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Migrant Autonomies in Singapore's Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) Industry¹

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Abstract

My paper uses the case of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in Singapore to argue for a reconceptualization of the mobile commons in which migrant actors are the protagonists of oppressive labor regimes. Based on a scoping review of scholarly research and popular media sources, I pose two key questions about the mobile commons and acts of resistance by MDWs in Singapore and proceed to answer them with my research findings. I suggest that the personal agency embodied in the acts and strategies of MDWs must be understood within an asymmetrical live-in employment relationship that does not automatically allow for digital participation. I am interested in the question: What does the 'mobile commons' for MDWs in Singapore look like? Importantly, recurrent studies show that MDW acts and strategies to cope with oppressive labor regimes are deeply but not exclusively conditioned by the structural factors determined by governments, recruitment agencies, and individual domestic employers. Hence my follow-up question: How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the mobile commons? The state's live-in requirement is the most significant structural factor conditioning the mobility of MDWs, by implication their forms of political practice.

Introduction

Following the abstract's outline, my paper's main constructs are the Autonomies of Migration (AoM) framework, *mobile commons*, and acts of resistance and strategies as they pertain to the political praxis of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in Singapore. Conceptually, my purpose is to offer an alternative picture of the *mobile commons* that has been less well-studied yet deserves more attention, given that technological revolutions in human communication – namely cellphone ownership – among

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marginalized migrant populations are a core element of their political assertion. Indeed, to a large degree, the *mobile commons* is a metaphor for the central role of mobile phones in facilitating the real-time updates of information and knowledge resources, including firsthand narratives of the “tricks for survival” for migrants on the move in a digital era (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 190). The case of MDWs in Singapore shows that in a context of live-in employment, the story of resistance goes beyond “All you need is a mobile phone”, as one interviewee based in Greece said to the researcher (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 178).

It is a compulsory legal requirement for MDWs to live permanently in their employer's residence which is also their workplace. The Singapore government's official hiring rules state that MDWs “can only work for her employer at the residential address declared”, and can only carry out “domestic chores” (MOM, 2022). This live-in condition is the root cause of an asymmetrical power relationship and the ineffectiveness of labor legislation; the terms and conditions of work are negotiated informally at the discretion of employers, and is excluded from the national Employment Act (Ueno, 2010, p. 83). My intention is not to critique or even make irrelevant the idea of a *mobile commons* as illustrated in a European context (e.g. Trimikliniotis et al., 2015), but rather to offer a different landscape, if you will, of the acts and strategies of resistance when its participants are MDWs in individual circumstances of isolation. My findings point to the possible variations of the *mobile commons* – an expression of political assertion and language of resistance by migrant workers – in the context of live-in employment.

My analysis is based on a scoping review of the relevant secondary literature on the conceptual framework of AoM, the *mobile commons*, and empirical research studies on MDWs in Singapore across both academic and popular news circles. The empirical research done to date is extensive in scope and variety but all underscore the overbearing nature of the live-in regime. A bulk of these studies rely on qualitative methodological approaches like in-depth interviews with MDWs and ethnographic observations of employer-employee interactions in the household. The core topic undergirding all these discussions is the asymmetrical power relationship in the hiring arrangement, where domestic employers are given undue rights to set the working conditions, terms of service, and the extent of miscellaneous allowances like rest days, access to food items, and usage of household space (e.g. Schumann and Paul, 2019). For my purposes, I have analysed a list of works that are most relevant to the theme of migrant acts and strategies and creative political practice as they allow us to visualize a unique format of the *mobile commons*. My following analysis incorporates the key themes that emerge repeatedly throughout the works cited, where MDWs are quoted extensively and where analytical conclusions are informed by ethnographic data.

Due to space constraints, I do not fully elaborate on methodology issues. However, it is worth noting that typically, the more seasoned MDWs dominate the participation in research interviews. MDWs who have been residing in Singapore for at least five years are more likely to have stronger connections with community networks, a more assertive digital presence, and better familiarity with labor rights laws. Researchers agree

that it remains difficult to access the worst cases of abuse and isolation, given that a prerequisite for participating in research is usually an off day outside the household (e.g. Ueno, 2010, p. 85). Where interviews are not conducted outside, a researcher's access to MDWs still depends on an employer's approval and in that regard, may overrepresent those living in relatively better conditions.

My main question is: **What does the *mobile commons* for MDWs in Singapore look like?** Importantly, recurrent studies show that MDW practices are deeply but not exclusively conditioned by the structural features defined by individual employers, recruitment agencies, and the state's live-in regime. Phrased in another manner, MDWs do not have as much autonomy as other migrant populations that is commonly implied in the AoM literature due to overbearing policy constraints, for example the live-in requirement. Hence, I ask a follow-up question: **How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the *mobile commons*?** I find that ultimately, the compulsory live-in condition and its asymmetrical power relationship is the most significant structural barrier to the mobility of MDWs, with huge implications for their acts of resistance, political assertion, and *mobile commons*.

AoM, the *mobile commons*, and acts/strategies of resistance

The AoM approach is interested in how migrant workers formulate everyday acts of resistance that assert an equal ownership over those basic human rights and labor entitlements that the citizens of host societies take for granted. For Engin Isin, "To investigate acts of citizenship is to draw attention to acts that may not be considered as political and demonstrate that their enactment does indeed instantiate constituents (which may mean being part of a whole as well as being a member of a constituency)." (Isin, 2008, p. 18). In maintaining an ontological separation between *acts* and *actions*, he further elaborates that while the latter can be conceptualized as observable behavior, acts embody the intentions of the actor in creating "a rupture in the given" (Isin, 2008, p. 25). While the strategies of MDWs likewise aims to assert themselves as rightful political stakeholders, the AoM approach prefers to downplay the regime of citizenship as a point of reference in favour of accounting for the complexities of migrant subjectivity – its own battlefield – that both cooperate and conflict with one another (Mezzadra, 2011, p. 137). This latter approach, a protagonist view of the migrant actor, is more apt for MDWs in Singapore who not only resist the host society's discrimination, but also experience their own relational splits across gender, race, and class with other migrant workers and with fellow MDWs.

The mobile commons is neither private nor public, neither state owned nor part of civil society; rather it exists to the extent that people share it and generate it as they are mobile and when they arrive somewhere.

