Abstract

This thesis analyzes the reproduction of inequalities within the realm of production within Singapore’s division of labour that relies strategically on migrants for different tasks in the global city. I examine the mechanisms that reproduce class differences within and across labour divisions to illustrate the politics of cosmopolitanism in Singapore. Specifically, I look at workers from different positions within the hierarchical labour force: Bangladeshi migrants who had been working in either construction or marine industries until employment disputes rendered them effectively jobless and homeless; Johorean commuters who cross the international border between Singapore and Malaysia daily to work in low-paid service sector work; and finally, middle-class financial workers who are often seen as the skilled, cosmopolitan faces of Singapore’s economy.

I use the extended case method to integrate Marx and Bourdieu’s notions of class to illustrate how inequality is reproduced through social reproduction vis-à-vis people’s access to economic resources. It is about how class is also lived through other constructions– in particular, “the self” and how certain constructions of personhood intersect with and constitute class. Rooted in the division of labour, class is reproduced through processes by which some individuals are denied access to economic and cultural resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients. These processes are constituted through both material and symbolic struggles and violence. I aim to unpack the ambiguities and precarities produced through this struggle of classed bodies – desires, hopes, choices alongside hyper-exploitative work conditions and symbolic violence – and through which, identities are formed in the larger social world. I would argue that no matter how ambivalent it appears, class and its reproduction are never free from power-laden processes. I argue that it is through theoretically-informed empirical analyses of processes of class formation that the notion of cosmopolitanism can retain its purchase of understanding work lives in a diverse division of labour.
Preface

This research has been approved by the UBC Research Ethics Board, a division of the Office of Research Services. My researcher ID is 37385.
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Throughout graduate school, I have been blessed also with an “army of (reproductive) labour reserves”. Just about the luckiest thing to have happen to me in coming to UBC has been meeting colleagues Guan and Lawrence, who became two of my best friends and sources of inspiration. They were an invaluable part of my comps survival strategy! I was fortunate to have the friendship of Elaine Ho who has given me advice throughout. I am thankful for Agatha’s friendship – her enthusiasm and hospitality make my time in Vancouver so much more enjoyable! I also have a steady team of cheerleaders back in Singapore who were always accommodating to my fieldwork schedule and often provided listening ears and the much needed pint after a particularly long day.

It has been alleged that the writing process is an extremely difficult and can be a long drawn out one. My experience of it, however, was rather enjoyable. The writing of this dissertation was done in two places: St. John’s College at UBC and my mother’s flat in Singapore. The friends I have met at SJC are an extremely entertaining, yet focused
bunch who are all coming to terms with their own work and who have provided me the daily fuel to start my writing for the day.

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Introduction

A question on the homepage of the Singapore Heritage Festival that took place in August of 2010 stood out, “Did it ever occur to you that the people we interact with daily are as different as we are similar?”1. It then went on to describe how diverse and multicultural Singapore as an immigrant port-city is – indeed, has always been. The paragraph led to the description of Singapore’s diversity – the food, the clothes, the people – and how this must be celebrated for we are a nation of “global citizens”. It brought to mind two questions that Neil Smith asked in 2000 when he encountered a similar advertisement for cultural diversity: “Was this a difference of equals or unequals?” and, phrased more strongly, “What happened to class?” (2000: 1). Beneath, or perhaps even, as part of this celebration of difference and diversity, indeed, this cosmopolitanism, lurks another form of difference that is, like many other so-called world cities, all too often unmentioned in Singapore. Class, it seems, still remains the great unmentionable difference amongst people in this global city yet, class is thickly written across our social landscape peopled by migrants and locals. Who does what work and to what ends are questions that must be continually asked, especially in a place where multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are so frequently touted as banners of success and growth. As Sassen argues, “cosmopolitanism” often disguises the exercise of power which is compounded in the reproduction of world cities and its finely-tuned selection of migrant workers in various sectors of the economy (2001). Indeed, the movement of migrant workers with diverse backgrounds into a world city such as Singapore means they must work, live and play in

a multicultural, yet often exclusionary, setting. This dissertation examines what being class-ed in this setting means.

The unprecedented pace and scale of economic, political, social and demographic change in Southeast Asia in recent decades has brought about an increase in levels of population mobility, the complexity of their spatial patterning and the diversity of the groups involved (Yeoh, 2006). It can be argued that these are not only a result of uneven development but also contribute to this unevenness as well. Featuring both “source” and “destination” countries, Southeast Asia is an important location for the development and emergence of dynamic migratory flows. The trends within these flows point towards labour migration to and within Southeast Asia and, more broadly, offer an important perspective into the geography of production in the global economy. At one level, work migrants from developed countries are entering the region as highly-paid, highly-skilled workers, recruited mainly to facilitate knowledge-transfer to local skilled workers (Beaverstock, 2002). At another level, work migrants move in from less developed economies with surplus labour to fast-growing, export-oriented economies in the region with labour shortages, particularly taking on jobs in sectors that locals reject. Within this context, Singapore illustrates the case of an aspiring global city with a high dependency on – and an unusually high degree of control over – labour migrants in various sectors of its labour force to maintain its position in the world economy. Indeed, one cannot convincingly discuss the division of labour in Singapore without also discussing its links with migrants and migration.

In many post-industrialist societies that are associated with changing economic landscapes, intensifying trajectories of neoliberalism, globalization and increased
mobility, there is a corresponding growth of prevalent casualized employment (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Waite, 2009). As the older forms of Fordist work become replaced by a more fragmented employment system made up of “highly flexible … and spatially decentralized forms of deregulated paid labour”, questions must not only be asked of how these transformations impact production but, more crucially for this thesis, how it impacts the different groups of workers within the division of labour (Beck, 2000: 77). The labour market conditions specific to the contexts within these advanced capitalist economies are arguably “producing more precarious work that is characterized by instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability” (Waite, 2009: 416).

Precarious work here refers to work that is not standard which is generally seen as “full-time employment with extensive statutory benefits and entitlements” (Waite, 2009: 416). In other words, neoliberal economic restructuring is associated with insecure labour market conditions and, as this thesis will show, will create and impact different groups of workers differently.

Advanced, knowledge-based capitalist economies such as Singapore build upon a segmented labour force. Its division of labour creates a mobile, cosmopolitan labour force of highly skilled, individualized workers who are able to take risks, willing and able to embrace social and career mobilities while less skilled workers become increasingly exchangeable, replaceable and most vitally, cheapened (Yeoh, 2006; McDowell, 2003). McDowell argues that “for many migrants, although not all, movement across space is accompanied by downward social mobility, resulting in a precarious location on the fringes of the British working class” (2008: 500). Without neglecting the local and regional contexts where I am locating my study, I suggest that this points to the trend of
neo-liberal globalization. These international movements result in particular groups at the forefront of those experiencing precarious lives as a consequence of their labour conditions (Waite, 2009; Wills et al, 2010). This thesis illustrates how existing employment conditions set up greater degrees of precarity in the lives of some workers than others in Singapore. Indeed, these processes place the worker at the center of the contemporary labour process. This is a process that, I would argue, sets up a graduated continuum, where some workers, in particular some migrant workers, are made more vulnerable to exploitation, risk and uncertainty than others.

The official rhetoric and policies I examine in this dissertation are not exclusively Singaporean in origin: rather, this is a case study of some key trends that current economic change is bringing to labour markets as well as our understanding of migration and work in the global economy. As with other places, the size of the transmigrant worker population grows alongside neoliberal restructuring processes designed to render labour more “flexible” in relation to capital (Wills et al, 2010). The deliberate and strategic reliance on foreign manpower is central to the nation-state’s economic prosperity plans, along with the deregulation of various economic sectors (Coe and Kelly, 2002). At the same time though, as Peck observes, geography matters in the construction of the local labour market that is also characterized by a unique set of processes of labour production, reproduction and regulation (Peck, 1996; Coe and Kelly, 2002). The local labour policies in Singapore are organized upon selectively inclusionist and exclusionist measures to keep Singapore in the global race.

Labour migration, however, cannot simply be explained as an economic response to uneven development across and within national boundaries, although this is not an
irrelevant factor. Labour migration, for many of these migrant workers, is also a powerful vehicle and expression of profound social and personal transformations. It is, just as important, a dynamic field of social practice and cultural production through which people constitute, rework and in many cases, reinforce pre-existing understandings about themselves, their relationships with others and their places in the wider world (Mills, 1999). Indeed, as much as mobility can free people from previous class, gender, ethnic moorings, it can also further reinforce these subjectivities.

My broad project in this thesis is to analyze how class is reproduced in people’s work lives within this division of labour that relies strategically on migrants for different tasks. Specifically, I look at workers from different positions within the hierarchical labour force: Bangladeshi migrants who had been working in either construction or marine industries until employment disputes rendered them effectively jobless and homeless; the Johorean commuters who work in low-paid service sector work and who cross the international border between Singapore and Malaysia daily; and finally, middle-class financial workers who are often seen as the skilled, cosmopolitan faces of Singapore’s economy.

This dissertation is about economic inequality within the realm of production. I wish to elaborate, however, the ways in which these categorical differences amongst workers are not ready made. This construction of difference requires effort, mechanisms to establish these differences within the system of labour divisions. I take a step back from these classificatory systems and examine the mechanisms that maintain and reproduce such class differences. Yet, an argument for the continued importance of class as an analytical tool and as a lived reality would remain limited at best, and obsolete at
worst, should it only be framed in terms of economic production. Indeed, as Yeung noted, “economic geography (has now) broadened to include other social, cultural and institutional considerations (2003: 442). This thesis is hence also about how class is reproduced through social reproduction vis-à-vis people’s access to economic resources. It is about how class is also understood and expressed through other concepts – in particular, “the self” and how certain concepts of personhood and subjectivity intersect with and constitute class. This thesis, then, argues that class identity is rooted in the division of labour and is created through processes by which some individuals are denied access to economic and cultural resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients. These processes are constituted through both material and symbolic struggles and violence, which create much indeterminacy, ambiguity and ambivalence along the way (Skeggs, 1997). It is my aim here to capture and unpack the ambiguities produced through this struggle of classed bodies – desires, hopes, choices alongside hyper-exploitative work conditions and symbolic violence – and through which, identities are formed in the larger social world. Class reproduction is dynamic and conflictual, with some people bearing its wrath more than others. Keeping this last point in mind, I would argue that no matter how ambivalent it appears, class and its reproduction are never free from power-laden processes. Class as a concept, a classification and positioning understood and lived through the division of labour is constantly in a state of reproduction and reconfiguration because it represents the interests of particular groups in their struggle with others.

There are twin processes intertwined and operating in tandem in the assembling of this labour force: the local labour structure in Singapore and the migration processes that
are lived by workers. To ground and territorialize the transnationalization of the labour force, I maintain that we need to pay attention to local labour policies, which are part of state power – control, surveillance and regulation over its working bodies. While I do not wish to reconstruct a state-centric understanding of migration processes, I would argue that the power of the Singapore state bears attention, with emphasis on its labour market restructuring measures. Its inclinations towards developmentalist policies and capacities not only forms the context of my analysis but also suggests a state with a particular class project (Olds and Yeung, 2004).

At the same time, the migration process that underlies economic production and social reproduction also differs greatly for different workers – motivations, desires, pre-existing social relations and current working conditions vary. Low wages, long commutes, dangerous working conditions, inadequate legal protection, and arbitrary forms of labour discipline are lived realities for many of the city’s migrant workers. Singapore is a much friendlier place, however, to a smaller, but no less important group of workers who are often exhorted to be its face of “cosmopolitanism” (Ye and Kelly, forthcoming). It is worth repeating that these categories are neither ready-made nor static: indeed, they require ongoing maintenance. The following empirical chapters also illustrate that these categories are not stable. I problematize each group of workers by analyzing the process of their “coming to be”, both at the policy level and at the individual level. Further, I argue that these scales are not discrete and one shapes the other.

While both of these processes outlined above are crucial to understanding this transnational labour force, I also pay attention to the recruitment processes of different
workers. While there is little space here to examine the precise workings of agents and labour brokers, I illustrate that workers are already subjected to work segmentation through the different practices that connect workers to jobs. In other words, I would argue that the labour recruitment process already reproduces divisions amongst different groups of workers.

At the higher end of the labour market, there are agencies and human resource departments of companies that operate across a wide spatial scale, connecting potential workers and vacancies in expanding and lacking sectors, engaging in activities such as going to both local and foreign universities to set up job fair booths. In the UK, for example, short term vacancies in high status law firms source for workers via professional recruitment agencies at an international scale (McDowell, 2008). At the lower end of the labour market where workers are increasingly cheapened, much of the transnational work brokerage is based on local relations, often where workers are recruited by agents working on an individual, private basis (Wright, 1997; McDowell, 2008). In Singapore, foreign workers who are work permit holders, aside from Malaysians, are eligible only for specific positions within the job market and must return to their sending country once their permits expire. It is possible to argue, thus, that although low paying work – or vulnerable, precarious labour, as I term it here – is subjected to local labour policies, the people working in these jobs are assembled across a wide spatial scale and constitute a transient part of Singapore’s transnational labour force.

This study also examines the evolving identities of workers themselves by analyzing their movements and experiences as members occupying particular positions within the division of labour in Singapore. In doing this, I hope to better to understand the
social and economic transformations that recreate particular class identities. Even though economic diversification is an important aspect of labour mobility, it is by no means the only, or even the most important consideration. Labour mobility at different scales – from peri-urban Johor to its industrial core and/or from Dhaka to Singapore – also reflect people’s desires for acquiring personal status associated with lifestyles on display in “modern” centers (Mills, 1999). Cash wages and social opportunities allow migrants to participate in new experiences and to acquire commodity emblems that represent claims to modernity and sophistication. There are hence, very complex social goals, needs and wants which migrant workers hold and that cannot be explained solely by the larger processes in the global economy driving these structural changes. These structural changes, moreover, are often accompanied by the reconfiguration of complex cultural politics upon the migrants’ return home, including reconfigurations of gender which may produce household tensions. As Elmhirst demonstrates, young Indonesian women returning to their village after their sojourn to the city for work exhibit certain attributes that transform their identities in the eyes of fellow villagers including new clothes, some savings, and above all, “a body politics (speech and disposition) that speaks of experience of modernity and a shrugging off of the label orang kampung” (2007: 232). It is through examining such cultural nuances that we can begin to makes sense of why Johoreans endure long, stressful commutes; why Bangladeshi male migrants pay hefty agent fees and why middle-class Singaporeans put up with salient discrimination at the financial workplace.

My key aim in this dissertation is to analyze how class is being reproduced in Singapore’s division of labour. I aim to address the material realities of class in
Singapore and to that end, the cultural meanings and practices that are embedded and re-worked in workers’ economic lives in Singapore. I develop a series of questions with which to address this main argument:

- What are the motivations for these three groups of workers to work in their respective jobs?
- How are their different class experiences reproduced and maintained at and through work in Singapore? In other words, what are the mechanisms involved in maintaining these class differences within and across different groups of workers?
- How do people of different genders, nationalities and ethnicities and races experience class differently? In other words, how does class identity intersect with these other social identities?

