability—that we fail to recognize that to be human is to be inconsistent. While confusing to witness in the moment, DaShan’s unpredictable pendular swing of emotions is in fact profoundly instructive. As I attempted to decipher a legible pattern from these emotive movements, I eventually realized that DaShan was simultaneously fearful and hopeful. While we waited, passing our time with small talk and Chinese chess, conversations flickered from moments of melancholic self-pity to solemn stories of Confucius ethics. That DaShan gamely endeavoured to remedy my ignorance of Chinese philosophy even while he anxiously frets over his family’s future suggests he is still somewhat optimistic. He nods his head approvingly when I tell him I’m still in school, “Education is important. Now, pay attention. Have you heard of this saying? ‘When push comes to shove, one has to make do’ [马死落地走]. You’ll find it useful one day.” My meandering conversations with DaShan as we sit and wait illuminate the importance of understanding contradiction as a condition of living. It is bewildering—perhaps even difficult—to comprehend the constant shifts in optimism and despondency, especially when these movements do not correspond with particular circumstances that might logically trigger such a response. When I pushed DaShan for an explanation that might adequately explain his
contradictory actions, he merely shrugged his shoulders. Such inconstancy did not bother him. And yet, I would argue that it is only by *embracing* such contradiction that we may come close to understanding the ways in which migrant workers conceptualize and process their limited possibilities.

Contradiction, then, is a useful method to understand the affective nature of hope. While we often speak of hope in possessionary terms—one either has hope or does not have hope; we are either hopeful or hopeless—I argue that hope is not an entity that one necessarily owns, but a dialectic of hopefulness and hopelessness. It is a structure of feeling that is imbued with contradiction—an affective process of embodying the overwhelming feeling of distress and optimism all at once. DaShan never occupies a singular position of hopefulness or hopelessness. His emotional register fluctuates over time because he flickers between the two conditions of hope continuously. Even when he is at his lowest point emotionally, there is still a seed of optimism in him that urges him to survive. Hope is therefore a slippery concept that “can never be fully divorced from hopelessness any more than hopelessness can be divorced from hope” (Crapanzano 2003:17). Indeed, to hope is to be contradictory.

Contemplating the notion of possibilities in the aftermath of an unequal system of power is challenging. The ways in which most of the world has accepted the inevitability of corporate consolidation, transnational financialization, and neoliberal governance have made it difficult for people to consider possible alternatives. While I do admittedly do not put forward solutions to the problems I have laid out in this thesis—I would argue that is not my project to begin with—I hope my theoretical engagement with the question of possibilities might open up new ways to think about hope. In other words, to fully comprehend the lives of migrant workers in Singapore, it is not enough to focus only on injurious experiences, but one must also consider the affective
process with which workers inhabit and understand their predicaments.

Even though many injured migrant workers were keen to return home to their families, it is important to keep in mind that workers are not a monolithic category of people. There are quite a few workers who seemed to occupy a more complex and contradictory position on the issue of ‘going home’. On one hand, workers do want to see their families, but on the other hand, they are hesitant about leaving Singapore and its attendant possibilities for a better life. As such, they choose to ‘wait’ in Singapore for a prolonged period of time. Waiting therefore involves a form of “cruel optimism”—a technique of survival—where maintaining attachments that sustain the good life fantasy, no matter how injurious or cruel these attachments may be, allows some workers to make it through day-to-day life when the day-to-day has become unlivable.

The analytical framework of ‘waiting’ is useful in terms of understanding “feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and vulnerability… and all the rage that these feelings provoke” (Crapanzano 1985: 45). Waiting is a contradictory process that is endured because it is fuelled by a mixture of despondency and optimism: despondency because of the knowledge that the waiting might culminate in a tragic end like the execution of Josef in Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) or the possible beheading of Nabokov’s Cincinnatus (1989); optimism because it is grounded in a longing for a brighter future.

I am reminded of Anna Tsing’s (2005) call for us to interrupt monolithic depictions of neoliberal globalization. Instead of viewing migrant workers only as victims of global capitalism, we ought to pay attention to the ways in which they inhabit the space of despair and possibility. By attending to “ruined landscapes” and “utopian dreams” simultaneously, we might then understand that even though the most dystopian narratives brim with injustice, they, too, ultimately carry our dreams for justice (Tsing 2005: 269).
Coda: Assigning Responsibility

In his thought-provoking book on cosmopolitanism and human rights, Pheng Cheah (2006:181) argues that “recent social-scientific studies of migrant labor in Southeast Asia… have focused on the sentimental documentation of suffering.” According to Cheah (ibid), “their devotion to the retrieval of voices and the re-description of complex material has sometimes come at the expense of conceptual thought.” While my thesis admittedly engages in affective and (hopefully) empathetic stories of hardship that workers face, my point of departure stems from the fact that I do not describe workers’ stories for description’s sake. Rather, my fieldwork provides a window for theorizing why it is that workers suffer. In other words, who is responsible?

The question of ascribing responsibility in an age of crises is a particularly difficult one. At a time when systems of inequality are so prevalent, it is becoming increasingly challenging to determine who and what is responsible for the pain and suffering of marginalized populations. This thesis has examined the suffering of Bangladeshi and Chinese migrant workers in the context of an unabashedly capitalist Singaporean economy. I have argued for a more nuanced understanding of responsibility that simultaneously acknowledges our shared vulnerability and the undeniably unequal power structures that render some people more vulnerable than others. Labor agents and employers certainly take advantage of relatively powerless migrant workers for their personal benefit, but they too, are not exempt from the system of exploitation that worships at the altar of profit. Jim Ferguson has pointed out that it is not quite possible to ‘reckon society’s responsibility’ without a quite thoroughgoing rethinking of what we mean by ‘society’” (2012: 560). This thesis hopefully pushes us to re-examine and deconstruct ‘the society’ of individuals and infrastructures that is supposed to take responsibility for the collateral
damage of nation-building in Singapore. As such, one might theorize responsibility by rethinking our ethical relationality to others within a system of inherent “inhuman conditions” (Cheah 2006).


Works Cited