Papadopoulous & Tsianos (2013, p. 190)

The AoM approach views migration as shaping labor regimes, hence mobility is a creative force that coexists alongside the social, cultural and economic dislocations that 'push' migrants (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 203). Historically, free and uncharted mobility was a livelihood strategy that preceded the instruments of border making and sovereign state formation. The autonomist connotation of AoM does not imply that oppressive state regimes are irrelevant, but rather that migrant acts of resistance aim to assert claims to freedom and unshackled movement. The histories of slave labor and indentured work remind us that the contract system was a capitalist disguise of labor exploitation; the notion of free consent was manipulated to extract maximum productivity from overworked laborers. For time immemorial, the indigenous communities of Asia had been sojourners who practiced circular migration and did not see the issue of settlement as one to be resolved until the cultural racism of European administrators surfaced in border-consolidating policies that governed pan-Asian indentured labor migration (Amrith, 2011).

From an AoM perspective, there are little grounds for assuming that migrants desire and strive towards "political participation in our institutions", or that the state's regulations occupy a significant place in the consciousness of migrant workers (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 187). Often, migration has more to do with everyday livelihood concerns and coping with family care crises at home or sometimes, escaping abusive marriages and 'problematic' family members (Ueno, 2009, p. 511). Such stresses fueled by contextual circumstances have substantial roles in migrants' lives, and the struggles to sustain household living are at least of equal significance as the structural injustices of oppressive labor regimes. The AoM approach would not advocate assuming that state apparatuses, as regimes of control, occupy a primary or even notable presence in migrant acts of resistance. The starting point of migrant protagonists may be more about aspirations of free movement, and in that regard go beyond the system and its rules of political participation and formal acknowledgement.

AoM is also notable for its attention to those "clandestine aspects of migration", that is the unseen tactics or hidden acts of resistance that chart a world of their own (Nyers, 2015, p. 29). Theorising migration as a perennial custom of human civilization instead of a novel element to the capitalist mode of production, much less an invention of the free market, also means recognising that the constant movement and mobility patterns (across borders) are longstanding traditions ingrained in the natural social order of sustaining communal life. Migrant acts formulate "their own codes, their own practices, their own logics which are almost imperceptible from the perspective of existing political action" which includes strategies that are not primarily directed at the formally established rules of political order (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 188). Embedded in AoM is an ontology of the *mobile commons*: "the sharing of knowledge and infrastructures of connectivity, affective cooperation, mutual support and care among people on the move" (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 178).

MDWs in Singapore and the *mobile commons*

Migrant or Foreign Domestic Workers (M/FDWs²) are a significant population in the international labor migration industry, and refer to a female non-citizen holding a work permit solely for domestic work. As of 2020, there are just below 247 500 MDWs residing in Singapore, the bulk of whom hail from Indonesia and the Philippines, with smaller numbers from neighbouring Asian countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and India (Wee et al., 2018, p. 2677). Most research on MDWs in Singapore focus on the styles of ‘deviant’ behavior they display to contest an asymmetrical power relationship and the meanings they assign to these actions. Among the most prominent works are Yeoh and Huang (1998, 1999, 2010), Amrith (2010, 2018), Ueno (2009), Schumann and Paul (2019) and Wee et al (2018) who emphasise the importance of new institutionalist perspectives in understanding the behavior of key stakeholders – the ruling party-state and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), recruitment agencies, individual domestic employers and MDWs themselves – in the domestic sector.

The Singapore state maintains a highly disciplinary and restrictive regime for MDWs that prohibit them from establishing any form of long-term attachment to the host society. The ruling party-state in office, the People’s Action Party (PAP), maintains a hands-off approach to the domestic sphere which I discuss below as a process of ‘creating differences’ through the mobilization of national identity. The state effectively decentralizes the responsibility of governing MDWs down to individual employers, many of whom have internalized discriminatory discourses of migrant workers and xenophobic attitudes that justify the exclusionary regimes of discipline and regulation. My answers to the two main questions show that MDWs devise their coping strategies based on their knowledge of employers’ prejudices like nationality-based stereotypes and ethnic or racial essentializations. In addition, the acts of resistance that MDWs deploy differs according to public and private settings, attesting to the overbearing nature of the live-in regime that is officially sanctioned by the state’s public/private divide in labor legislation. Their actions complicate our understanding of the mobile commons and point to the limitations on migrant acts of resistance when power asymmetry exists.

After the above introduction of AoM, the mobile commons, and MDWs in Singapore, I proceed in the following sequence. First is an overview of the state’s live-in law that establishes a basic degree of confinement for all MDWs such that it is a primary barrier to their mobility. I also explain other policies that establish an asymmetrical power relationship, like sizable financial obligations for domestic employers who are then responsible for monitoring MDWs like propertied chattels. Thereafter, I discuss the variety of MDWs’ acts of resistance in both public and private settings to show that their mobile commons do not materialize in a coherently identifiable format. My answers to the two main questions are also a contemplation of how this small but significant case of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the mobile commons; I find that

² MDWs and FDWs are used interchangeably in the migration scholarship and labor policy documents. I use the former throughout this paper because the term ‘migrant’ is more appropriate for the AoM framework and the mobile commons, while ‘foreign’ is more commonly used in citizenship studies.

important revisions to the concept are needed in this context. Firstly, for migrant workers in the domestic sector, cellphone ownership is not automatically empowering or emancipatory. Secondly, MDWs themselves contribute to a re-racialization of their non-national counterparts that sometimes hijack the potential for solidarity networks. The central message of AoM remains: using alternative definitions of political protest – including covert, defensive, and non-confrontational strategies – to see anew those apparently insignificant acts of resistance as a unique form of political assertion.

Race histories in Singapore, migrant workers, and the creation of differences

Most of the existing studies show that the state's live-in regime for MDWs and its restrictive regulations on their movement are a primary barrier to their socioeconomic mobility, by implication their access to the means of political assertion and participation. While a full elaboration of the Singapore state's foreign labor policy is beyond my scope, a brief outline of its economic development history and immigration policies for industrialization is needed. Singaporean sociologists note that the government's task of managing an independent and sovereign nation-state was not a voluntary choice but a forced colonial imposition, hence a "fait accompli" that produced the "political category" of "Singaporean" (Chua, 1995, p. 102). British administrators had granted a degree of autonomy to the local leaders in 1959 which proved foundational for the consolidation of the current ruling People's Action Party (PAP). However, the abrupt withdrawal of British troops soon after created huge anxieties over the maintenance of peace and order for a precarious island-state with zero natural resources. Following a short-lived merger with Malaysia, in 1965, Singapore became an unlikely nation left to its own devices in a competitive and realist world order; the need for national identity and patriotic consciousness emerged abruptly (Kong & Yeoh, 2003). Singapore's population was majority Chinese ethnic with a significant minority of Indians, both of which are historical legacies of indentured labor who intermixed with the native Malay inhabitants. The presence of these various ethnic groups was concerning for the government because it complicated the issue of loyalty to the nation; there was no "myth of ancestral heritage" for Singaporean nationalism (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 31; Teo, 2019).