The research methodology that I have chosen: the extended case method and related field research techniques enable me to critically examine the politics of cosmopolitanism. Conducting an ethnographic field study, I shall be using participant-observation and semi-structured interview techniques with all three groups of workers to answer these research questions. The methodological framework I have designed illustrates the lived reality of cosmopolitanism in Singapore’s division of labour. It is a case study where cosmopolitanism is not only based upon class stratification but further, where class becomes racialized differently, in different work contexts. I argue that an integrated reading of Marx and Bourdieu’s notions of class allows me to draw out the differentiated positions, dispositions and challenges that different groups of workers face. This research design is also a strategic way to question the liberal construct of
cosmopolitanism which is not capable of drawing out the pervasive and persistent reproductions of racialized and class-based stratification.

Analyses of structural changes in global capitalism, local labour markets and the lives of embodied workers are part of an interwoven, mutually reinforcing project to understand the complex nature of inequalities within and across different workplaces. In this thesis, I try to convey some of the complex and rich experiences, the poignant contexts and multilayered conversations that shaped my interactions with the people who responded to my research. This thesis is part of my obligation to them – scholars, staff and volunteers of the non-governmental organizations and the workers – without whose patience and generosity this research could not have been possible. The stories within this work speak to the sharpness, poignance and resilience of people trying to make sense of complex circumstances, some of which are harsher than others.
Chapter 1: Theorizing class and work

“... the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but in contrary. Their social being that determines their consciousness”
   - Marx, 1904: Preface

“Just as economic wealth cannot function as capital until it is linked to an economic apparatus, so cultural competence in its various forms cannot be constituted as cultural capital until it is inserted into the objective relations between the system of economic production and the system producers”
   - Bourdieu, 1997: 186

“The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence”
   - Bourdieu, 1977: 188

In the last three decades or so, there have been significant changes in advanced industrial societies in terms of the nature, form distribution and location of work (McDowell, 2003; Harvey 1998). Waged labour, according to various scholars, has become flexible, destandardized and individualized (McDowell, 2003; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Lash and Urry, 1994). Indeed, as the older forms of Fordist work become replaced by a more fragmented employment system made up of “highly flexible ... and spatially decentralized forms of deregulated paid labour”, the question arises not only of how these transformations affect production but, more crucially for this thesis, how they affect the different groups of workers (Beck, 2000: 77). Advanced, knowledge-based capitalist economies such as Singapore are keen to create a mobile, cosmopolitan labour force of highly skilled, individualized workers who are able to take risks, willing and able to embrace social and career mobilities while less skilled workers become increasingly exchangeable and replaceable (Yeoh, 2006; McDowell, 2003).
Questions about the cultural meanings of work and its diversity have also become all the more important as economic inequalities are growing across divisions of labour, particularly as states and firms seek to internationalize their labour forces. The activity of working could be understood as the application of human effort to transform material resources into goods for the use of individual workers and their households. Aside from being a crucial part of earning a livelihood, however, work and its accompanying wage also bestows status, solidarities and identities on workers (McDowell, 2003). With acknowledgement to other scholars, I have argued elsewhere that for the affluent “new rich” (e.g. bankers, lawyers, business people, information technology [IT] experts), these new forms of work could reap high rewards and opportunities to access certain lifestyles that symbolize a cosmopolitan identity not only through work but also through the consumption of particular goods (Ye and Kelly, 2011; Robison and Goodman, 2006). Consumption patterns, the fashioning of the body, the accent, socializing skills and sexuality of the worker become cultural attributes which form the basis of economic discrimination by constructing certain people as more suitable for certain types of work than others. I have also argued that in the pursuit of cosmopolitan happiness, through its various discourses and practices, there are new social and economic divisions being reproduced amongst different workers (Ye and Kelly, 2011).

Building on this research, I illustrate in this thesis how practices and attitudes conveying what it means to be cosmopolitan and the new social divisions accompanying cosmopolitan identity affects not only the middle classes but also those who labour in various low-paid, low-status manual and service sectors. These are workers often considered “low-skilled” – e.g. construction workers, cleaners, retail assistants – and
consequently more disposable, and hence subjected to growing insecurity and uncertainty, while at the same time, also pursuing their dreams of social mobility and of becoming cosmopolitan and modern in a world that in many ways continually disenfranchises them. Conditioned by processes of uneven development as well as their own desires and motivations to participate in the global economy, many of these workers migrate and become globally mobile themselves while simultaneously contributing to the economic and social inequalities between and across scales. Indeed, these workers themselves strategize and contribute to their own subordination through their participation in production. Borrowing Burawoy’s idea, I show how workers are themselves also actors in their own exploitation (1985). Further, social identities of race, gender, nationality and language that are embedded within class identities amongst groups of workers are produced and maintained through the construction of difference, segregating and marginalizing certain groups. The new global working subject – regardless of whether proletariat, petite bourgeoisie or bourgeoisie – is hence increasingly complex and diverse. It is these socio-economic differences and inequalities amongst and within different groups of workers which I examine in this thesis.

These complex inequalities must be articulated in terms of class. Class is, as Marx argues, a structural location within the exchange and production of commodities. Underlying this structure are the social relations that organize the rights and powers of individuals within the sphere of production (Wright, 2005). In contrast, Bourdieu’s extensive analysis of class – most strikingly through the concept of *habitus* – shows that is it also a set of social practices, deeply rooted within, and marked upon the body. For Bourdieu, class is constructed and reproduced through a set of discourses that position
certain bodies as more legitimate, more acceptable than others (Weininger, 2005; Skeggs, 2004). Following Bourdieu, new theorizations of class have moved beyond just focusing on economic inequalities in the production sphere to look at the discursive representations of class and class practices in other spheres of social action as well as the moral basis of class identification (Sayer, 2005). The political practices of the state and other institutions as well as everyday social interactions continue to produce and reinforce the categories of class as it intersects with gender, nationality, ethnicity/race and sexuality even in mobile, seemingly cosmopolitan societies. Indeed, as Ong asserts, migration produces a particularly clear context where uneven power relations and stratification reveal themselves, formally and informally including some and excluding others (1996; 1999). While Ong’s focus is on citizenship, I would argue that there are parallels between citizenship and the divisions of class. I argue one needs to transcend the false dichotomy of materialist and cultural perspectives to understand the uneven effects of economic restructuring, economic inequality and how this impacts the cultural practices of different workers. To engage with class-based issues of structural inequalities and power differences amongst different groups of workers in the context of a globalized workforce, one needs to analyze the intertwined forms of economic exploitation and subordination but also cultural dimensions of stratification, without neglecting the agency of individuals. The decisions people are capable of making are both enabled and limited by structural and cultural resources and disparities that are or are not available to them and through which they construct themselves to be and become.

Theorizations of social class have various explanatory dimensions and attempt to answer a diverse array of questions. As Wright succinctly asks in the concluding chapter
of a book summarizing different conceptual approaches to class, “if ‘class’ is the answer, what is the question.” This suggests that across the different theorizations of class, there are different empirical underpinnings, different assumptions about what constitutes classes and different positions regarding their overall significance (Sheppard and Glassman 2011). These questions are not simply generated within a vacuum but are shaped by particular normative concerns about problems in the empirical world. Indeed, it is these concerns that impart salience to the theoretical framing of class analysis. In other words, it is these empirical issues we confront which shape how we come to know class.

In this section, I discuss the contributions of various geographers to the concept of class before I focus on Marx and Bourdieu whose theorizations provide distinct and useful frameworks within which to analyze the research questions I will pose. Referring to the empirical material that I will elaborate throughout the thesis, I draw out the main theoretical contributions of each thinker, noting the ways they enable the empirical analyses I undertake. I then illustrate how by stitching both thinkers together, one can approach class with a sort of theoretical complexity and richness is missing in class analyses relying solely on Marx or solely on Bourdieu.

I also briefly discuss how class relations – which remain very much at the core of broader social relations – are structured by various state practices which in turn, create the conditions within which people lead their lives. While this may appear to endorse a type of state-centric explanation, I do not suggest that the state is itself independent of societal or other forces. As Glassman argues, interrogating state practices provides a lens through which to analyze the (uneven)development process and how this, in turn, affects
other facets of social life (Glassman, 2004). While the role of the state is not the core of this dissertation, I would argue that the state, especially one as strong as Singapore’s, plays an important role through its discursive strategies and policies, in shaping the divisions of labour amongst different groups of workers. It is, however, the structural and social consequences of these state practices that is the focus here, not the state itself.

Theoretical dialogues: geography and class

_Difference was to be respected, even celebrated ... but was that a difference of equals or unequals?_  
- Smith, 1999: 1.

Economic geographers have conducted work on how work and employment take on a spatiality (by this, I refer to Herod’s use of this term as how social life is organized geographically (2007: 248)) (Castree, et al, 2003; Hudson, 2001; 2004; Samers, 2002; Storper and Walker, 1989). From Massey’s spatial division of labour (1984) to analyses of how labour markets are spatially structured (Peck, 1996), there are labour geographers who have persuasively shown that there are profound ways in which space is connected to work, employment and resistance (Herod, 2001). While class is implicit within much of this work, Neil Smith argued in 1999 that it appears to have fallen off of the agenda and called for geographers to reinvigorate the potent subject of class in the discipline. Even with existing diversity – or perhaps precisely because of the “diversity” promised in various discourses of “cosmopolitanism” – class continues to be thickly entrenched in the cultural, political and economic landscapes which we interrogate. A narrow class analysis would limit any inquiry into the complex connections binding the value of things to the people who make them. One’s situation in the economic sphere is not independent of
one’s performance as a gendered, sexualized and/or raced subject as the value of one’s work emerges through lenses constructed to interpret the value of one’s worth. Oppression on the basis of race and gender is imbricated with economic exploitation rooted in class difference, and struggles to dismantle racial and gendered oppression very quickly confront issues at the heart of the social economy: wage inequality (or the lack of wages altogether), working conditions (physical, social, and political), and the social and cultural ideologies that rationalize such inequalities.

The argument is not that a narrow economic purview exhausts the analysis or denies the existence of oppressive in the forms of race and/or gender. Far from it. Oppression is not universally functional and may over relatively long periods in specific places prove quite dysfunctional in economic terms. It must be emphasized that the evaluation of a worker’s value to the firm rests on discourses and practices that regulate the interpretation of the meaning of that worker as a social subject. Indeed, empirical situations are very complex and the actually existing compacts of power never adhere do neat categories of class or gender or race as we have learnt from the cultural turn and identity politics (Herod et al, 2007; Smith, 1999).

Smith argued that the new dynamics of production unleashed by global industrialization has resulted in the feminization of cheap factory work in many of the new industrial regions and export-oriented processing zones in the Global South, where wages are low, labour laws are lax and unions are weak. This is to say that class is the more basic principle of organization of contemporary societies in which race and gender are embedded, rather than class domination as being shaped by gender and race (Burawoy, 1985). Feminist geographers, like Valentine, for instance, have taken on the
concept of intersectionality to theorize the relationships between different social categories such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality and so forth (2007; Gibson-Graham, 2001; Kobayashi, 2009 et al; Pratt, 2004). These theorizations are particularly useful in highlighting that specific social structures of patriarchy, heteronormativity and such still persist even within contemporary concerns of diversity and cosmopolitanism (Valentine, 2007). In this body of work, feminist geographers have argued that when the focus is on cutting costs and enhancing work productivity, corporate decision makers often correlate technical skills with other social identities such as gender, nationality, race/ethnicity and language (Gibson-Graham, 1996; McDowell, 1997; 2008; Wright, 1999; 2006; Schoenberger, 1997), thus encouraging both geographic relocation and feminization of labor. They highlight that performance of work is not independent of one’s performance as a gendered, sexualized and raced subject as the value of one’s work emerges through lenses that interpret the value of one’s other social identities. Within this literature, it is persuasively argued that different people are assigned different social and economic values (Wright, 1999).

In doing this, feminist geographers in particular have developed theoretical toolkits that draw from various conceptual approaches. Melissa Wright develops an approach that uses Marxism, post-structural feminist and postcolonial theories as an integrated lens to illustrate that female labour and female bodies are rendered disposable through cultural discourses of kinship in the Chinese factory that become central to the political and economic practices of capitalist power, exploitation and resource distribution (2006). In this sense, the success of flexible production that is so widespread now effectively rests upon the disposability of workers, and more specifically, female
workers. This political economy of flexibilized labour can also be broadened to address my own empirical study. The question I ask then is not so much why certain people – such as Bangladeshi male migrants in Singapore – are paid so little but how cheap, physically-demanding labour assumes the male, Bangladeshi form rather than, say, a Caucasian female form. In this sense, class shapes racial and gender domination more so than class is shaped by gender and race (Burawoy, 1985). I would further argue that this Marxist line of argument also correlates with Bourdieu’s notion of class. Specifically, Bourdieu says, “…what is determinant in a given area is a particular configuration of the system of properties constituting the constructed class, defined … by the whole set of factors operating in all areas of practice – volume and structure of capital…. It is the specific logic of the field, of what is at stake and of the type of capital needed to play for it” (1984: 112). In this sense, Bourdieu’s class model takes on a very locally-specific geography – one which considers different factors and their various combinations to explain social differentiation and domination in a particular field.

Economic restructuring and new managerial paradigms of “flexible management” have challenged older forms of bureaucratic methods of management, thus affecting not only the gendering of assembly line work but the gendering of managerial labor as well. More women have now entered financial workplaces, seemingly reflecting increased egalitarianism, but McDowell was skeptical of the extent which a “new” meritocratic City had emerged as a result, especially in terms of gender composition in different work tasks. Even as gender composition of applicants in the workforce was gradually changing, their class composition remains solidly bourgeois (McDowell and Court, 1994). The cultural capital and associated social characteristics traditionally
valued by City bankers – private schooling, a good university, the right accent and class background – still dominate recruitment and selection practices for professional positions. In corporate finance, for example, the social background of people remained narrow – Oxbridge, Bristol and Exeter. Women were still marked as “different” in the work environment. Through behavioural practices, dress, language, ways of talking about work and discourses of authority, female bodies and constructions of varieties of female-ness continued to be understood marks of difference. Masculinities were also varied at work – traders and corporate financiers take on different gender performances, with the former being the “barrow boys” and the latter the “young princes” usurping the power from “old patriarchs” (1994). Drawing upon Ong’s work on Korean migrants to the United States, McDowell argued that discourses of racialized differences also shaped people’s suitability for different types of employment with different skills and talents being made to appear “natural” on some bodies. Ideas about different national work ethics and differently sexualized bodies all affect options in the labour market from the lowest paid jobs to the upper ends of the white collar and managerial labor force (McDowell, 2008: 499; Ong, 1996).