Eventually, Singaporean nationalism and citizen identity would hinge primarily on a unique sense of economic pride premised on its industrial miracle and international reputation as an Asian superpower. Known as a "typical developmental state", the incumbent PAP took a pragmatic approach to economic growth with industrial blueprints that reoriented its key sectors towards "capital-intensive" (Oishi, 2005, p. 27-28). The government also aggressively promoted the concept of meritocracy in education and career opportunities, which led to exponential increases of female participation in the paid workforce (Yeoh & Huang, 1999). By and large, signs of advanced consumerism and material culture – commonly referred to as standards of living – are regarded as evidence of the government's capability of providing for its people. Part of this lifestyle upgrade was foreign labor policy that allowed the government to utilize cheap labor from

neighbouring source countries for the lower-value primary sectors. The Singaporean workforce dominates in higher-value tertiary industries compared to immigrant-heavy sectors³ which are known as 3Ds: dirty, dangerous, and difficult/demeaning (Musa, 2021). These occupations are shunned by citizens of developed countries and heavily outsourced wherever possible.

“When we look at the migrant workers’ issue, we are not looking at it from the perspective of human rights. We are looking at it on a need basis... Like it or not, we need to sustain and grow an economy that is able to generate an annual per capita [GDP] of US\$35,000. At the end of the day, whatever factors would be able to help us to sustain the growth of the economy for the benefit of our countrymen, for the benefit of our country; we will definitely go for it.”

Yeo Guat Kwang, former Singapore politician (in Han, 2020)

Domestic work fits squarely into the 3D category because cooking, cleaning, washing, and servicing the needs of dependent people at home are activities that are looked down upon; most people would want to outsource these if they have the means to. The rapid influx of MDWs to replace the traditional homemaker roles of Singaporean women is not a sign of genuine gender equality or shifts in social attitudes about the sexual division of labour, but an economic compromise for the domestic economy. The ‘maid’ regime is the capitalist patriarchal state’s way of maximizing the labour productivity of a small population while keeping gender ideologies intact⁴. Singaporean women have the privilege of being part of the professional workforce but ultimately, homemaking is still a woman’s job. The shortage of domestic labor was resolved by MDWs who were supposed to be a temporary solution, but became an irreversible structural feature.

An asymmetrical power relationship in the domestic sector

As the tertiary professionalization of the domestic workforce continues, skills categories are used to construct different visa types in foreign labor policy that symbolise not just a migrant’s economic utility, but also their degree of precarity (Teo, 2019, p. 174). MDWs enter Singapore as unskilled low-wage migrants under the conditions of employment sponsorship, which means their work and residence rights is tied to an employer’s discretion. Employers can terminate their contracts and repatriate them without valid reason, which places MDWs in a lower bargaining position. The government’s hands-off approach to labor politics and human rights violations in the domestic sector is justified with ideologies of the public/private divide; the division of formal and informal

³ Singapore’s foreign labor policy has explicit criteria for the source countries and sex of work permit holders. The construction sector is exclusively male while domestic work is exclusively female. Other sectors like marine shipyard and food processing are unisex but dominated by males.

⁴ The Equal Education Policy, while exceptional for its gender blindness on paper, was not driven by a genuine concern for the status of women as human beings with developmental capacities. Ingrained gender ideologies that attached homemaking responsibilities to females continued to proliferate in public debates, which reinforced false assumptions that any inequalities between the sexes would disappear when women could access the same educational opportunities as men.

spheres of work. As this logic goes, the domestic arena is not amenable to rules and regulations since it is a privatized space and not part of the market. Also, the needs of individual households differ, which means that the work and welfare of MDWs is always an informal affair that is decided on a case by case basis. MDWs are excluded from the Employment Act due to this particular nature of domestic duties, which is between employer and employee (Yeoh & Huang, 1999, p. 1156). By transferring the responsibility for MDWs downwards, the state delegates individual employers as their custodians.

An asymmetrical power relationship is institutionalized in the form of financial obligations for employers at the start of the hiring process. These include a \$5000 security bond, a monthly 'maid levy' (\$200-\$295), and compulsory biannual medical examinations – pregnancy checks and tests for sexually transmissible diseases – that certify physical fitness (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 223). Also, all work permit holders are banned from applying for permanent residency (PR) and citizenship status. MDWs are not allowed to marry citizens and PRs without special permission from the Ministry of Manpower (Yeoh & Chee, 2015). The security bond is forfeited if MDWs contravene any of the stipulated boundaries, such as getting pregnant during their contract term or working in non-domestic settings. These “material disincentives” create relationships of dependence that cause many employers to feel the need for constant surveillance and incessant monitoring of MDWs (Teo & Piper, 2009, p. 152). The state's logic of non-interference in the private sphere gives employers a disproportionate leeway to set the terms of employment; many MDWs endure abusive conditions of “social quarantine” (Teo & Piper, 2009, p. 156). In this context, the strategies that MDWs can access for their acts of resistance and the mobile commons is highly dependent on employers.

Structural features of an asymmetrical power relationship

For MDWs, there is no separation between personal life and work because their workplace and living quarters are infused into one; both can be sites of oppression (Ueno, 2009; Yeoh & Huang, 2010). Civil society organizations have campaigned for stronger enforcements of a weekly rest day, but to date the improvements have been negligible because employer discretion rules (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 11). Furthermore, there are still many employers who prefer MDWs who are willing to go without rest days, which is a demand that some recruitment agencies adhere to. These 'maid' agencies are informal institutions that are in charge of the matchmaking process and hence are crucial intermediaries between the state, employers, and MDWs (Wee et al., 2018). Often, they are the first point of contact for prospective employers given that their marketing materials shape peoples' expectations and perceptions of MDWs. The Singapore government still does not classify 'maid' recruitment agencies as a public sector, instead leaving it up to private operators to compete against one another at the expense of MDWs' wellbeing. Recruitment agencies are the dominant migration brokers which disseminate sexist and racist ideas of MDWs by actively participating in the structural oppression of their labor rights and human welfare. The nationalities of workers are

presented as essentialist characteristics to prospective employers; for example, Filipinos are better at English but tend to be ‘too smart, while Indonesians are ‘duller’ but more docile and obedient (Wee et al., 2018, p. 2673). Choosing to hide information about labor rights, like the right to cell phones and rest days, are some ways that recruitment agencies endorse unethical practices.

Some employers forbid off-days due to the perceived risks of ‘bad influence’ and ‘social contamination’, and even worries that external stimulation will trigger “mood swings” (Ueno, 2009, p. 507). Especially during the first two years of employment, recruitment agencies and employers often expunge the idea of giving rest days and justify this as ‘for their own good’ in terms of protecting the “safety” and “security” of otherwise insensible MDWs (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 590). Although the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has since made some modifications to the contract clauses for MDWs by adding some additional rules for employers to adhere to a reasonable job scope, employers can still get away without recourse because no formal checks are in place (Ueno, 2009, p. 52). As of 2022, employers are supposed to declare to MOM if they require additional services beyond housekeeping – the most common is caregiving for children and the elderly – so that the authorities can make recommendations to better support MDWs by increasing salaries, managing the risks of overwork, and likewise (MOM, 2022). However, because of the privatized nature of domestic work and its apparently un-governable substance, the government is reluctant to turn these recommendations into enforceable rules.

The most updated version of the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA), which outlines basic employer responsibilities like giving a weekly rest day, has been critiqued for its vague language and lack of effectiveness. After all, recruitment agencies are in charge of drawing up contracts for MDWs; the whole affair goes unregulated under the state’s hands-off approach to the private sphere that sees the home as unsuitable for the implementation of standardized employment practices (Yeoh et al., 2020, p. 848). The negotiation of employment conditions is then a wholly marketized process that is left to recruitment agencies⁵ that work in favor of employers, sometimes even allowing an employment arrangement to start without having both parties sign an agreement of mutual consent (Devasahayam, 2010, p. 54).

For many MDWs, the first arena of political assertion is their employer’s home where they start negotiating for a rest day. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that

5 Since 2004, as part of the new licensing requirements, labor officials must visit recruitment agencies to observe their orientation/training programs for MDWs and labor rights induction for employers before they are given the approval to draft contracts. A demerit point system was introduced in 2006 for unethical agencies which were threatened with the loss of their operating rights. However, it is extremely difficult for MDWs to benefit from these clauses because they are only activated when a formal complaint is lodged; many MDWs do not have the time, energy, and resources to kickstart the process.

Singapore society continues to devalue and marginalize MDWs⁶ despite their real contributions to sustaining a society. Sexist attitudes and gender discrimination affects MDWs most adversely but also constrains many middle-class female professionals who despite their higher socioeconomic privilege, are not exempt from the obligations of domestic servitude. Indeed, the ongoing pandemic regulations for MDWs are worsening an already asymmetrical employment relationship. The recent MOM advisories were aimed at rebounding Singapore's economy to pre-pandemic production capacities, and showed little regard for MDWs as human beings with a range of emotional and social needs. On top of the existing financial costs for hiring MDWs, the additional expenses that employers must provide during COVID-19 will increase the likelihood of abuse and exploitation in private. As MOM's website indicates, all incoming MDWs are subject to the same travel and quarantine restrictions as other travellers. Employers are responsible for making these arrangements and must do so after their application to hire is approved by MOM, a process that is now more costly.

As of the time of writing, all MDWs must take their first COVID-19 test upon arrival and the second test towards the end of their Stay-Home Notice (SHN) – at an approved state facility (hotels and motels) or their employer's residence depending on the port of departure – which lasts up to 14 days (MOM, 2021a). The COVID-19 tests costs \$320 while a two-week SHN comes to around \$2000, which must be paid upfront by the employer even if the MDW does not enter Singapore as planned. MDWs must also have a cell phone registered with a local phone number, internet connection, and WhatsApp for communication purposes. Employers must also purchase medical insurance with a minimum of \$10 000 coverage in case the worker contracts COVID-19 or shows symptoms. MOM only issues the work permits for MDWs after the quarantine is completed safely. Government officials from the health and labour ministries contact MDWs at regular intervals to ensure they follow quarantine rules. Ironically, due to COVID-19, it is now compulsory for all MDWs to own cell phones. However, as explained in the sections below, MDWs are situated in a live-in regime that is ripe with the potential for power abuses. There is no way of knowing whether cell phone usage is empowering or even enjoyable for MDWs when they move in with their employer.

What does the mobile commons for MDWs in Singapore look like?

It is important to reiterate that MDWs do not enjoy a clear separation of personal and professional life; the separation of home and work has little meaning when the domestic sphere is the site of employment. The political arenas that MDWs chart to assert their acts of resistance stem from their collective efforts to navigate away from unethical recruitment agencies, exploitative employers, and the regimes of overwork.

⁶ During March to April 2020, COVID-19 infection rates in Singapore's industrial dormitories – where predominantly male construction workers reside – were at their peak. Public outrage over the deplorable living conditions was palpable and intense. In contrast, the lack of attention on MDWs shows that the home is still not thought of as workplace. The hygiene of domestic employers no doubt benefits the health of MDWs, but the ongoing regulations – for example, easier termination and transfers between households – only worsen their existing vulnerability in an asymmetrical power relationship.

They organize information into common resource pools and shared databases that allow MDWs to partake in informal gatherings at the park, e.g. Sunday picnics in the middle of Lucky Plaza or along the riverfront are one of the most commonly sighted (Ueno, 2009). These social circles allow MDWs to maintain communications with existing networks and create new relations with other migrant workers, and most importantly get a much-needed reprieve. Where MDWs have regular access to rest days, their presence is notable in the city centre where many mom-and-pop shops catering to Filipinos in particular have sprung up. However, if MDWs do not get days off, the only way to understand their acts of resistance is from clandestine tactics at home, like how and when they approach their employers for difficult conversations and their bargaining strategies when negotiating for better conditions. Overall, the structural features of the live-in regime establish an institutional disadvantage for MDWs, so their acts of resistance are directed at coping with its negative implications; the lack of labor policy changes should not stop us from appreciating migrant autonomies and the mobile commons in whichever manner it arises (Lindquist et al., 2012, p. 9).