While difference can be respected and even celebrated, as the earlier quote suggests, this complex intersectionality produces subjects who are coded as inferior through the operation of numerous categorical distinctions. These distinctions through discursive practices and markers of difference, are made complex but also transformed and – through human agency – resisted. Class exploitation continues to be central to the functioning of capitalist economies – hence research in this area continues to be relevant – but it is equally clear that class relations are constructed and maintained through
processes and practices that render people of different race, sex, nationality and language as Other. There is the common belief that deconstruction of these master categories of race, gender and class will lead to the reduction of inequalities that are inherent within them (McDowell, 2008; McCall, 2001). Yet, in research practice, it is very difficult to speak with people and collect data without relying on social groupings especially if the aim is to understand how and why certain people ended up in particular jobs in a segmented labour force. I address this problem by adopting a broader approach. I understand identities as fluid and changing and examine the transformative powers that shape these changes at both the structural and everyday levels. Even where people’s economic conditions are similar, inequality can take on different forms across different settings and scales (inter/intra workplaces and labour force) (McDowell, 2008). This thesis takes on a critical approach to what it means to be cosmopolitan by recognizing contributions of existing literature on the subject while expanding its empirical focus of cosmopolitanism by including people not readily thought of as “cosmopolitan”, and adopting a class-based lens through which to understand the concept. Despite optimistic claims about the emergence of post-transitional identities within new mobile societies that apparently transcend the constraints of the nation state, gender, class and ethnicity, I concur with other feminist scholars that while categorical inequalities are taking on different forms and contexts, their significance remain clear by continuing to limit equal access for people of different social backgrounds in the global marketplace (Ye and Kelly, forthcoming; McDowell, 2008; Skeggs, 2004; Sklair, 2001; Urry, 2000; 2004).
Theorizations of class

Marx

The Marxist concept of class directs our attention both theoretically and empirically towards the systematic and conflictual interactions of people in processes of production and exchange. Central to the cause of conflict in Marxist analyses of class relations is the concept of exploitation, which is the appropriation by one class of the surplus produced by another (Wright, 2002). Marx argues that in capitalism, this appropriation occurs because employers are able to force workers to work longer hours and perform more labor than is embodied in the products that they consume with their wages. This appropriation of surplus labour time, or exploitation, constitutes the source of profits for the capitalists which are, in turn, crucial for capital accumulation and expanded investment.

Aside from seeing exploitation as central to the dynamics of capitalism, Marx also uses it to explain the conflicting relationship between workers and capitalists (or owners of production) (Wright, 2002; 2005). It is a relationship which pits the interest of one class against another, binding the two in this relationship of difference through ongoing interactions. This form of class relationship, therefore, is also a type of social relation as people who are involved in capitalist production have different kinds of rights and powers over the use of inputs and over the results of their use (Wright, 2005). For instance, to have rights and powers over a construction site defines the owner’s social relationship to his/her workers with respect to the use of the construction site and the appropriation of its surplus if the site is productively used. In turn, it is this uneven

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2 It is my aim here to provide a theoretical framework within which to analyse and organize my empirical data rather than to provide a comprehensive discussion of either thinkers’ sociology of class. For more detailed analyses of Marx and Bourdieu, see for example E.O. Wright 1985 and 2005.
distribution of power embodied within the relations of production that enables exploitation and forms the basis of class relations for Marx.

To make empirical sense of individuals’ experiences of class relations in a market-based society, then, it is important to be able to locate them within the social structure. In other words, an individual’s class location designates their social positions within a particular kind of social constellation, rather than the individual simply existing as a discrete entity. This is to emphasize that when people go about their everyday lives, the choices, values, ideas and ways in which they act are structured by their relations to other people who are also making choices and acting (eg.: “I have to leave the house at 5.30am to beat the causeway traffic because my boss would deduct my pay if I don’t arrive at work by 8.30am sharp”, interview with Johorean commuter) (Wright, 2005). In short, social relations refer to the inherently structured elements of interactions between individuals. To speak of people’s locations within class relations then is to position people within certain structured patterns of interaction. Within this structure, there is again the uneven distribution of power – the worker’s decisions and movements are restricted by his/her employer’s decisions. It must be noted however, that for Marx, within his discussion of social relations is how they enable the production of commodities and the reproduction of exploitation. This is a point in Marx’s argument which ties in with Bourdieu’s notion of class as inherently a social practice – a point which I will return to later on in the chapter (Weininger, 2005). Marx, however, sees objectively definable material interests as a central mechanism through which class locations influence social action and behaviour.
Individuals, however, are always agents. They retain significant levels of control over their expenditure of effort – exploitation of the workers by capitalists, therefore, necessarily requires effort and is necessarily precarious, requiring constant use of institutionalized devices of surveillance, monitoring and supervision to contain the conflict of interest (Wright, 2002). In Weberian terms, this would constitute a type of “technical inefficiency” where the agency that workers retain prevents the “full realization of economic rationality” (Weber, 1922,1978: 137 quoted in Wright, 2002: 837). In this sense, Marx’s analysis of class allows room for exploring how workers, through their agency, can resist or at least negotiate their way through a context of dominance. I will argue and demonstrate in my later chapters that this constitutes a crucial form of power which cannot be neglected in any discussion of exploitative relations. It is this form of power for Marx which animates class struggles within the long-term trajectory of capitalism. Agency amongst the exploited can lead to the development of more organized collectives such as unions – without which it is up to individual workers to strategize within their position as the exploited to reduce their level of toil (Wright, 2005).

In response to the agency held onto by workers, the exploiting classes must devote resources to insure their continued ability to appropriate labour effort – such as hiring “security companies” to intimidate and discipline workers and/or installing close-circuit monitors as a surveillance method. Simply coercive methods of extracting labour from workers, however, may render it too easy for the exploited to withhold diligent performance. To overcome this challenge to domination and subordination, practices designed to engineer consent tend to supplant some coercive practices, where employers
can effectively implement them through ideologies, “incentives”, etc, – getting the worker to co-operate, to actively agree to provide enough labour for the appropriation of surplus (Wright, 2005). In other words, Marx argues that workers themselves must be “produced” by the firm’s owners to align their loyalties with capitalist institutions so that material production can continue. The ways in which workers are constructed and reproduced situates them, therefore, as both products and producers of things.

As powerful as Marx’s work is in terms of emphasizing the harms of exploitation towards labourers, much of his work has theoretically emphasized the polarization of two “big classes” (i.e. the exploited and the exploiters) within modes of production (Sheppard and Glassman 2011). Even as Marx himself recognized that class relations in actual societies are more complex than such polarized binaries, the emphasis his analysis provides on capitalists and waged workers has led to challenges in analyzing the class positions of other groups such as the middle-classes (Sheppard and Glassman 2011; Wright, 2005). It has also been noted that some jobs are part of career trajectories, which lends a sense of temporality to people’s class locations (Wright, 2005). The issue here is then one of job mobility and the class issue thus becomes who is able to access this sort of job mobility – this is a problem which I will explore further on.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu draws upon Marx, Weber and Durkheim without being reducible to the ideas of any one of these theorists (Sheppard and Glassman 2011; Weininger, 2005). For Bourdieu, class analysis cannot be reduced to the analysis of economic relations; rather, it simultaneously entails an analysis of symbolic relations – which is roughly along the
lines of the “status communities” referred to by Weber (Weininger, 2005). Whereas Marx and Weber articulate class as formed solely within the production process and the capitalist market, Bourdieu conceives of classes in capitalist society as being formed within and outside production and the market. Similar to the first two thinkers, Bourdieu also sees capitalist social relations and the market as hierarchically structured with reinforcements from the power of the state. Like Marx, he argues that capitalists gain wealth based on their ability to appropriate economic surplus from producers. However, Bourdieu stands out from all the other class theorists by developing a sophisticated, multi-scale account that emphasizes the cultural dimensions of class (Weininger, 2005). The two key tenets of Bourdieu’s analysis which I will discuss are his notions of capital and habitus.

Bourdieu’s ideas of class show that classification is pervasive in spite of broad economic sameness by systematically theorizing the unequal distribution of power that is social and symbolic, rather than merely economic and tangible (Bourdieu, 1991). Further, the social space where class relations operate, he argues, can hence be understood as a “field of forces” where there is a dominant set of power relations imposed on all those who enter this field and relations within this field are not “reducible to the intentions of individual agents or even to direct interactions between agents” (Bourdieu, 1991:230). For Bourdieu, power in this social space is not simply imposed but results from historical struggle and requires ongoing maintenance – a point which resonates with Marx. Further, because power is not narrowly focused within any one person (either because of their privileged economic or social status), or any one particular set of relations or networks, this argument allows us to better examine the various social inequalities that differentiate
people from one another in ways that may not seem immediately rational. Simultaneously, this notion does not neglect that there is still a set of power relations that reigns supreme in the field that is independent of the actors who enter it. In other words, there always remains an objective presence of structure that affects people’s practical taxonomies (Bourdieu, 1977: 97).

For Bourdieu, the occupational division of labour forms a system. Further, people’s locations within this system is differentiated from – and through this relationship of difference, connected to – one another in terms of implicit power. This suggests that his idea of class is not restricted to a system of simply ownership of and/or control over the means of production (Weininger, 2004). This theoretical position makes it possible to imagine a more diverse group of people within the labour spectrum, particularly the workers who do not fall conveniently into either of the large classes on which Marx focuses – hence all the more pertinent to my concerns. Part of individuals’ non-rational power comes from the distributions of “capital”, which he sees as “the set of actually usable resources and powers” that can be accumulated over time (Bourdieu, 1984:114; Weininger, 2004). The term “cultural capital” thus refers to the set of resources that people utilize in their daily lives, such as forms of knowledge and skills. That is, cultural capital refers to the culturally-specific competence that can either be a resource and/or power in a given social setting. Middle-level financial professions, for instance, are in the same broad stratum of economic capital. They are differentiated at work by their possession and expression of their accumulated cultural competence (for example, their knowledge of networking skills, conversational topics at work with different groups of people, etc), that can either be wielded against or render them subject to symbolic power,
depending upon the context. Significantly, though, this power does not operate solely within the realm of the symbolic but also interferes with their position within the division of labour. More concretely speaking, cultural capital also affects the individual’s career development.

A key aspect of Bourdieu’s explanation for social collectivities is the notion of distinction – the premise that social identities are formed primarily in the arena of consumption practices and preferences (taste). Famously, “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier” - the ways of relating to and judging objects and practices mark out the systems of dispositions and it situates people in their social class (Bourdieu, 1984:6). Objects are not independent of interests and tastes of those who perceive them and they do not impose a universal, unanimously approved meaning (Bourdieu, 1984). Through the cultural practice of consumption and judgement, a person’s social knowledge can be read and this reading consequently attaches value to a person. Indeed, people are classified or located at a particular social position by the distinctions they make between “the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (Bourdieu, 1984:6). Taste is inseparable from a specific cultural competence. One’s taste indicates one’s knowledge of and relationship to specific objects and practices that make up one’s cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Underlying this idea of taste is the sense of distinction, or symbolic capital, which is the categorizing principal that creates social collectivities in ways that produce lifestyle coherence (Weininger, 2004). A coherent lifestyle emerges because people bearing similar symbolic capital are attracted to one another, hence, setting up a reproductive mechanism for a social collectivity that is organized around a dominant culture in the
collectivity. For instance, middle-class employees who consider themselves “cosmopolitans” may enjoy going to whisky bars and would see themselves as socially distinct from employees who enjoy going to Chinese karaoke bars after work. This distinction is then sustained through the continued investment of symbolic capital over time, which, in turn, maintains the social collectivity. Simultaneously, this sense of distinction creates and sustains a sense of difference between the whisky-drinking group and the karaoke-bar group. One could argue that the identities of these two groups become mutually constitutive – linked by the relationship of distinction from/with each other.

Crucial to Bourdieu’s class analysis is the explanation of practice – rather than simply discourse. Bourdieu uses the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle of class habitus - the implicit bodily know-how and competencies that characterize his notion of class. It is an internalized form of class condition where actions are generated neither by the explicit consideration of norms (that is, the upfront consideration of “rules”) nor by rational calculation (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984). In other words, in social life, under the person’s “typical” circumstances, action can proceed on a pre-reflexive basis and can be highly spontaneous without recourse to conscious reflection on rules or approximation of results (Weininger, 2004). Indeed, an individual’s disposition is the “practical mastery of the social structure as a whole which reveals itself through the sense of the position occupied in that structure” (Bourdieu, 1991:235. Italics added). It is this sense which orients the expenditure and allows for the expression of economic and cultural capital of the person. In other words, habitus is the embodied dispositional schema that allows individuals to take certain aspects of social life for granted as a result
of their position in a social field. Habitus is also not primarily located at the point of production but is a continuous, on-going production of accepted practices. In short, habitus is the individual’s \textit{practical state} of living as a class-ed being. At the same time, one’s social position is created from his or her volume and composition of capital, which, in turn, is informed by their class background. In this sense, habitus in practice (or the “doing” of a person’s disposition), is also a practice in reproducing cultural class-ed practices and dispositions.

\textit{Theoretical dialogues: Bourdieu meets Marx}

As mentioned earlier, the recognition of an objective social reality – that is, conditions which limit some while enabling others – and its embedded power underlies Bourdieu’s model. Through the internalization of cognitive and evaluative structures that organizes our vision of the world in accordance with the “objective structures of a determinate state of the social world”, the habitus creates and is created through the \textit{socially informed body}. Our tastes, distastes, compulsions and repulsions – our \textit{senses} – never escape the structuring action of social determinisms so much so that these determinants even create our sense of necessity and sense of duty, our sense of aesthetic, common sense, sense of humour, sense of morality, sense of practicality, sense of propriety and so on (Bourdieu, 1977: 124). Indeed, this is where Bourdieu’s class analysis takes on a Marxist tone. Bourdieu discerns a working class habitus that is “antithetical” to that of the dominant class: the “taste for necessity” (1984: 374). The petite bourgeoisie exhibits a lifestyle born of the combination of an aspiration to the

\footnote{For other ways in which Bourdieu engages with a Marxist dialogue, see for example Burawoy, 2011.}
bourgeois lifestyle on the one hand and insufficient economic or cultural capital to attain it on the other. Its members are therefore inclined to be “lacking culture” through the eyes of the bourgeois – hence, the judgment of taste by the middle class as a type of social domination.

More urgently here, I want to highlight that there is a Marxist slant to Bourdieu’s argument that goes beyond expanding or seeking parallels between the two thinkers’ ideas of capital. Bourdieu argues that “technical or ritual practices are determined by the material conditions of existence…as treated in practice by agents endowed with schemes of perception of a determinate sort, which are themselves determined … by the material conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1977: 116) (For example, the commuting Johorean working in a hair salon in Singapore would tell me that she “doesn’t understand how people can spend $2000 on a handbag”). This is to emphasize that while Bourdieu discusses at length the cultural dimensions of class at the scale of the individual’s bodily practices, he does not leave the economy out of it. Rather, social formations and differentiations are necessarily conditioned by economic bases – the habitus is inherently a product of the various economic resources differently available to individuals in a given field. The empirical discussion of people’s social class position must therefore always be linked to their economic capital. In other words, social reproduction is not only tied to the relations of economic production but is another form of entrenched social domination. If everything suggests a belief that there is a correlation between people’s incomes and consumption habits, it is because taste is almost always the product of economic conditions. Attitudes of prudence and thrift, amongst the working class, are therefore regulated by their specific positions in the division of labour, by their own economy of
means. This form of regulation and domination is arguably more deeply entrenched as domination no longer needs to be exerted in a direct way when it is “entailed in possession of means … of appropriating the mechanisms of the field of production and the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1977: 184). Social reproduction takes on relations of domination that are rendered dynamic between individuals and at the same time, become social formations that are mediated by objective, institutionalized mechanism to the point of being invisible. As Wacquant states, “class lies in neither structures nor in agency alone but in their relationship as it is historically produced, reproduced and transformed” (1991: 51). Social class, it could be argued, can only arise through the conjunction of these two partially independent forces and it bears repeating that both structure and people’s agency are very much shaped by the unequal distribution of economic resources. If Marx was right in saying that economic relations are very much social relations, then this part of the discussion shows that social relations and more specifically, habituses, are themselves powerfully conditioned and differentiated by economic relations as well. Hence, it is reasonable to argue that objective differences reproduce themselves in the subjective experience of difference (Weininger, 2004).

While Bourdieu’s Marxist tones also infuse his recognition of the importance of a dominating structure through the objectification of people’s cultural capital (namely, education), I would argue that there are points where his theory falters. He argues that the institutionalization of academic qualifications sets a single standard and creates a single market which guarantees the convertibility of cultural capital into money or economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977: 187). While this claim might have some validity for the France that Bourdieu studied, my data on Singapore shows, however, that this convertibility
encounters friction – a sort of “return to sender”, if you will – when we speak of different bodies. There were Bangladeshis I spoke to, for example, who hold tertiary academic qualifications yet these were rendered by the state as “irrelevant” or “unrecognized” while applying for work in Singapore. Middle-class financial professionals, on the other hand, often held university degrees (which, granted, may or may not be in banking and finance) and these were always a factor in their gaining employment. Convertibility, hence, often holds true for this group. This illustrates that convertibility is itself a class-ed/class-ifying practice as well as a class privilege for some and not for others. One could argue then that this twist suggests a move to disenfranchise certain peoples such that their labour becomes more exploitable. I will go on to elaborate this in the empirical chapters.

Bourdieu also argues that the objectification achieved by institutionalizing one’s credentials is “inseparable from the objectification which the law guarantees by defining permanent positions which are distinct from the biological individuals holding them…” (1977: 187). This is to say that through the act of objectification, the law is able to produce and guarantee the social value of certain qualifications more than others. Once the state of affairs is established – such as through administration documents like work visa/permits and their accompanying rights, privileges and restrictions – the relations of power and domination no longer exist apparently between individuals: they are set up in pure objectivity between institutions which, in turn, continue to reproduce social producers. Indeed, the most successful ideologies are those disguised as “objective mechanisms”, a “legitimating discourse” with the function of bringing about displacement and diversion, camouflage and legitimation (Bourdieu, 1977: 188). In this formation and maintenance of labour as an objectified resource to be dominated and
exploited – Bourdieu’s position parallels Marx’s notion of class relations within waged labour. In order to understand how this structure affects the subjective experience of people within work, one could examine the variations in their work conditions: degrees of autonomy, closeness of supervision, physical demands of work, promotion aspects, job mobility, and so on. These can be treated as sources of variation in work experience amongst the working classes⁴ - that is, people occupying working class locations within classed relations (Wright, 2005). These practices and processes regulate the relationship between labour and capital; to construct and control the relationships between workers, their employers and the state. This serves to discipline and regulate labour by containing particular labouring bodies in particular spaces of association (for example, Bangladeshi construction workers in company-provided housing) and within certain mechanisms of dispute resolution, thus undermining the possibility of labour collectivities (such as unions) (Kelly, 2002). Local labour regimes function as a mode of social regulation derived from an integrated relationship between the processes and institutions of production, work, consumption and labour reproduction in a particular setting (Kelly, 2002). I would argue then that the different incorporation of various workers – in this case, the middle-class financial workers, the Johorean commuters and the Bangladeshi migrant workers by Singaporean state policies – construct and perpetuate institutionalized class differences between different labouring bodies.

**Critical cosmopolitanism**

*The rootedness of peoples in place (the geographical rootedness of the nation-state in particular) draws us rather awkwardly back to Kant’s actual*

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⁴ I use this term broadly here.
geographical world characterized by folly and aggression, childish vanity and destructiveness, the world of prejudice that cosmopolitanism must counteract or actively suppress in the name of human progress. It takes but a small step then to see geographies and spatialities (and local loyalties) not only as disrupters of order and of rational discourse, but as undermining universal morality and goodness. They become, as with Kant’s Geography, the fount of all prejudice, aggression, and evil.
- Harvey, 2000: 545

Theorizations of cosmopolitanism often invoke the 18th century intellectual legacy of Immanuel Kant, who envisaged a global citizen and moral community of humanity, while at the same time peddling some decidedly racist and ignorant assessments of large segments of that humanity (Vertovec and Cohen, 2003). David Harvey picks up on the contradiction in Kant’s writings and notes that while “cosmopolitanism is back” on the academic agenda, the cosmopolitanisms described are often underpinned by geographical ignorance, prejudice and the exercise of power (2000). It is precisely such ungrounded – in every geographical sense of the word – knowledge that has propelled colonial projects (through missionaries, mercantialism, etc). Indeed, this uncritical at best and false at worst brand of geographical knowledge powerfully served to justify racial superiorities that pervaded colonial thought and xenophobia. Perhaps more frightening of all within this strand of thought, these atrocities can be easily reconciled with universal rights and ethics (often masked with words such as “meritocracy”). Indeed, “perpetual peace” appears to be vernacular principles that have been universalized to operate as an intensely discriminatory practice disguised as the universal good! Thus, according to Harvey, cosmopolitan pronouncements are not matched by an understanding of otherness and other places, or the actual practice of such a world-view (Ye and Kelly, 2011). To the extent that geography is an empirical form of knowledge that is contingent and particular
upon local conditions, spatial ordering produces regional and local truths and laws rather than universals. Harvey laments however, that even among the well-educated youth today, this spatial ordering appears to be lacking. While many of us may be able to tout the rhetoric of Kant’s philosophy of a moral universal humanity, our practical ethics still needs much work in terms of understanding geographical knowledges. As he quotes Foucault, “space is fundamental to any form of communal life, then space must also be fundamental to any exercise of power” (538). The implication here is that spaces outside of power are impossible to achieve. To the extent that human life unfolds across space, it is therefore necessarily infused with and perhaps even only ontologically possible with power. A cosmopolitanism devoid of geographical knowledge hence fails to give tangible meaning to the way space is fundamental to the exercise of power, which in turn, stops any realization of true democracy in its tracks. Indeed, the transnationalization of capital does not affect everyone the same way but rather, it is upon the reconfigured division of labour which the global economy, and at a smaller but no less dynamic scale, the global city thrives (Sassen, 1998). Networks of service sector workers are stretching across spaces and traversing borders (sometimes daily!) to keep hospitals, hotels, roads and factories clean and running. The labour force assembled to run the production, exchange and consumption within the global city are often drawn from across national boundaries yet live much of their economic lives very locally and very differently, depending on where they are located within the class spectrum.

The subjectivities of people who cross borders and of those who experience transnationalism in situ (such as the middle class Singaporeans who work in a bank staffed by people from various backgrounds) also take on a more local dimension. As
Hannerz suggests, there are “people who remain within networks in which largely the same or closely related meanings and meaningful forms reach them through all relationships” (1992:44). Along with transnational capitalist connections and ideas, people continue to perform and reproduce their multiple identities through networks of shared gender, national and ethnic meanings. Hannerz also notes that it is the global relationships of people that “play major parts in the making of contemporary world cities” (1992:50). There is, hence, a spatial aspect to the performance and reproduction of these non-economic networks and in the long run, these social networks cannot be “seen …in isolation…they must be viewed in the aggregate, as a pattern of parallel, crosscutting or overlapping connections” (Hannerz, 1992:47). This view recognizes that people’s movements across borders are embedded with multiple-subjectivities that precede, parallel and sometimes even contradict their economic class identities, depending on where they are located within the division of labour.

As mentioned earlier, cosmopolitanism has popularly been associated with global economic elites and their consumption practices. This does little to illustrate the diverse ways in which transnationals – not only the middle-classes but also the globalized working classes – organize their social-cultural networks and multiple identities as well as the ways in which they make sense of their transnational experiences. I agree with Vertovec and Cohen that cosmopolitanism is also an attitude or disposition and a practice (2003). Hannerz argues that “the perspective of the cosmopolitan must entail relationships to a plurality of cultures and this entails… a willingness to engage with the Other” (1990: 239). Ley suggests that “cosmopolitans think globally, aim to exceed their own local specificities, welcome unfamiliar cultural encounters and express the wish to
move towards a true humanity…free of racial, national and other prejudices” (Ley, 2004:159). Cosmopolitanism then, is the intellectual stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences and such an attitude can only come with time and experience through travel and adaptation (Vertovec and Cohen, 2003:13). In this regard, to be a cosmopolitan is not only to partake in the same exclusive lifestyles with bourgeois tastes wherever members of the transnational capitalist class travel as Sklair suggests, but to gather enough cultural capital to accept diversity in both local and cross-border experiences (2001). Indeed, cosmopolitanism also suggests an inclusive attitude towards people of different social backgrounds. In other words, cosmopolitanism can be understood as the “cultural habitus of globalization” (Ley, 2004).

This leads the discussion of the integration and negotiation of cosmopolitan dispositions into everyday life practices, where people learn to live with difference in a diverse setting (Valentine, 2008). Cosmopolitanism is also a matter of practice and competence which is “marked by a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting as well as building up the skill of maneuvering through systems of meaning” (i.e. the “know-how”) (Vertovec and Cohen, 2003:13). Successful cosmopolitanism, therefore, requires an on-going negotiation of daily cultural conditions to which we are not accustomed. In short, effective cosmopolitanism is the ability to put that cultural open-ness into practice.

I engage with a type of critical cosmopolitanism, one which not only debunks the myth of elites as rational economic actors, but in the bid to engage the “Other”, a cosmopolitanism that recognizes the multiplicity of issues, questions, processes and problems that affect and bind people, regardless of where they were born, reside and
work. The main problems confronting many seeking employment and inclusion in the
global economy that I address here are the issues of access to work and equity among
different workers in the global city. I demonstrate that class is reproduced through
various practices and discursive strategies that are “cosmopolitan” – a problem that can
be unpacked through an examination of workers from different classes. I show that social
exclusions and conflict resulting from the cosmopolitanization of the Singaporean labour
force – at a smaller scale, of individuals – become barriers against entry of certain groups
of people into certain types of work.
Chapter 2: Methodology: the extended case method

*When the ground beneath us is always shaking, we need a crutch.*
- Burawoy, 1998:4

In this section, I discuss my data collection methods. The data collection methods and theoretical framework I use are designed to directly address the research questions I have outlined in the introductory chapter. I will first recount the ways in which I operationalized and interpreted my data collection among the three different groups of workers. I will note my interview design, recruitment strategies, and location of the interviews. I will also address some of the difficulties and tensions I encountered while in the field. By noting these tensions, I attend to positionality issues that could have been a result of my own identity and my own social geography, hence, pointing out the limitations of my research. I also discuss how I negotiated potential ethical issues while working with different groups of workers, in particular the Bangladeshi workers. Finally, I discuss how I reconcile my “ethnographic condition” – the execution of my methods, my empirical findings and preexisting theories – by drawing upon Burawoy’s work on the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998: 5).

*Research design*

The fieldwork was conducted in Singapore from October 2008 to December 2009. I continue to use Singapore as a fieldsite as I had for both my Honours and Masters research because of its distinctiveness. It is a developmental city-state which artfully executes neoliberal strategies in the shaping of its labour market with a capacity that no other global city has as the thesis will go on to show. As I illustrated in other chapters as
well, Singapore is also an example of a case study that contributes to existing debates on class in the global city. I had originally planned to examine the reproduction of social class in Singapore only amongst financial professionals and Johorean commuters. I had chosen these two groups of workers primarily because of the theoretical possibilities that could come out of comparatively analyzing these two groups. Their work experiences have also not been well-documented in the Singaporean context. After I started volunteering regularly with a Singapore-based NGO for migrant workers, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), however, I came into contact with the Bangladeshi migrants who had previously been on work permits until various employment disputes rendered them jobless and homeless. I decided that the story of class in Singapore could not be told without also addressing their class situations. I was very much encouraged by Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang whose work on female live-in domestic workers on work permits in Singapore illustrate how certain groups of workers, specifically, Third World women are systematically marginalized and disempowered as (re)productive bodies in the labour market. I contribute to this body of work by discussing how Third World men are also vulnerable to the precarities of the work permit system by talking to men who have fallen through the cracks of this system. I shall discuss the ethical concerns of the ways in which I recruited this group of respondents later on in this section.

As Yeung pointed out, “choosing the right kind of data required is perhaps the most crucial moment in any methodological framework” (2003: 447). How does one go about understanding and illustrating the reproduction of class within a division of labour that is comprised significantly of different migrants? Yeung argues that much of
neoclassical economic geography was concerned with what Philo succinctly termed “things that count” (Philo, 1998; cited in Yeung, 2003: 447). Some of my data is quantitative, such as data on wages and statistics on foreign employees in Singapore that I collected from government websites. I am, however, studying people as social actors whose experiences are not always constituted by measurable objects. As a result, I had to rely on an ethnographic study that comprised of qualitative techniques such as interviews and participant observation.