The state is an important orchestrator of the asymmetrical power relationship in the domestic arena, but the migrant acts of resistance in this setting does not directly engage with oppressive labor regimes (Lindquist et al., 2012, p. 13). In a context of live-in employment, the acts of resistance that MDWs deploy are very often directed primarily at the household's dynamics and alleviating the negative repercussions of unreasonable employers' demands; coping with the adverse secondary offshoots of an institutionalized domestic confinement rather than with state authorities and government officials themselves (e.g. Ueno, 2009, 2010). The fact is that domestic employers wield such power over MDWs that their entitlement to rest days – typically once a week on Sundays – is not a given although most recruitment agencies nowadays must include this clause in their contracts (MOM, 2012). Numerous studies find that it is indeed a normative and widely accepted practice among employers to confiscate the passports of MDWs together with their work permit cards to prevent them from “running away” (Devasahayam, 2010, p. 51). Overall, researchers' observations of the hiring process show that both recruitment agencies and employers do not have a robust concept of workers' rights that must include healthcare benefits, limits on maximum working hours, and adequate rest time (Yeoh et al., 2020). Society's unconscious bias of MDWs, as seen in both economic and labor policy, is that they are purely a class of disposable laborers with unlimited working capacities to be exploited, while their emotional and social needs as human beings do not enter the picture.

It is important to acknowledge that digital connectivity aside, MDWs have had remarkable success establishing a public physical presence in enclaves within the central business district. They contest dominant notions of their outsider status in public spaces by travelling around in friendship circles and behaving somewhat ‘boisterously’, which “reflect a style of resistance” that contradicts the host society's expectations of MDWs as seeking “compliance and subservience” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 598). Some MDWs also choose their off days to dress in distinctively fashionable and flamboyant attires that contrast starkly with the standard ‘maid attire’ of plain shorts and conservative Bermuda

pants; this act is a way of showing “self-respect” and reminding oneself that employers do not have total control over their everyday decisions (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 597). Such readily observable acts of resistance – displays of friendship solidarity and migrant communities – in public are not a new affair, and have existed since over two decades ago (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, 2010). Many MDWs especially Filipinos are proud of ‘migrant enclaves’ like Lucky Plaza and Far East Plaza in Orchard Central which are known as ‘Little Manila’ in the local parlance; the collective presence of racialized migrant groups temporarily disrupts the social order because MDWs become the dominant group in that space. Singaporeans living in the central business region have complained about overcrowding by migrant workers and have requested that security personnel direct them elsewhere, but MDWs “persist in habitual acts of re-colonizing space” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 598). Based on research interviews, MDWs justify these acts as a rejection of the host society’s representation of migrants as an external contagion, and instead assert their right to the city and belonging in public space through “little tactics of the habitant” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 599). When MDWs get together outside the domestic arena, wherever they meet also becomes a zone of migrant socialization and bonding; they gossip, mock, and ridicule employers to vent off steam in a therapeutic unleashing of pent-up negativity.

In terms of the *mobile commons* framework, the affordability of and accessibility to cell phones still has a significant role in improving MDWs access to the knowledge databases which are updated in real-time by their counterparts, such as Facebook groups for MDWs (Platt et al., 2014). However, the asymmetrical power relationship continues to put MDWs in a lower bargaining position and gives them multiple hurdles – access to rest days being a primary one – to overcome before digital participation has benefits. In that regard, an analogy of public (visible) and private (hidden) transcripts for MDWs’ acts of resistance and political assertion is relevant because they “perform the public transcript of deference” while asserting a “hidden transcript of deference” when outside the earshot of employers (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 5). In a live-in situation where prolonged confinement is the norm, mobile connections made possible through cellphone usage are used to organize small-scale and informal gatherings – not confrontational events like street protests – that mean a lot to their emotional and social health. Ultimately, however, the issue of whether an off day is granted must first be resolved and hence, research studies typically cannot include the worst cases of isolation. Some projects that use ethnographic methods explore the acts of resistance at home in cases where MDWs do not get rest days.

Many MDWs who are unable to travel outside the domestic confine resort to covert and informal tactics to kickstart the negotiation process for an off day. In the home, scholars observe that MDWs use whatever organizational resources at their disposal to contest their structural vulnerability (Ueno, 2009). Their acts of resistance in this live-in context require an intimate knowledge of their employer’s household dynamics, daily routines, family relationships, lifestyle habits, and social preferences. Interactions between employers and employees in the house are important opportunities for mentioning the rest day, and MDWs capitalize on their employer’s soft spot by crying

while talking about how much they miss their children, or fabricating stories of family emergencies to elicit sympathy (Ueno, 2009, p. 514). These forms and outcomes of bargaining are contingent on the charitable goodwill and whim of employers rather than formal guarantees, although a weekly rest day is supposed to be a default practice. Other issues that MDWs act against are related to unequal and unfair treatment inside the house that creates a loss of personal dignity, such as excessive monitoring, restricted access to food items and being given leftovers. MDWs choose to counteract by making a show of doing chores when employers are present, consuming pricier ingredients in secret, and sometimes pretending to be ignorant of CCTVs installed by employers. These acts may or may not lead to confrontations with employers but are about self-defense and protecting individual dignity (Schumann & Paul, 2019). As a last resort, MDWs may choose to blatantly violate the household's rules to upset their employers so that they would be sent back to recruitment agencies.

These acts of resistance are performed sporadically and unpredictably, and do not have an organized basis, but is still common knowledge – a haphazard *mobile commons* – to many MDWs struggling with oppressive household dynamics. In the home, the concept of “spatial deference” is a useful illustration of the unbalanced power relationship that MDWs learn to operate with (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 222). Because employers wield disproportionate autonomy to spaces around the migrant's body and the allocation of their usage of domestic spaces, for MDWs, the home is more appropriately conceived as a site where (im)mobilities are produced. Employers' statements show that many prefer MDWs with a keen awareness of this “spatial deference”, that is one who “knows her place”, “when and where she is needed”, and most importantly getting that perfect balance between “being present and ready for service” and “making herself scarce” (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 229).

When MDWs are incessantly monitored inside the house, they do not even enjoy an insulated backstage and zone of privacy to recharge and rejuvenate; there is no real opportunity to be by themselves because employers have set up such pervasive systems of intrusive surveillance. In this context, a migrant's personal agency is not about creating policy changes but rather coping with institutional regimes of labor that legalise a “use and discard” philosophy (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 515). The rest day is still one of the most crucial barriers to MDWs' rights to public space. A presence in these spaces also serves as an entry point for MDWs to access those *mobile commons* like migrant enclaves and circles of solidarity established by their counterparts (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 595; Yeoh et al., 2020, p. 853).

How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the *mobile commons*?