Furthermore, rather than studying people who are cut off from the rest of the world, I am studying (dis)connections and (im)mobilities brought on by the crossing of national borders. I am examining workers whose lives are lived, whose identities are constituted with ties across scales and boundaries. While multisited ethnography holds much potential in the study of borderlands, migration and cultural differences, I am not simply examining the people in different locales (Burawoy, 2009: 201). Rather than to show how people’s lives change across sites, I seek to show how difference among different groups of workers in Singapore is constituted and I argue that to truly understand these differences, we have to look beyond the national borders of Singapore to their sending areas. Indeed, Barnes argued that “new economic geographers are engaging in an intellectual project that … abandons any notion of progress, accepts that subjects are made and not given …” (1996: 49). In constituting these distinct sites (i.e. Bangladesh, Johor and Singapore), I am thematizing differences, rather than connections as the focus. In other words, I look at different sites to understand and account for the differences amongst different groups more so than – but without neglecting the importance of – the connections amongst them. This is, as Burawoy terms, the “multicase
ethnography” (2009: 202). As he argues, it is the “comparison of cases constituted with a view to understanding and explaining their difference… only then, when we have constituted the case, can we think about connections” (Burawoy, 2009:203). It was this focus on difference that highlighted for me the discrepancies between empirical reality and theoretical prescription. I argue that it is through the understanding of how difference is constructed in this multicultural labour force can we gain greater analytical purchase in the concept of cosmopolitanism. As I indicated in the introduction, I look at different groups of workers and their livelihoods to illustrate the politics of cosmopolitanism in Singapore. In other words, I use the multicase ethnography to illustrate the power relations that take on, primarily, a class dimension that undergird cosmopolitanism. I argue that to address these discrepancies, it would be required to develop a self-reflexive extension of theory. I shall return to this point towards the end of this chapter.

I used a variety of methods to collect my field data that differed according to the group of workers with whom I was speaking. I chose the interview method over participant observation when I was speaking with the middle-class financial professionals – that is, managers, executives, traders, vice-presidents, etc. – for a number of reasons. As a grad student, it would have been difficult to access a financial institution to conduct participant observation. My previous experience of speaking with them for my Masters’ research also taught me that employees do not feel and behave neutrally knowing that their exchanges with one another could very well be documented in my research. My previous experience also showed that middle-class financial workers are comfortable articulating to me their work experience in a private interview setting. Individual, private interviews were chosen over group interviews so respondents did not have to worry about
elaborating their opinions on social relations in the workplace in front of others in the industry, let alone the same company. Individual interviews also had the added advantage over focus group interviews by allowing more in-depth questions and responses. As I was examining issues of class and cosmopolitanism, it was important to recruit people of diverse backgrounds. I interviewed fifteen financial professionals of diverse social positions representing different genders, various ethnicities, races and nationalities. Several of them were people I had previously interviewed for my Masters’ research. I also recruited respondents through snowball sampling and through my own social networks. I was also consciously recruiting people who held a variety of vocations in the bank so as to demonstrate how particular identity performances at work may or may not vary across different departments. Out of the fifteen financial professionals, twelve would be employees of various departments in the financial institutions, while three would be human resource personnel.

My primary research with the financial professionals was carried out through semi-structured, private, in-person interviews that took place over lunch, coffee, or sometimes over happy hour at a location of the interviewee’s choice. I decided to let the respondents choose the interview location mostly for convenience in terms of proximity to their workplace. The decision had the added advantage of enabling the respondents to be more candid and at ease with providing information on potentially sensitive issues such as ethnic relations at the multicultural workplace. I also decided to use a semi-structured format for the interview so that the questions that were prepared served as a guide to lead the interview, yet, still let the interview take on a conversational flow. Often, the respondents’ eloquence on some topics would lead to questions that were not
planned. To concentrate on picking up interesting points, I decided against taking notes during the interview and relied solely on a tape recorder. I also went by myself to several of the bars and cafes they told me they frequent as part of my participant-observation technique. Fieldwork truly is neither objective nor subjective – it is “intersubjective” (Mills, 1999: 23). I found myself more at ease at these places than, say, the many times I walked around the alleys and parks in Little India with my Bangladeshi respondents or in the work places of some of my Johorean respondents.

I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the Johorean commuters as well, using a mixture of English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Aside from the interview method, I was also able to conduct participant observation with the Johorean commuters for my primary data. I interviewed fifteen Johorean commuters in total, all of whom were on work-permits, meaning that none of them earned more than SGD$1,800 a month. There was again with a mixture of genders, vocations and ethnicities. I recruited a number of them at the causeway while I either was making the commute on the bus myself or with another respondent. These interviews were conducted during the commuting journey while waiting in line for the bus and on the bus itself. I recruited the rest through my own social network and snowball sampling. A personal friend of mine knew two Johorean commuters working at City Plaza as hairdressers, a shopping mall in the Eastern part of Singapore and through this network, I was able to recruit ten other commuters, six of whom worked in City Plaza and four others working in other places. I was able to interview these ten commuters at their workplaces, mostly during their breaks or when it was less crowded in the shop. While there were times this was difficult, especially if the employer was around, being in their workplace also allowed me to
observe them at work. I obtained their full consent also in noting down my observations while at their workplaces. Some of the Johoreans were also curious about my own trajectory, asking me questions about how I decided to study at UBC, if the fees were expensive, if it was difficult to be a Chinese person living in Canada and so on. One of them also arranged for me to meet his teenage daughter. He was keen to send her overseas for her university education and wanted me to speak with her about my experiences living abroad. This obviously reflected my status as a Singaporean-Chinese woman who has been educated in two Canadian cities. I could have been a living representation of the prestige and possibilities that working in Singapore could entail.

I faced a different set of challenges when I conducted fieldwork with the 25 Bangladeshi male migrants who became my respondents. The interview method was most difficult with this group of workers for a number of reasons, although I still conducted semi-structured interviews with those who were comfortable enough with the tape recorder. While I picked up basic Bengali during the first three months of my volunteering with them and while many of them are able to speak simple English, there were still some language barriers during interviews. I engaged the help of a native Bengali speaker for two interviews but quickly abandoned this technique as the respondents seemed uncomfortable having an “insider” between myself and them. While this highlighted to me the advantages of my positionality, there were also times my identity posed discomfort. There were a few times my gender became a sort of barrier. For example, there were times the men would speak amongst themselves and when I tried asking them what they were talking about, I was met with “You are a lady. We cannot tell you”. My initial anger at these sentiments were driven by my own habitus, yet, this
eventually highlighted to me the forms of masculinity that are dominant in the men’s social contexts. Fieldwork, therefore, as Mills says, “engages people in the construction and interpretation of their own and others’ identities” (Mills, 1999: 23). There were also two instances when my identity led to solicitations and invitations to semi-official events. The Bangladeshi High Commission learnt about my research and my volunteering and invited me to two Eid celebrations. Upon arrival, I was immediately ushered past the several hundred men – who must have stood in line for a few hours – to a front row seat. I was not sure if these invitations were entirely without strings attached. My presence at these events may have been used to increase the status of the officials who invited me.

It was also difficult for these men to speak about their suffering in a coherent manner. I learnt that participant observation and informal conversations with them yielded the richest fieldwork data. They would often invite me on walks around Singapore’s Little India, showing me their daily geographies: where they were sleeping, their lawyers’ offices, where they liked to eat or simply socialize with other Bangladeshis. There were also times they invited me to eat with them or to participate in festivities such as Bengali New Year and Eid. It was during these times that our conversations flowed most easily. I spoke with twenty-three Bangladeshi male migrants, all of whom are currently on Special Pass and used to be on work permits. I met all of them through the Meals Programme organized by TWC2 for which I was volunteering.

I was aware of the ethical issues arising from my methods of research. As with the two other groups of respondents, I explained to the Bangladeshi men my project and that even parts of our informal conversations could be written into my thesis. I also explained to them that they could stop participating in the project at any time. I engaged the help of
some native Bengali speakers who had a good command of English where this may have been lost in translation. There were also ethical issues surrounding my recruitment method – I was at first a volunteer and later on, a researcher as well. I felt that the first three months of volunteering helped me build invaluable rapport with this group of workers, even though I did not start volunteering with the intention of including this group in my research. Also, while being a volunteer may have caused some men to feel obligated to respond to me as a researcher, I felt that my position as a volunteer meant that I would be able to point them in a useful direction should they require help, even if I was not able to help them myself. I was also wary of further “exploiting” them as they were still giving me their time, even though they were no longer employed. To compensate them for their time and help, I launched a photo exhibition in Little India, featuring portraits of the men that I photographed over an eight-month period. I got the men’s input on which photographs they wanted displayed at the exhibit. I also had them read the narratives I would be presenting alongside the photographs to get their input on the content and flow of my writing. Aside from raising public awareness of the problems these men were facing, all the funds from the entrance fees of the photo exhibit also went towards the Meals Programme to pay for the men’s daily breakfasts and dinners.

Further, I was also aware of the potential symbolic violence exerted through the relationship between researcher and respondent. As Bourdieu argues, it should not be thought that “simply by virtue of reflexivity, the sociologist can ever completely control the multiple and complex effects of the interview relationship …this is a situation in which in evoking, as the research invites them to do, “what’s wrong” with their lives, they expose themselves to all the negative assumptions that burden these problems and
misfortunes…” (1999: 615). This potentially becomes a subtle form of objectification, particularly where the researcher assists the respondents in disclosing painful details of their experiences. Social agents, as Bourdieu says, do not “innately possess a science of what they are and what they do. More precisely, they do not necessarily have access to the core principles of their discontent or their malaise…” (1999: 620). Through my interactions with them, then, no matter how aware or careful I may have been about reducing the power asymmetry between the respondent and myself, the very reason for and the structure of the interaction already compounds a particular form reinforcing the power difference. The theories I brought to the field – my preconceptions, if you will - also affected the way I framed my interaction with them. The acts of transcribing and writing could also further exemplify the ambiguity or even confusion in symbolic effects (Bourdieu, 1999: 623). For example, I often present my “case studies” in verbatim – that is, in letting the quotes speak for themselves. While I hope that this technique conveys the emotional force behind much of the data, it is also worthy to consider if the remarks I have presented – sometimes racist, sometimes patriarchal – are simply reinforcing racism or sexism. In Burawoy’s terms, am I reproducing the colour bar? (1998). I do not have a simple answer to this but I do hope that in owning up to my struggle with this, I am taking responsibility for my research actions.

These different groups of workers, while connected through the division of labour in Singapore, were also occupying very difficult positions within this division and hence, faced very difficult problems of class in their everyday work lives. Before I left for the field, I was predisposed to relying on Bourdieu’s notions of class to understand the processes of class reproduction in Singapore. This assumption, while not entirely without
merit, quickly collided with the dangers and exploitation that I learnt were the realities of some workers more than others. It was working with this group of Bangladeshi male migrants that I learnt how urgently their situations must be understood in terms of exploitation – a point which Marx’s arguments on class would have been able to illuminate. It also became clear that Marx could not provide the nuances of class reproduction in ways that Bourdieu can with his more culturally inflected notions of class. This did not mean that Bourdieu’s notions of class no longer held validity when discussing the Bangladeshi male migrants or Marx in discussing the financial professionals but rather, that these theories required an extension because of the continued relevance they could provide together. As Mann argues, “…although history forever challenges theory, it does not render it redundant” (2007: 10). It was through the extended case method that I was able to reconcile the discrepancies between theoretical prescriptions and my empirical data (Burawoy, 1998). There were also “context effects” which I could not, did not want to ignore (Burawoy, 1998: 7). As Burawoy argues (1998:7),

We can either live with the gap between positive principles and practice, all the while trying to close it. OR formulate an alternative model of science that takes context as its point of departure that thematizes our presence in the world we study. That alternative … when applied to the technique of participant observation, gives rise to the extended case method.

I find his emphasis on taking context into serious consideration while (re)working with theory very useful. Indeed, if methodology is not “theoretically innocent”, then for it to become an asset rather than impediment, one needs to be theoretically self-conscious along the way (Burawoy, 2009: 248). Aside from being reflexive about my own positionality as a researcher, it is this form of reflexivity about theory and the empirical
world it tries to analyze that lends a sense of credibility to narrative-driven research. After all, the France that Bourdieu was writing about is a significantly different context from the one on which I am working. This method of research – a sort of “empirical theorizing”, if you will – provided me with both a sense of liberation from and also a sense of heightened awareness of theoretical normativity. Furthermore, such reflexivity in research reduces the effects of power from the researcher by reducing the normativity in prescribed theory and taking into account empirical friction encountered on the ground. It is this uncovering of local processes, this situating of knowledges that can deepen preexisting theory such that it continues to be useful in spite of the different space/time dimensions (Burawoy, 1998: 21).

In the weaving together and presentation of the empirical data and theoretical frameworks, I had to further impose organization of very personal testimonies with which my respondents trusted me. The provision of headings and subheadings, paragraphing and bullet-points, made for a comprehensive reading more so for the reader than the respondent. What is for me to highlight in this thesis is the extraordinary. For the respondent, it is the ordinary. The act of writing then is a further “objectivating distance”, presenting the respondent as an object – which is embedded within yet the opposite of what I want to achieve in this thesis (Bourdieu, 1999: 625). As I have mentioned earlier, these are difficulties and ambiguities within the research process – the conception of the work, the theories I have chosen, the methods of data-collection, the transcription, the writing – for which I have no direct answers. I can try to reproduce the viewpoint of my respondents and resituate it within a particular research context but I recognize my own privileged viewpoint and normativities that are intrinsic within the research process.
largely because I had to answer my research questions. It is through this admission, this objectification of myself and the work I have done here that I claim responsibility towards the people who have made this research possible.
Chapter 3: Contextualizing class and work in Singapore

The central purpose of this thesis is to understand how class is reproduced through the project of cosmopolitanism in Singapore as experienced by the groups of workers in its differentiated labour force. As Peck argues, all labour markets are “locally constituted” (1996: 95). Each local labour market is unique in that it reflects a unique intersection of its causal processes. Although every single labour market is entrenched with its own gender and ethnic stratification, these do not have universal outcomes. Indeed, these processes are also not operating across tabula rasa but their realization are very much a result of inherited social, economic and institutional geographies of the labour market. Prior forms of geographically uneven development always recreate or at least shape emergent geographies of work (Peck, 1996). This chapter will show that while an appropriate field site given its state-led globalization projects, the prominence of a transnational workforce, and the importance of its international division of labour for its economic growth, Singapore is not the only place where these processes can be witnessed. Rather, it is a case-study where broader themes of class, cosmopolitanism and identities can be understood in contemporary economic geography. The functioning of economic institutions and processes of social regulations are, I would argue, a useful starting point to understanding both the ways in which institutions matter to the operation of the economy as well as the ways in which people are situated in the division of labour, which eventually shapes the ways in which they lead their lives. As such, my aim here is simply to lay the contextual groundwork for understanding the transnational profile of Singapore’s labour force in terms of state discourses and practices, rather than to elaborate at length about the historical development of Singapore’s economic growth.
I will start by briefly going through the post-colonial development of Singapore’s economy, which closely follows the developmental state model. I will then discuss the state’s involvement in the management of ethnic relations to provide the context for multiculturalism in Singapore. With references to ministerial speeches, statements on government websites and documents, I will then highlight the official discourses that promote and handle the introduction of foreign workers into the Singaporean economy, particularly those who are seen as providing “unskilled” labour. Finally, I will illustrate the materiality of these discursive reproductions with reference to corresponding policies on foreign workers in Singapore.

Post-colonial development

As the founding myth of modern Singapore goes, Raffles landed on the island in 1819, which was run by a local Malay chief. Yet, in spite of the deep harbour and strategic location along major trading routes, it is interesting to note that Singapore was founded by circumstances, rather than by choice because the Dutch already had control over much of the surrounding region at the time. This move by the British was to prevent the Dutch from having a monopoly in the Malay Archipelago. An early event that proved key to Singapore’s commercial history was the Anglo-Dutch treaty in 1824, which ensured that Singapore would be kept as a British colony. This assurance made Singapore an attractive focal point in Southeast Asia for British commercial investment and Chinese immigration. The British brought in labour from neighbouring countries as well to expand the island’s labour pool. Trade surged but even by this time, Singapore was already a bustling multicultural entrepot, a status premised upon its extra-territorial
linkages, with international trade valuing at $11.4 million (Chew and Lee, 1991). From its very founding, thus, Singapore was already administered and developed as an international and regional economic hub, peopled by workers from beyond its national borders. At this time though, Singapore was not only extending a territorial reach but was also itself part of Britain’s empire.

Singapore’s free port status was not the only factor in its success – as shown by failed free ports like Riau, Pontianak and Sambas (its Dutch rivals) (Huff, 1994). Singapore worked because it was colonized by the world’s largest and most powerful industrial and imperial force. Hence, Singapore was founded at the right time and the right place, answering a need for a port where Asian and Western merchants could meet for trade (Huff, 1994). By the time Singapore achieved self-governance from British colonial power in 1959, it was already an important and vibrant port - entrepot trade had laid the foundation for its future capitalist economy (Chew and Lee, 1991). Prior to self-governance, Singapore’s “endowment of immigrants”, paired with its comparative advantage in geographic location along the trade routes provided the means for material ambitions to be fulfilled (Huff, 1994:3). During the colonial period, it was this combination of immigration and geographical advantage that shaped the economic development of Singapore and it remains one of the features of Singapore’s economic development today.

As heavy reliance on entrepot trade, which had worked thus far in favour of Singapore and the British began to lose steam in the 1950s – it was no longer seen as reliable for providing employment to a growing young population and for generating economic growth (Huff, 1994; Chew and Lee, 1991). Industrialization was rationalized as
the next logical phase for the development of Singapore. Attention focused on developing other sectors of the economy, especially manufacturing, which could also generate growth in sectors, such as transport, finance, banking and construction. Apart from the distraction of Singapore’s political struggle for independence from the British, there were other constraints on immediate action to generate industrialization. Not least of these was the absence of an industrial bourgeoisie, since the fortunes of most members of the wealthy classes were trade-based, and linked to the interests of international capital (Huff, 1994). Hence, it would require a nurturance of the domestic population for Singapore to embark on its industrialization project. The state would in all likelihood have an important role to play in any strategy for industrialization (Huff, 1994).

The local governing body that came into power was the People’s Action Party (PAP) that was formally established in 1954 and won electoral success in 1959, when Singapore gained self-governance status from the British. The PAP was mainly comprised of English-educated upper class nationalists, headed by Lee Kuan Yew, himself a graduate from Cambridge University (Tremewan, 1994). The PAP leaders strongly believed that Singapore could only survive the new challenges that independence brought through a merger with Malaya (Hill and Lian, 1995). Aside from economic imperatives, there was also a very specific political reason behind this merger with Malaya: complete independence from colonial rule would be possible.

Import substitution industrialization (ISI), which would become the second stage of Singapore’s political economy, was the economic strategy to follow the move to merge with Malaya. This economic strategy could only succeed with the common market and political union with Malaya. In other words, ISI became the economic justification for the
larger political intention. It was precisely on this political-economic platform that the People’s Action Party (PAP) campaigned in the 1959 elections, after achieving self-governance from the British administration (Tremewan, 1994). The PAP’s battle for merger succeeded on September 16th 1963, and along with Sabah and Sarawak, Malaya and Singapore made up the Federation of Malaysia. Merdeka through the merger was, however, short-lived (Chew and Lee, 1991).

Singapore was thrust into reluctant independence from the Malaysian Federation on August 9th, 1965. This abrupt independence was the culmination of intense political and ethnic tensions between Malaysia and Singapore. This separation from the Malaysian Federation immediately placed Singapore in a precarious position, economically, politically and socially: an island-state with a largely Chinese population surrounded by large Muslim states, namely, Malaysia and Indonesia. It was also politically sensitive that the Malays were the minority in Singapore, a point which remains relevant when discussing contemporary politics. There were also socio-cultural issues that had to be addressed in this quest for industrialization and nation-building. As an immigrant, multi-ethnic community, Singapore had no common ethnic or linguistic identity binding its nation together. While the framework of a state was available, there was no common sense of national belonging that made people feel “Singaporean”, as opposed to feeling “Chinese” or “Malay”. Therefore, the desperation of the PAP leaders was understandable, given the ethnic divisions of its people, the lack of resources and the precarious geopolitics of Singapore’s location. The country also had few natural resources and had just lost its most important hinterland, Malaysia. ISI was no longer a workable economic

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5 This is a Malay word meaning independence from colonial rule which at the time was conceived of as possible only with the merger.
strategy. This political turmoil conditioned and delayed the question of industrialization in Singapore since there was the need to reorganize the relationship between the state and its citizen-subjects under a capitalist economic formation (Rodan, 1989:45; Mitchell, 2003). The PAP was also faced with another dilemma: prior to the merger, it had gone to great lengths to demonstrate that an independent Singapore was not viable. Now, ironically, it had to prove that earlier analysis wrong (Chew and Lee, 1991).

_Contextualizing class: regulating the labour regime by the Singapore state_

_- Export-oriented industrialization_

Following the short-lived merger with the Malayan Federation in 1965, the People’s Action Party (PAP) quickly adopted the Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI) strategy for rapid industrialization through manufacturing, solving urgent problems of mass unemployment. Arguably then, Singapore has extended its territorial reach for economic development from the time of its independence. To do so, the PAP went on to comprehensively promote all elements needed for EOI to succeed. It went about harnessing its ideological power by sponsoring a set of values and social attitudes largely through the “ideology of survival” to enhance the political legitimacy of its will to rule exclusively and without serious opposition. The “Asian values” of thrift and self-discipline in the PAP-defined “national interest” were promoted to curb all effective constitutional opposition and gain citizen acceptance of its authority and thus the PAP furthered its already extensive social control. The Party also firmly established the idea of meritocracy and elitism that further rationalized its structures of political control. The primacy of English was rationalized entirely on the basis of its utility for science,
technology and commerce; that is, it was essential for economic development both for its multicultural, multi-lingual population as well as for the global economy. The yearning to be competitive in the world export markets resulted also in the suppression of collective labour movements, reducing the bargaining power of unions, lowering wages and expanding the prerogatives of management. As Rodan argues, with labour costs and compliance now crucial to the industrial strategy, the political defeat of labour was considered essential (1989: 91). The creation of the National Trade Union Council (NTUC) by the PAP curbed militant unionism and brought labour into part of the corporate structure of the Singapore state (Rodan, 1989). The provision of cheap and docile labour was not the only element of the government’s strategy. The PAP also went on to add to the island’s competitiveness by investing heavily in infrastructure and a range of direct and indirect subsidies of private capitals’ establishment and operating costs. In that sense, Singapore’s ambitions to tap into the world economy have motivated dramatic changes within the city-state itself (Rodan, 1989).

With the stress on exports, the government turned increasingly to foreign investors, for it was evident that only the well-established Western and Japanese firms and to a lesser extent, other Asian firms could compete outside the region, where advanced technology, management, expertise, access to capital, efficient marketing as well as established markets gave them a decided edge. Foreign investment – extra-territorial capital mainly from the US, the UK and Japan – responded to government encouragement and economic opportunities. From 1965 to 1976, the value of foreign asset holdings in manufacturing increased 24fold (Rodan, 1989). Much of this resulted from the aforementioned state-directed infrastructure development and labour policies.
The investment climate was also friendly to foreign companies with exemption from import duties. Promotion centers were set up in the financial centers in foreign countries to promote Singapore as an offshore manufacturing base (Rodan, 1989).

Corrective wage policy

Towards the mid to late 1970s, Singapore started facing labour shortages. It was until then believed that the country could feature both low and mid-technology labour side by side. Yet, it appeared less so by the 1970s. The government’s desire to increase the amount of higher-value added production was conditioned primarily by the increasing value of the Singapore dollar which raised production costs in the country. Furthermore, Singapore would soon lose its “developing country” status at the World Bank, which would mean giving up its General System of Preferences trade benefits on labour intensive products (Rodan, 1989). As the international investment climate picked up in 1978, Singapore policy-makers took on new strategies to move Singapore towards a more sophisticated technological base, thereby taking it out of competition with lower wage countries and lessening the pressure in labour-expansion for economic growth. Singapore turned to join the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) by re-positioning itself and moving the economy into higher levels of productivity and value-addition. To push for Singapore’s upward mobility in the NIDL, the state adopted the Corrective Wage Policy in 1979 to raise wage costs and increase higher valued productivity (Rodan, 1989). Generous tax and fiscal incentives were also provided for appropriate new investments and expansion of social and physical infrastructure to encourage the use of more capital in production. It had previously been assumed that the state’s holding down of wages had
distorted the actual market value of Singapore’s scarce labour – this increased production in low to middle technology industries in which Singapore no longer held comparative advantage (Rodan, 1989). While it may appear ironic that the state was looking to be more integrated within the NIDL by playing such a strong role again in determining wages, I would argue that this puzzle must be understood in the context of the developmental model as previously discussed. Indeed, a less cohesive, less powerful state would not have held the same capacity to carry out this measure. Manpower development was also supported by the government through various schemes administered by the state. Towards the generation of a more skilled local labour force, the government expanded education at all levels, especially at the tertiary levels with a whole range of new Research & Development (R&D) institutions established to meet the specific demands of this new phase of industrial development (Rodan, 1989). It must also be noted that in spite of the Corrective Wage Policy (CWP) and all its measures to shift the workforce towards higher productivity and increased wage levels, there has never been a minimum wage enforced upon employers in Singapore. Alongside the CWP, there is also a flexible wage system in place – a policy that shows the calculated steps taken to ensure that the country’s labour force remains in the state of productivity and competitiveness for developmental purposes. There remain laws and regulations today regarding the payment of salaries but, “(t)here is no minimum wage requirement in Singapore. (Employers) are free to negotiate salaries and salary increases with (their) employee(s)”\(^6\). In line with the developmental state characterization of Singapore, the CWP and its legacy in effect, required the disciplining of capital. More recently, the National Wage

Council (NWC) has suggested that “employers, unions and the government press on with concerted actions recommended in the January 2009 guidelines to cut costs, save jobs and enhance competitiveness” in the economic recession.

Trade unions

It has been noted that the heavy government involvement in the provision and promotion of export incentives and comparative advantages have been accompanied by a region-wide truncated labour movement in Southeast Asia (Kelly, 2002). While there is a general lack of active labour collectives in the region – for example, unions in the electronic sector are banned in Penang and in Cavite, Laguna in the Philippines, less than ten percent of the labour force is organized – I would argue that this is not the case in Singapore (Kelly, 2002). The labour movement in Singapore is thriving institutionally, yet, almost ironically, it has been subverted by the state to suit its developmental needs and as a mechanism of labour control.

Although the PAP had, in the 1960s, emphasized the necessity of a trade union movement that was responsive to government policy, new measures were being taken up in the 1970s to ensure that the NTUC and the government were aligned in their policies. The state was keenly aware that this new economic restructuring could only work with a co-operative union movement and an acquiescent labour force (Rodan, 1989). As Lee Kwan Yew, then Prime Minister of Singapore, said, “…only the overriding authority of political leadership saves the country from unnecessary conflict; for if challenged, the

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union leadership knows it must face the consequence of a collision of wills; few union leaders can doubt the outcome of such a clash” (quoted in Rodan, 1989: 156). Through the subsequent restructuring of trade unions, the government ensured – through measures such as arresting the leader of grassroots union organizations, Phew Yew Kok – that there would not be any remote possibility of power bases within organized labour that could challenge the PAP’s hegemony in general or, especially, its economic plans (Rodan, 1989). The state also encouraged the creation of various in-house unions which are an extension of industry-based unions. This move further weakened the organizational capacity of cross-industry labour and made it possible for company-specific needs to be more easily realized. This also served to let workers identify easily with the company and to make the ties between individual and corporate success less abstract while at the same time making it more difficult for labour activism to demand broader improvements (Kelly, 2002; Rodan, 1989). As Marx argues, the continued production of commodities and capital accumulation can only be possible through the disciplining of labour. To banish any doubts about this social contract, the restructuring of the economy was aided by the fracturing of collective bargaining power as well as through the ideological disciplining of workers.

Aligning the social organization of workers for the success of the economic restructuring process was also legally reinforced through the legislative changes made to the Trade Unions Act in December 1982 (Rodan, 1989). The objectives – conveyed through a gendered discourse – which still stand today were and are:

* To promote good industrial relations between workmen and employer.
* To improve the working conditions of workmen or enhance their economic and social status; or
To achieve the raising of productivity for the benefit of workmen, employers and the economy of Singapore.


Under the Trade Unions Act, labour actions such as picketing, strikes and lockouts are also rendered illegal – a move which has left Singapore strike-free since 1978 (Ministry of Manpower website). Marx asked if capitalists can create consent among workers under hierarchical and coercive conditions (Burawoy, 1985). It appears here that these legislative changes to enforce consent were intended to maximize the cooperation of unions in the restructuring process not just by reducing labour autonomy but also by helping to create ideological sympathy towards the government’s objectives. This is rationalized through the discourses of “productivity” and “upgrading”. In August 2009, at NTUC’s Employment and Employability Institute, the issue of reducing reliance on foreign workers cropped up with the main argument being that easy access to foreigners may be the reason workplace productivity is slipping. In an official press release two days later, the Manpower Minister, Gan Kim Yong reinforced the logic behind the government’s continued incorporation of foreign workers, saying that such measures may “create rigidity and distortion in the labour market, add costs to businesses and undermine their competitiveness” (Straits Times, 1st April 2009). Since April 2009, NTUC, together with the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) and with funding from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) started a non-governmental organization (NGO) called the Migrant Workers Center (MWC). It positions itself as a “bridge between NGO, MOM and employers in aiding foreign workers (that is, migrant workers on work permits) with salary disputes, injury compensation claims and food and shelter
needs” (Straits Times, 15th Jan 2010). In conjunction with the institutional and legislative changes to trade unions then, the state saw the need to instill amongst workers an ideological acceptance for the incorporation of foreigners into the local labour market. At a recent speech, Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew said, “Without them, the two IRs would not be built, all the schools, buildings would not be there…So when you grumble (about them) - Serangoon estate grumbles about the workers near the neighbourhood - please remember they're human beings. They come here to earn a living and do the heavy work for us. Without whom, you'll not be here”. Lee went on to say that if Singaporeans are disgruntled about having foreigners living and working in their midst, they must be prepared to upgrade their skills and productivity levels to keep the country’s economy competitive. To achieve this, Lee urges unions to encourage their members to take up state-subsidized re-training programmes (Today Online, 19th Feb 2010).