Numerous research studies attest to the overpowering nature of the live-in condition where domestic employers negate the autonomy of MDWs to the extent that techno-communications are a site of struggle instead of an entitlement, much like the rest

day⁷ (Platt et al., 2016, p. 2211; Wee et al., 2018, p. 2679). The 2008 'Day off Campaign' was a grassroots initiative by civil society organizations to encourage domestic employers to extend at least one weekly rest day (Amrith, 2018, p. 68-69). Effective since 2013, the enforcement of this new legislation remains contingent on employer discretion, plus employers have the option of meting out an extra day's wages in exchange for no rest days; a gaping loophole that worsens an already unequal bargaining power. A 2015 survey of MDWs found that less than 60% were given rest day compensation, while a 2017 study found that some recruitment agencies stated "no rest day contracts" as an employment prerequisite (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 1697, 1705). The mobile commons concept rightfully emphasises the exponential growth of communications technologies that have made transnational contact that much more affordable and accessible for marginalized populations. As the authors note, migrant workers transit through internet cafes and use social media platforms to 'make connections' and plan 'routes' (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 190). These observations likewise ring true for MDWs in Singapore but the emancipatory function of cell phones cannot be assumed in an asymmetrical power relationship.

Cell phones are especially important to MDWs because digital communication allows them to maintain familial and kinship relations, and also receive information about current affairs (Platt et al., 2014, p. 14). Facebook groups like "FDW in Singapore (working conditions forum)" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1914915078526399>) provide real-time updates about changes in labor regulations, social distancing rules, and Q&A forums with resources about what to do in abusive employment circumstances and the available channels for assistance. NGOs like the Centre for Domestic Employees (CDE) (<https://www.facebook.com/cde.singapore/>) also act as common resource hubs for MDWs to maintain regular connections with one another through virtual music live shows and photo collage challenges. MDWs are also advised to access websites with real-time updates of crowd levels at popular hangouts like Lucky Plaza, and are invited to use free advisory clinics (e.g. banking and money remittance services), skills training, and crafts workshops like cooking and knitting. These common resources are expressions of collective solidarity to the extent that they involve all MDWs in exchanging useful information, sharing hotlines, informal peer counselling, and the creation of safe spaces to vent about unreasonable employers. While many employers nowadays acknowledge that cellphone ownership is a basic human right and necessity for MDWs, the root problem of the domestic's lower bargaining power in the household remains unresolved (Lin & Sun, 2010). In one study of Indonesian MDWs in Singapore, the authors found that maximizing the positive outcomes of mobile phone usage is an 'always ongoing' affair in an unbalanced power geometry tilted in favour of employers; control (by employers) and connection (with loved ones) are two sides of the same coin that are daily negotiated (Platt et al., 2016, p. 2210). Large power differentials sanctioned by the state's live-in regime give employers a clear

⁷ Thanks to the tremendous campaign efforts of migrant worker NGOs, the issue of MDWs' rights to a weekly day off (off day or rest day) became more visible on the public agenda. The 2012-2013 revisions to the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act stipulated that a minimum of one rest day per week is a basic right of MDWs which is crucial to their physical and mental rejuvenation. These guidelines were only recommendations that fell short of ensuring the legal compliance of employers, but was nonetheless a commendable milestone for civil society.

upper hand. In this scenario, the public/private divide is an arena for acts of resistance; MDWs experiment with their interactions with domestic employers to their advantage.

Interviews with MDWs residing in NGO shelters reveal experiences of being locked up involuntarily by employers, getting passports and work permits confiscated, being subject to extensively long working hours with little to no rest days, lack of freedom for religious practice, intensive and pervasive monitoring, and having their means of communication curtailed (Ueno, 2010, p. 83). Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the benefits of a digital revolution are unclear for MDWs; an employer's preferences of whether and what technologies are accessible is a more significant factor than financial constraints. In one set of interviews with over 60 MDWs, "only a few still showed their concern about cost" and most opted for more expensive voice calls with their loved ones as long as employers were not in the way (Lin & Sun, 2010, p. 190). Many MDWs have no doubt benefitted from ground-breaking shifts in cellphone access and communications technology⁸, but the structures of an asymmetrical hiring relationship complicate their digital participation creating a double-edged sword.

Many MDWs mention that they are expected to be continuously and immediately available to their employers upon receiving their text messages or voice calls; there is little to no separation of personal and work matters in the cellphone usage of MDWs (Platt et al., 2016). When employers were unwilling to grant cellphone usage or only allow restricted screen time, MDWs have found ways to obtain cell phones in secret and use its communication functions in the absence of employers (Ueno, 2010, p. 87). In one study, a group of Filipino sisters arranged for their youngest to pick up a cellphone upon arrival at the airport – her employer had requested that this not be allowed – for communication purposes. When this new employer turned out to be borderline abusive, she conveyed her desire to switch employers by texting "at night when alone in her room" so that her sisters knew to fetch the required documents (Thompson, 2009, p. 373). Other strategies that MDWs deploy to maximize digital communication while minimizing costs is to switch between several prepaid cards depending on which telecommunications provider has the best promotional rates at that time (Thompson, 2009, p. 369). These strategies require a lot of research on the range of data plans and how they compare against one another; knowledge about the best deals for communication services is a common resource pool that MDWs partake in.

Many supposedly illegal practices on paper are condoned by government officials and recruitment agencies alike. Some domestic employers who enlist the latter's services still block access to cellphone usage and rest days for the first two years as a 'test period', while others instruct the agencies to include this clause in the contract (Cheong & Mitchell, 2016, p. 57). The Migrant Workers' Center (MWC) in Singapore launched

8 MDWs who have been in working Singapore for more than a decade attest to this trend in their interviews (Platt et al., 2014, 2016). In the early 1990s, there was virtually no contact with their loved ones unless they were able to access email or more often, employers would agree to post handwritten letters on their behalf. Since then, digital broadband and cellphone plans have increased drastically in scope and variety while their costs are generally manageable for MDWs, albeit typically their most expensive budget item. Daily contact with their loved ones during breaks and late into the night after employers have gone to bed allow MDWs to stay in touch with familial matters and maintain transnational networks.

a smartphone application in 2018 called “Jolly App” in partnership with the national POSB Bank. This digital service for migrant workers offers a wide gamut of services like banking and remittance information, cellphone plans, and affordable transportation options (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018, p. 4072). Access to these resources however still depend on whether employers allow MDWs to use the household’s broadband internet and with what restrictions. In that regard, the construction of the mobile commons can be hijacked by individual cases of isolation where digital communications are not freely available. The assumption that acts of resistance can be organized on digital platforms can be troubled to the extent that cellphone ownership and usage is not a given for some migrant workers, and in the case of MDWs, is not necessarily advantageous or emancipatory. The live-in structures of domestic confinement do not allow the analytical privilege of expecting their political assertion to come through digital empowerment.

Apart from this fragmentation of the digital common, another significant factor underlying the content of mobile commons is a transmutation of racial justifications, or a reconfigured racism if you will, by MDWs themselves in their self-defence when trying to establish their credibility and trustworthiness to prospective employers. In this sense, the mobile commons have a dual connotation of positive and negative implications, given that the types of collective knowledge and forms of shared social codes may be beneficial to some members while oppressive for others; for example, racial stereotypes of Filipinos and Indonesians (e.g. Ueno, 2010; Wee et al., 2018). Interviews with MDWs show that there is differential treatment of MDWs by nationality – Filipinos have the highest salaries and bargaining power, and are most likely to enjoy the full gamut of labor rights provisions (Lin & Sun, 2010, p. 191) - which hinders solidarity building. Generally, Filipino MDWs have a reputation of being more affirmative and keener on guarding their labor rights, and employers who prefer to hire Filipinas for their higher English fluency often anticipate this as one of the key ‘trade-offs’ (Schumann & Paul 2019, p. 1713). Filipinos are known to be smarter but also more likely to be overly assertive, while Indonesians are typically perceived as docile and timid but lacking in civilized sensibilities like hygiene (Ueno, 2010, p. 95). Indonesian MDWs who are faced with the prospect of living with a Filipino colleague – which often happens when a household hires two MDWs – might use reverse psychology on their employers by offering to leave the household, claiming that the newcomer is likely to be ‘too smart’, dominant and “will order me what to do” (Ueno, 2009, p. 509).

The AoM approach is unique for “its emphasis on the subjectivity of living labor as a constitutive and antagonistic element of the capital relation.” (Mezzadra, 2011, p. 123). The personal agency of MDWs includes the various attitudes of self and other identity – which have the potential to replicate forms of discrimination, not just generating collective solidarity – that converse dialectically with one another to constitute temporary

modes of subjectivity in a capitalist international division of labor⁹. MDWs are acutely aware of their outsider status in labor-receiving destinations and actively contest oppressive labor regimes, yet their acts of resistance also rely on intercultural resources for migrant subjectivities like nationality-based stereotypes, gendered ideologies, and racialized assumptions about other migrant workers.

It is worth noting that domestic servitude, considered a form of social reproduction, has been heavily researched by feminist scholars who take issue with the gender omissions in AoM and its understanding of the mobile commons. This framework remains highly applicable and relatable to migration studies, given that technological advancements in digital communications have indeed revolutionized migrant strategies (Platt et al., 2016). Yet the case of MDWs provides a more grounded consideration of political acts and methods of resistance keeping in mind the public invisibility of domestic work (Andrijasevic, 2009, p. 398). As feminist political economists note, social reproduction (reproductive work) refers to “the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social as well as physical human beings who engage in an array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally.” (Glenn in Kofman, 2012, p. 143). MDWs fulfill exactly these roles for their employers’ families when they service household members with cooking, cleaning, washing, and care work for young and elderly dependants.

Gender biases are ingrained in immigration regimes that specify a female-only sex criterion for domestic work, sometimes alongside invasive medical examinations that take on a sexist connotation. The fieldwork experiences of Johan Lindquist in Lombok island, Indonesia, also finds that the brokerage process is distinctly gendered. While agencies require upfront fees from male migrants before departure, females do not pay at this stage, amplifying their status as commodity to be “protected” by the host destination’s sponsors (Lindquist, 2010, p. 127). Local recruiters said that females were “easier to control than male migrants” since their households that did not give them free mobility; the recruitment process for women typically requires a “letter of permission from either the husband or father” (Lindquist, 2010, p. 130, 124). MDWs in Singapore find themselves compensating for their placement fees with several months of unpaid labor, unlike their male counterparts who incur debts from fellow villagers. It is unsurprising that this preliminary trial period for MDWs is usually followed with an employer’s excessive monitoring down into the daily habits and routines of MDWs. This state of affairs is fairly normalized for many MDWs whose access to cell phones is conditional and not necessarily empowering.

The collective investment into and partaking of shared knowledge networks is crucial for the emergence of the mobile commons which “exist only to the extent that they are commonly produced by all the people in motion who are the only ones who can expand

⁹ Although not the focus of this paper, building on the AoM approach by thinking about contradictory migrant subjectivities is also about thinking through the history of industrial Europe, the colonial and imperial impositions of the capitalist system, and racial capitalism (e.g. Virdee, 2019). The paid labor market, as we know it, comes with ingrained psychological biases of gender and race that historically has valued certain (white male) workers as the epitome of the fully productive worker.

its content and meanings.” (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015, p. 1039). To use the example of care work, the ambivalent and contradictory meanings of care in the narratives of Filipino domestic and institutional workers shows the rifts in solidarity. Some studies find that MDWs who have managed to upskill into non-domestic sectors look down on ‘maids’, associating them with lowly classes that they have broken out of (e.g. Amrith, 2018). Sometimes, negative racial stereotypes based on nationality and cultural differentiations – even if deployed strategically for good reason, like making themselves attractive to potential employers by emphasising the more ‘caring’ nature of Indonesians compared to Filipinos or vice versa – hijack the formation of a coherent community of MDWs (e.g. Ueno, 2010, p. 91).

The personal testimonies of both current and former MDWs, some of whom have managed to transition into higher-skilled care workers with a more ‘respectable’ visa type¹⁰, reveal at least two layers of nuance in attitudes toward care (Huang et al., 2012, p. 203). The most obvious tension exists between the Singapore community population and the Filipino care workers who are not used to how common condescending perspectives of nursing are, given the connotation of professionalism and social respect this job typically enjoys in the Philippines (Amrith, 2010, p. 416). Another more complicated layer of friction also exists within the group of Filipino care workers, namely between those who remain as MDWs and the smaller number who have managed to gain Permanent Residency (PR) status, some even becoming small business owners in their own right. In some cases, Filipino PRs who have ‘upgraded’ themselves into a non-domestic sector distinguish themselves from their co-national counterparts by citing their higher levels of sophistication in contrast to many MDWs who behave too promiscuously with Bangladeshi migrant workers in particular (Amrith, 2010, p. 420). In contrast, MDWs who have been unsuccessful at making this jump find that Filipino PRs – many of whom are remote domestic employers of rural migrant women in their hometowns – behave in arrogant and haughty ways (Amrith, 2018, p. 70-71). Such internal disagreements and conflicts among MDWs are driven by a metamorphosis of racism and essentialist stereotypes.