When the National Wages Council (NWC) issued its guidelines in January 2009, the Ministry of Trade and Industry forecasted Singapore’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2009 to drop between 2 and 5 percent. In agreeing to the guidelines, the trade union responded,

In this situation, it is right to be cautious. We must stay the course to save jobs for workers and prepare for the economic upturn. The Labour Movement believes that if we stop cutting costs to save jobs now, retrenchments will go up. And if we stop retraining workers and placing them into jobs, unemployment will rise… Companies should make judicious use of the flexible wage system and variable wage components to manage wage costs and match rewards to performance in a sustainable way.

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8 Lee is referring to the uproar from residents of an upper-middle class neighbourhood called Serangoon Gardens at the end of 2008 when the government announced the decision to convert an old school compound into a dormitory for male foreign workers.

Since 2004, the Singaporean state’s WoW! Fund programme has been providing subsidies of up to SG$20,000 for company employees to have an “improved work-life balance” through the training of HR managers, improved infrastructure for remote access to work from home, adding nursing rooms to workplaces for back-to-work mothers and so on (Ministry of Manpower website\(^{10}\)). From a Marxist point of view, these measures form a more elaborate network of social control and regulation to manufacture consent from workers. It is through consent that labour can be more readily extracted from working bodies, creating a complex form of capitalism where labour is rendered unfree not only through coercive means but through the calculated means of drawing ideological consent from labour and its representing organizations. This is further reinforced by “caring and fun” union measures such as providing discounts at supermarkets and leisure chalets for NTUC members (NTUC website: http://www.ntuc.org.sg/ntucunions/abt_ntuc.asp).

The global pursuit of flexible, docile, low-cost labour has encouraged industrial enterprises everywhere to reduce their fixed wage labour force, making payment systems more flexible and truncating labour collectivities (Little and Watts, 1998; Sayer and Walker, 1992). I hope it is clear from this section that the labour movement is not absent in Singapore. On the contrary, it is very much thriving through its co-optation by the state which closely regulates the developmental model. This has led to the genesis of a particular type of institutionalized social contract between capital and labour collectives –

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one that aligns the latter with purposes of the former. On a smaller, more intensive scale, these measures produce the competitive, enterprising working self in Singapore that is acquiescent to the capital demands of the developmental state. As with all developmental policies, the ways in which they are meant to be put into effect – that is, how they are governed – is different from its idealized representation, and the ways these affect individual lived experiences are always graduated (Ong, 2000). I will now go on discuss how the different segments of the labour pool are institutionalized as Singapore continues to globalize its workforce.

Managing a multi-ethnic city-state

With independence, there was also a shift in the way the governing body related to its people. The governing body had to face the challenge of imagining a common objective as a nucleus of nationhood. Socially and politically, building a nation-state out of an ethnically-diverse population with a complex background of economic, political, social and cultural differences has resulted in the PAP’s attempt to produce an overarching national identity and an ideology of “multiracialism” (Lai, 1995:17). This ideology officially gives separate but equal status to the Chinese, Malays, Indians and “Others”11 (or CMIO, for short) and informs official policies on various issues related to the economy, language, culture, religion and community life (Lai, 1995; Perry et al, 1997). This ideology became part of the national ideology, so that Singaporeans of various backgrounds can imagine themselves as a multi-racial people. English was

11 This is a group comprised of other ethnic minorities in Singapore – Eurasians, Jewish, Armenians, British, etc.
adopted as a convenient language of trade and is the first language of the country, tying the different ethnic groups together.

As mentioned earlier, the insecurity of Singapore’s regional geopolitics is another dimension affecting ethnic relations and management in the city-state. Situated in the Malay Archipelago that has a large “indigenous” Malay population and an “immigrant” Chinese minority, Singapore’s ethnic composition created an arguably disadvantageous fit to its surrounding region. It was because of its ethnic differentiation and dominance of its Chinese people that many viewed Singapore as a Chinese place, or even state (Lai, 1995). To some extent, the ethnic identities of the Chinese and Malays in Singapore are shaped by the comparison of their economic and political positions with those of the Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. Further, the position of Chinese in Singapore is structured by the historical experiences of the Chinese immigrant minorities in South-East Asia; conversely, however, some viewed the Malays’ social position in Singapore as a disadvantaged indigenous minority (Lai, 1995). Finally, the ethnically differentiated development during the colonial period has resulted in limited interaction, the maintenance of rigid ethnic boundaries, strong stereotyping and an underlying sense of insecurity and fear of dominance by Chinese and Malays of each other. These fears culminated in three violent riots prior to Singapore’s independence (Lai, 1995).

The construction of the local multietnic community must be understood against this background. Until the 1960s, Singapore’s population mostly lived in separate ethnic settlements established by the colonial administration. Large-scale resettlement into self-contained public housing estates, implemented through the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was one of the ways in which the ideology of multiracialism materialized
spatially. Through the construction of publicly administered, largely ownership-based, housing projects, the HDB has been able to provide Singaporeans with affordable shelter and spaces to facilitate interaction among different ethnicities – for example, neighbourhood schools, markets, community centers, playgrounds, walkways that link one block of flats to another, etc. (Lai, 1995; Perry et al, 1997; see also Chua, 1997). There are also ethnic quotas enforced to ensure each housing block reflects Singapore’s ethnic composition. From a strategic level, then, public housing in Singapore is a powerful tool in managing ethnic diversity and relations – a crucial issue that must be addressed in the creation of a national identity. Singapore’s planners also saw the HDB as an efficient way of providing improved living conditions that are necessary for the city-state’s economic success (Perry et al, 1997). The state also manages ethnic relations via the school curriculum, where the ethnicity of the student determines his or her “mother tongue” – for example, a Malay student must study Malay, an Indian student must study Tamil. Ethnic identity also continues to be clearly denoted on every Singaporean’s identity card. The notion of multiracialism, hence, is conveyed and experienced in the everyday living spaces of Singaporeans.

_The Singaporean state_

Processes of labour control in Asia are facilitated by the strong capacity states continue to display in shaping their economies (Kelly, 2002). These processes are often presented as responses of governments pursuing export-oriented and foreign investment driven developmental strategies perceived to attract desirable “global capital”. The Singaporean state, in particular, as a city-state that has few natural resources within its
national boundaries and no sources of multi-lateral aid, uses the powers and capacities of
the nation-state to transform society and space and to embed itself within the world
economy. As a city-state, Singapore holds greater capacity than any other in controlling
its borders to structure its labour force to address the perceived needs of its economy
(Yeung and Olds, 2004). The critical role the state continues to play in Asia could be
succinctly understood as the model of the developmental state, which aside from
Singapore, is typically found amongst the East Asian states (Woo-Cummings, 1999). The
exact configuration of social power, ideological predisposition in capitalist societies and
nature of political and economic regimes depends a lot on their specific historical
circumstances – this is what largely gives rise to differences among these states. It is not
my aim here to provide a comprehensive reading of the uniqueness of Asian states nor
their similarities and differences within. I would argue that Singapore’s model of
development corresponds with that of the developmental state in many ways\textsuperscript{12}.

Without many natural resources, and with a diverse ethno-cultural population, the
economic sphere emerged strategically as a site where national interests could be directed
(Hill and Lian, 1995). A developmental state is distinguished from a neo-liberal state
through the willingness of the state of the former to discipline capital—especially
financial capital—to force it into production of goods for global export markets (Johnson,
1995; Woo-Cummings, 1999). Singapore, to a large extent, resembles the developmental
state model in that its industrialization becomes necessarily driven by the state’s will to
discipline financial capital. During the pre-war years, the role of the colonial government
was confined to providing and maintaining the legal framework for private enterprise and

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building the infrastructure of Singapore’s port (Chew and Lee, 1991). After 1959, however, the state also became pivotal in promoting development and it was strong and selective in intervention strategies. Singapore is “prominent as a country where planning has succeeded”, such as with the Corrective Wage Policy as discussed in another chapter (Huff, 1994:4). In short, far from being a free-market economy, Singapore’s economy during this time and after World War 2 was largely orchestrated by the state (Rodan, 1989).

Finance is the key motivating force behind state action in a developmental state. It is the tie that links the state to the industrialists (Woo-Cummings, 1999). Developmental states buttress their legitimacy by creating institutions that could be molded into a “developmental coalition” (Woo-Cummings, 1999:13). In other words, to be “developmental”, the bureaucracy must be effectively “embedded in society, through a concrete set of connections that link the state intimately and aggressively to particular social groups with whom the state shares a joint project of transformation” (Woo-Cummings, 1999:15). These connections between state and business must be learnt and perfected over time, through a long process of institutional adaptation (Woo-Cummings, 1999; Perry et al, 1997). In this regard, connections with society are also connections with industrial capital for developmental states. In this model of governance, the commitment to collective goals is not always expressed directly through economic policies and operations but is also exercised through “promotion of national ideologies and sentiments (often demanding sacrifices in immediate economic welfare)” (Woo-Cummings, 1999:27). Through institutional adaptation and innovation, “the state accommodates itself to the changing requirements for remaining competitive in the
global marketplace and to provide support for educational infrastructure…” (Woo-Cummings, 1999:27). I will illustrate this point later on with reference to ministerial speeches and government documents.

The political power and control of the Singaporean developmental state bypasses the federal/provincial/municipal politics typical in other global cities (Olds and Yeung, 2004). For example, immigration policies and borders can be tightly managed to facilitate labour market restructuring, a capacity that no other global city has (Yeoh and Chang, 2001). On land-use planning matters, the statutory board responsible for urban planning, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), answers directly to the Ministry of National Development. In turn, the key agent of national development in Singapore is the Economic Development Board (EDB), which has virtually monopoly power in determining the strategic direction of the economy (Olds and Yeung, 2004). Given that the EDB formulates and carries out national economic development policy, and that the URA then takes over to ensure land use planning supports the EDB’s directives, the politics of urban change is extremely hierarchical in nature, with few complications from citizen participation. Given this role of the state and its stronghold over development, Singapore’s structural promotion of its global reach has been rapid and unique (Olds and Yeung, 2004).

Indeed, a large portion of the causes and consequences of policies in Singapore result from this close-knit relationship between political and economic processes. From this perspective, there was no “miracle” that caused Singapore’s economy to flourish nor is it an “accident in history” (Huff, 1994:3). It is from recognizing this strong integration
of state and economy that we can develop a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the importance of the economy within nation building in Singapore.

By the mid-1970s, foreign firms had already accounted for four fifths of the manufactured exports. Singapore, even in 1986, was still predominantly a manufacturing economy (Huff, 1994:35). By this time as well, the Singaporean state had already began to consolidate its role as an international financial center (Perry, et al, 1997). Rather than the domestic market organizing Singapore’s international exchange, its “economy is dominated by multinational companies facilitating external cooperation… Singapore took in its entirety the MNE ‘package’ of capital, technology, entrepreneurship, management and marketing” (Huff, 1994:36).

After the mid-80s regional recession, however, Singapore began to shift its economic emphasis away from manufacturing and towards higher skills and growth in the service and financial sectors (Yeoh, 2006). Indeed, by the 1990s, Singapore’s economy was led by manufacturing and services as “the twin engines of growth” (Committee on Singapore’s Competitiveness, 1998:7). The state in Singapore has enthusiastically created policies and institutions that are favourable to the growth of multinational corporations. In other words, multinationals are sought after as a substitute for local entrepreneurship within the development of Singapore’s national economy, which is not much different from the historical development path of Singapore: “a willingness to accept foreign enterprise from the late 1960s continued its …cooperation and compromise with them, [together with] Singapore’s strong locational advantage” (Huff, 1994:36).
Fuelled by the increasing emphasis towards the service industry – and within this industry, the financial sector specifically – the period from the 1990s up to present saw the rise of foreign labour, both skilled and unskilled in all sectors of the economy (Yeoh, 2006:5). By this time, the state was keen on developing an “entrepreneurial culture” and to “attracting global talent” so as to thrive in the increasingly competitive new economy (Bunnell and Wong, 2006). Cost-cutting policies were also implemented to encourage foreign investment and to boost Singapore’s competitiveness in the global economy, with social impacts of rising retrenchment and unemployment rates. These were rationalized by the state as an inevitable consequence of the move towards the new economy (Bunnell and Wong, 2006). The Economic Review Committee, a statutory board under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, exhorted Singaporeans to “understand the changing employment scene and its impact and implications and to adjust their mindsets and expectations” (Bunnell and Wong, 2006:73). In May 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the formation of the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) in Parliament. The ESC will “develop strategies for Singapore to build capabilities and maximise opportunities as a global city”. One of its objectives is to “provide opportunities for all by (c)reating quality jobs and real wage growth for the broad majority (and) making continued social investments for an inclusive, upwardly mobile society” (ESC website, http://www.esc.gov.sg/about_background_objective.html). “In particular, we should develop financial services to position Singapore as Asia’s premier center for management and distribution of financial services.” (Committee on Singapore’s Competitiveness, 1998:7).
As the above quote suggests, the financial sector is designated as one of the key areas for Singapore to extend its economic reach beyond its shores. In the Annual National Budget Report for 2005, it was stated,

To enhance our status as an international financial center, we have taken major steps to open up the industry to greater competition, adopt a risk-focused regulatory regime, deepen the talent pool, strengthen the market infrastructure, and encourage leading financial players to hub their regional operations here…we have a sound and dynamic banking system, a quiet reputation for wealth management, and liquid and efficient capital markets (Ministry of Finance website, date accessed 14th December 2009)

Another way in which the financial sector in Singapore is set up as a strong, dynamic and globalized sector is in its promotion of “a pro-business environment, excellent infrastructure, cost-competitiveness, a highly skilled and cosmopolitan labour force” (Monetary Authority of Singapore website, date accessed 14th December 2009). The quantitative results of this state-led project have been significant. The financial sector made up 11.6 per cent of the 2005 gross domestic product (GDP), growing by 6.5 per cent. There are 500 local and foreign financial institutions in Singapore, of which 111 are commercial banks. Out of this 111, only five are locally owned (Ministry of Trade and Industry website, date accessed 11th July 2005).

Assembling a cosmopolitan Singapore through the division of labour

Even as the above-mentioned measures serve to strengthen its national labour force over time, Singapore was not by any means reducing its extra-territorial reach both outwardly and inwardly. These restructuring measures since the early 70s illustrate configurations of state, capital, labour and commodity production within a changing international division of labour which Singapore has always been keen to be a part of. In
any case, it was perhaps even increasingly complex in its tapping of foreign peoples, ideas and resource, through the upgrading of its services sector within its city-state boundaries and the offshoring of the more low-productivity manufacturing industries for which it had been until then known (Rodan, 1989). As the economy moved “upscale” in the 1980s to produce for markets of the advanced capitalist countries, certain activities became increasingly marginalized in the city-state’s space-economy but because they were still important to the economy as a whole, they were maintained no longer in the city itself but in its new hinterland. As a result, Singapore’s higher-end services grew by 14.6 percent in 1989 (McGee, 1991).