Recruitment agencies pit different nationalities against one another by advertising the workers based on nationalist characteristics; this promotional process constitutes a potent source of friction between MDWs. Research interviews find that Filipinos speak unfavourably of Indonesians, “typically referring to their poor intelligence, odor, and uncivilized manner” (Ueno, 2010, p. 91-92). In addition, MDWs draw on regional differences of urban sensibilities and modern lifestyles to establish a superior sense of domesticity vis-a-vis their rural co-nationals. The existence of separate visa categories that extend greater mobility to non-domestic sectors generates a lot of tension in the ‘Filipino community’, plus Singapore society still has a condescending view of ‘maids’ (Amrith, 2018, p. 72).

¹⁰ Moving into non-domestic sectors is not impossible, but the chance of accessing the required training programs – for clinical occupations as registered nurses (RNs), enrolled nurses (ENs), nursing aides (NAs) and healthcare attendants (HCA) – to qualify for the Singapore nursing certificate depends solely on an employer’s approval. Some MDWs attend community skills workshops for eldercare, but these are typically volunteer-driven efforts and are not formal channels for MDWs to achieve skills upgrading.

Although MDWs have superseded traditional male breadwinner models that assume the dependent status of women¹¹, they continue to draw on conventions of femininity and masculinity in their narratives.

Whether positive or negative, these modes of differential inclusion (unwritten knowledge and informal social codes) in the migrant community are likewise a component of a mobile commons based on the “customary knowledge born out of the socialites of migrants themselves and others who support them.” (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015, p. 1040). These include internalized notions of an ideal femininity and good motherhood, which are socially encouraged norms of patriarchy that can be endorsed by numerous MDWs (Amrith, 2018, p. 78-79). The identity management of labor subjectivity by MDWs is a coping mechanism for the downward class mobility they experience when their professional backgrounds from the home country is not recognized. MDWs draw on internal and external perceptions of nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender in ways that simultaneously validate and transgress these norms, resulting in an inconclusive picture of political assertion that is symptomatic of a protagonist positionality.

Conclusion

Migration theorists note that “Autonomist approaches tend to emphasise the negative and exclusionary dimensions of citizenship” that can use a more diversified framework, because this control bias (a focus on migrant oppression/repression) makes it difficult to appreciate state regimes as productive borders that offer resources for “migrant citizenships” (Nyers, 2015, p. 24). The case of MDWs in Singapore bargaining for rest days shows that the employer to employee interactions constitute the norms of citizenship where authority and intransigence are not mutually exclusive to both parties. From a migrant’s perspective, Singapore’s citizenship regime is not solely about subordination because this viewpoint dismisses a gamut of critical citizenship viewpoints. My answers to the research questions uses the case of MDWs in Singapore to contribute a more nuanced version of the mobile commons. The beneficial role of technological advances and communications technologies is less clear-cut in a context of live-in employment, which complicates the acts and strategies of political assertion that MDWs can present. In addition, although my paper has not focused as much on this second nuance, the internal disagreements and tensions in the MDW community that shape individual labor subjectivities is also a type of informal social structure that undergirds the mobile commons. Overall, the concept is a useful framework for viewing the organization of migrant acts of resistance according to each context, while its empowering function is less clear in the case of MDWs.

The bodies of migrant women are a terrain on which immigration policies differentiate members of the community (inside) and those of an alien existence (outside). How

¹¹ Many migrant mothers are expected to take on both sides of the division between the active (male) productive worker in public and the passive (female) reproductive worker in private. The migration of domestic workers is one policy that combines a primary breadwinner status of women migrants – a reversal of gender roles that happened to many households in the sending destinations of the Gulf region and the Philippines due to the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s – with the reproductive connotations of female bodies laboring in the private sphere.

domestic employers channel the government's model of an obedient Singapore citizen is obvious to MDWs whose everyday strategies must navigate the spatial boundaries set by their employers, recruitment agencies, and state immigration regimes. The live-in requirement of domestic work cannot be underestimated for its stonewalling effects on labor rights receptiveness in privatized spheres, especially since the capitalist patriarchal state maintains an uncompromising stance on the public (productive, manageable and governable) versus private (reproductive, unmanageable and ungovernable) distinction. Important for AoM is a recognition that historically, the issues of mobility and settlement only emerged as problems to be managed within the governance structures of European state-making regimes. The ancient sojourners of pan-Asian and Middle Eastern migration did not see circular mobility – a key component of livelihood strategies – as an unnatural phenomenon, yet their presence was eventually transformed into coolie status in repressive colonial labor regimes (Lindquist, 2010, p. 121). The AoM approach emphasises that from this historical perspective of autonomy, where mobility is a non-issue¹², migrant protagonists must be acknowledged as formidable political actors who possess a lot of agency and creativity.

Following the scholarship's lack of attention to chance encounters and fortuitous moments in migrants' lives, AoM scholars have rightly underscored the revolutionary potential of cell phones in facilitating serendipitous moments of migrant solidarity in highly securitized regimes of in/exclusion (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 192; Trimikliniotis et al., 2015). These often taken-for-granted technological advances in human communication do not always penetrate past asymmetrical power relationships in the household. However, as isolated as MDWs are, their methods of acting out in domestic confines makes them participants of a fragmented mobile commons that is performed haphazardly. At times, their confinement inspires moments of creativity (e.g. crying over family emergencies) that elicit sympathy from employers in ways that point to those unorganized yet shared forms of coping tactics. At least for MDWs in Singapore, these strategies exploit the weak spots of otherwise unreceptive employers and create temporary moments of victory. Access to digital participation is not guaranteed in live-in employment, but the everyday strategies of MDWs nonetheless offers a nuanced understanding of the mobile commons in migrant politics.

Putting our lens on MDWs allows an appreciation of their creative resourcefulness in shaping acts of resistance without losing sight of the sheer strength that state regimes hold in restraining access to even digital activism. In addition, there are also grievances among MDWs who may not see eye to eye¹³ in competitive labor regimes. The mobile commons framework remains relevant because MDWs are like many other non-live-in migrant populations; their value in the host society is tied to their function in economic policy and their productive capacity as a labor force, nothing more.

12 Many MDWs in Singapore also have extensive overseas experience in other labor-receiving destinations like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Gulf region. They may go through various regimes of domestic confinement depending on location, but overall, their paths of cyclical migration over the years attests to how circular mobility is still very much a function of livelihood for these migrant women.

13 My paper has focused more on demonstrating the nuances of the mobile commons for MDWs in Singapore whose access to cell phones is not automatically empowering in an asymmetrical power relationship. While I have discussed intra-MDW tensions that complicate the uplifting effects of the mobile commons, the chance to fully elaborate on this angle of analysis must be saved for elsewhere.



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