Lower technology industries, like textiles and electronic manufacturing were offshored to Johore and then later on, to the Riau Islands as the SIJORI\textsuperscript{13} Growth Triangle developed in the 1980s. As Guinness observed, much of Johor’s industrial development was a result of direct capital investment from Singapore (1994). Population also grew in Johor’s Mukim Plentong because many of these workers were discriminated against in attempts to find employment in Singapore. Much of Batam’s labour was also brought in from other parts of Indonesia. It can thus be said that Singapore’s economic restructuring in the 1970s as discussed earlier had repercussions beyond its national boundaries, including the creation of new labour markets. Through this Growth Triangle, we see, among other things, the immediate hinterland of Singapore spanning interstate boundaries. Scholars have argued that the Growth Triangle would not exist were it not for Singapore’s strategic niche in the global flow of commerce (Sparke et al, 2004; Bunnell et al, 2006). Within this cooperation, Singapore would provide the skilled labour,

\textsuperscript{13} This was the acronym used in the 80s that refers to the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle. This acronym was later on abandoned to downplay the semiotic significance of Singapore in the Triangle (Sparke et al, 2004).
business services and capital, Johore would provide the skilled and semi-skilled labour and recreation land while Batam and the rest of the Riaus would provide low-cost labour and some natural amenities like the beaches. I would argue then that the Growth Triangle is premised upon uneven development, which is often glossed over as “comparative advantage”, where Singapore taps into and contributes to extra-territorial flows of people, capital, commodities, regulations and resources.

**Incorporating foreign labour**

I now turn to the issue of labour within Singaporean space in recent years. The turn of century saw an increasing share of non-citizen population – a direct consequence of the city-state’s restructuring policies to attract and rely on foreign labour (Yeoh, 2004). The deliberate and strategic reliance on “foreign manpower” is part and parcel of the dominant neoliberal discourse of globalization as an “inevitable and virtuous growth dynamic” (Coe and Kelly, 2002:348). As elsewhere, the transmigrant population grows in tandem with restructuring processes to render labour more “flexible” in relation to capital (Yeoh, 2004). As briefly mentioned above, the workforce was strategically and rigorously configured to incorporate a significantly large foreign labour pool which can be broadly divided into two strands: foreign talent and foreign workers. Both strands of workers are brought into Singaporean space strategically and they are administered very differently (Yeoh, 2006). The state’s management of its migrant populations requires different modalities of government based on various mechanism of calculation, surveillance, control and regulation that creates a graduated system to which different migrants are incorporated (Ong, 2000). I would argue that the instruments for the public
administration of foreigners into Singapore set in place the mechanisms for extracting different forms of labour from different bodies, dividing labour that results in the reproduction of social class in Singapore. It would not be too far fetched to argue that this is a bourgeoisie state model, one which seeks to appropriate profit from differentiated workers.

Foreigners’ access to rights and privileges is mainly differentiated by skills status and by the perceived desirability of these skills to the achievement of national goals. As Differentiated access is institutionalized by the issuance of a range of work passes and permits that fall broadly into the employment pass and the work permit categories (Yeoh, 2004). Building a nation in the image of a “cosmopolis” requires selectively inclusionary projects to entice “foreign talent” – highly skilled professional workers, entrepreneurs and investors who are part of the face of cosmopolitanism in Singapore (Yeoh, 2004). This group of migrants hold a form of the employment pass\textsuperscript{14} that enables them to apply for dependants passes and access to greater job mobility. Far greater in number, however, are the work permit holders, most of whom are concentrated in the manufacturing, construction, shipbuilding and domestic industries. This pool is also broken down further by nationalities, with rules and regulations set by MOM, permitting only certain nationalities to access work in particular industries – a point which I will elaborate later. This high demand for foreign workers reflects the low wages accepted by these workers, the low chances of them quitting and their skill sets – all of which are conditions already set in place by the work permit regulations (\textit{Straits Times}, 9\textsuperscript{th} December 2009). Also

\textsuperscript{14} My objective now is to illustrate how these institutionalized categories classify individuals according to their work, skills and income, reproducing a type of class structure within Singapore. I will discuss the social consequences of these passes and permits as well as the different trajectories of workers in other chapters.
regulated by the work permit and emphasized in official discourse, “foreign workers” have no opportunities for social advancement within Singapore.

An article in Singapore’s *Business Times* postulates that the total increase in foreign labour between 2004 and 2005 is approximately 80 percent of the total increase in Singapore’s population (9th Feb, 2006). As it now stands, there are about 1.1 million foreigners working in Singapore, making up approximately 20 percent of the 4.5 million people within Singapore’s borders; and with more immigrants being given citizenship and permanent residence, the proportion of local-born Singaporeans has fallen to under 82 per cent, a level lower than in 1980 (*Straits Times*, 7th August, 2009; Thompson, 2009; Yeoh, 2004:2435). Quantifying the breakdown of foreigners working in Singapore by nationality, gender and race/ethnicity is, however, very difficult because of the confidentiality surrounding official data.

There are two main flows of transnational foreigners who are administered into the labour force in bifurcated ways, firstly, the skilled professional and managerial workers in high-end positions, and secondly, the low-waged contract labourers. Far larger in number is this second group of workers who enter with work permits. The number of contract workers was estimated to be about half a million in 2000 and by December 2009, the official figures reached 870,000 (*Straits Times*, 7th Aug 2009; Yeoh, 2006:29). The first group, higher skilled and better educated foreigners who enter the country on the employment pass, have been increasing rapidly as a result of intensive recruitment and liberalized eligibility criteria. These foreigners are found in financial institutions,

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15 The Government’s rationale for this is national interests – It does not want to expose Singapore's vulnerability in terms of its dependence on foreign labour. Questions I have posed to MOM officials regarding these statistics have not been answered.
teaching in universities, biomedical labs and other “knowledge-based” sectors (Thompson, 2009). In 1997, employment pass holders numbered approximately 55,000 – about 12 per cent of the total foreign workforce. This number had doubled to 110,000 by 2000 (Yeoh, 2006:29). More specifically, the foreign employees on the employment pass programmes were eligible for long term social passes and dependants’ passes\(^{16}\). Recently, the pass categories were revised to create greater flexibility for foreign employees seeking work as professionals in Singapore (MOM website, date accessed 10\(^{th}\) July 2009). For example, on January 1, 2007, MOM introduced the personalised employment pass (PEP) that frees employment pass (EP) holders and non-permanent residents from a specific employer. PEP holders can generally take on employment in any sector. There may be some jobs where prior permission is required, and details will be made available. PEP holders do not need to re-apply for a new pass when changing jobs. PEP holders are also given the flexibility of a continuous period of up to six months without a job to evaluate employment or work opportunities. They will not be required to leave Singapore during this time and remain eligible to bring dependants to Singapore during the validity of their pass.\(^{17}\)

The government’s principal rationale for encouraging foreign talent is to drive its economic regionalization in competition with other top cities because its “own talent base was too small to provide the core pool of talent needed…so that it could hold its own against other top cities” (Dale, 1998:64). Assuming this, the government has followed a

\(^{16}\) Dependent’s passes are issued to children under 21 years of age and the spouses of Employment Pass holders, entitling them to come to live in Singapore with the Pass holder (Yeoh, 2006). The Long Term Social Visit Pass gives long-term visit entitlements to parents, parents-in-law, step-children, spouse (common law), handicapped children and unmarried daughters above the age of 21 (Yeoh, 2006).

policy of “gathering global talent” and “making Singapore a cosmopolitan city” since the late 1990s (the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, quoted in Yeoh and Chang, 2001). Apart from policies to encourage investments, trade and strengthening high-technology capabilities in the country, a key plank of the attempt to globalize the city-state is to “build a talent capital”, mainly through “augmenting Singapore’s talent pool through attraction and management of international talent” (Ministry of Manpower website, date accessed 20th July, 2005). Apart from investing heavily on the city-state’s quality of human capital within its borders, navigating the globalized world requires even more rapid augmentation achievable only by importing from outside the nation’s borders “so that when the tide comes in again, we will have that thick layer of entrepreneurs and foreign talent to take our economy even further into the next century” (Former Minister of Trade and Industry, George Yeo, 1998, quoted in Yeoh, 2004:2435). Although skilled transnational workers are wooed by the state, mainly to fuel economic activities, they are not only situated as economic actors for the new economy in the official discourse – indeed, “international talent infuse (Singaporean) society as they bring a spirit and vigour which will motivate Singaporeans to scale even greater heights” (Manpower 21, 1999: 34). Their presence is also, hence, constructed as bringing a desirable joie de vivre to Singapore.

In the context of Singapore, then, the state “plays a necessary role in shaping both the real and discursive contours of the labour regime” (Coe and Kelly, 2002:347). Such discursive constructions situate Singapore as a home to a polyglot population – a version of cosmopolitanism that is close to the well-entrenched view of Singapore as a multiracial, multilingual, multicultural and multireligious society (Yeoh, 2004). As part
of the material bases for this social reproduction of Singapore’s cosmopolitan identity, the state has emphasized massive infrastructural development, including “The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay” that comprises several theatres and performance spaces costing an estimated S$400 million (Yeoh and Chang, 2001: 1037). Additions to the waterfront\textsuperscript{18} entertainment landscape included the Crazy Horse franchise from Paris and the Ministry of Sound nightclub from the United Kingdom that were part of the $60 million budget to “fill the gap in premium night entertainment for a niche group of well-heeled business travelers and regional visitors” (Minister for Trade and Industry, Lim Hng Kiang, 5\textsuperscript{th} Dec 2005, Singapore Government Release).

In the bid to attract “global talent”, the state is hence enthusiastically fostering a vibrant cultural scene. The pubs, clubs, restaurants and coffeehouses are imagined as crucial for facilitating networking among artists, designers, entrepreneurs, scientists and venture capitalists to enhance the “milieu of innovation” deemed vital to the new economy. It is also hoped that through such networking practices, the “entrepreneurial culture” can be fostered in Singapore with both Singaporeans and “global talent” performing in line with appropriate cultural values such as “creativity”, “flexibility” and “entrepreneurship” (Wong and Bunnell, 2006:72).

The Ministry of Manpower formulated “Manpower 21” – an initiative to “create a blueprint which would represent the vision of future Singapore, from the manpower point of view” (Manpower 21, 1999). The said vision is for Singapore to transform into a Talent Capital by developing a “systematic framework for a globally competitive

\textsuperscript{18} This refers to the Clarke Quay and Boat Quay areas that were developed along the Singapore River. These two nightspots have since gone out of business.
workforce”. To activate this framework, one of the recommendations that Manpower 21 stresses is to

…actively augment our manpower pool at the higher end and be prepared to lower our dependency on low skilled workers…for high end international talent, we should establish a strategic marketing plan that captures the new spirit of Singapore, and expand the international operations of Contact Singapore 19 …we should also establish an internet-based international talent recruitment website, develop programmes to enable talents to work in overseas operations of Singapore companies and cultivate wide networks of “Friends of Singapore”.

(1999: 3)

It should be noted that this so-called intention to “lower dependency on low skilled workers” has not been realized. As noted in earlier paragraphs, the number of employees on work permits has almost doubled in the past decade. This rhetoric still crops up in official discourse today and I elaborate later that this is accompanied by certain policies to render individual “unskilled” bodies transient in Singapore, while figures to date show that the reliance on foreign labourers appears to be increasing.

The creation of a “cosmopolis” is understood in official discourse as both an enhanced version of the older philosophy of multiculturalism as well as a new vision of an open, creative, vibrant, world-class city (Yeoh, 2004). Indeed, as the then Prime Minister Goh said during the 1997 National Day Rally,

Singapore must become a global, cosmopolitan city, an open society where people from many lands can feel at home.

(STATS, online archive of ministerial speeches, date accessed 14th July 2009)

Former Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo, also said,

We must make sure that we’re getting our fair share of the weird and wonderful from China, India, the West and the rest of the world. If we can do that, then we are in the running


19 This is an organization that aims to attract overseas Singaporeans and foreigners to develop their professional careers in Singapore.
The coinage of a “cosmopolitan Singapore and Singaporeans” is hence part of a state-driven, state-engineered, neo-liberal globalization project (Yeoh, 2004:2436; Yeoh and Chang, 2001). Indeed, the increasing share of the non-resident/non-citizen population at the millennial turn is a direct consequence of the city-state’s policies to attract and rely on “foreign manpower” to create a global talent capital. This has led to the re-engineering of Singapore as a place for cosmopolitans – the group of elite transnational workers who are eligible to enjoy the country’s porous borders and who, in this case, are interpreted as symbolizing globalization, diversity, urbanization, industrialization, modernity, efficiency, accessibility, and high-speed connections to all parts of the globe. The above-mentioned policies and infrastructural developments cater to the group of “foreign talent” who are valorized as crucial to fulfilling Singapore’s cosmopolitan dream. Cosmopolitanism at the level of national policies in Singapore, hence, is already an exclusive idea that is accessible to a select group of people of particular backgrounds. In short, Singapore is “cosmopolized” to attracting and retaining foreign talent (Yeoh, 2004).

It is clear that this is a brand of cosmopolitanism with discursive and material limits, where consequently, some groups of people are constructed as much more important than others for Singapore to succeed. It is possible to argue, therefore that the Singaporean state promotes its own class project, one that is shrouded in the discourse and strategic policy applications of cosmopolitanism. Within this project, it is often forgotten that Singapore – or any other global city, for that matter – owes its success not only to the presence of multinational corporate headquarters and transnational elites of the professional classes but also has to be sustained by an underbelly of lowly paid, low
status employees. Crucial to the actualization of national development, and at a larger scale, global capitalism, is the creation and mobilization of a cheap labour force. This “forgetting” of large migrant others in the cosmopolis is not an accidental nor ignorant act but one which is a structural necessity to spearhead the state’s cosmopolitan project, reproducing class divisions amongst groups of workers (Devan, 1999). In other words, development in Singapore is based upon a very carefully calibrated cosmopolitanism, peopled by a highly differentiated labour force, where certain groups are privileged over others and where different sectors are subjected to different regulations, sometimes even before they arrive in Singapore to work. And in the process, these regulations assign different social fates to different people. We must then ask what are the consequences of these policies on these low status workers? What are the opportunities that are open to them? How were they recruited? How do they live in the Singapore described above amongst Singaporeans? What is their economy of needs that motivated them to seek work in Singapore? It is the official situation of this strand of low-paid, low status workers to which we now turn.

**Foreign workers**

The high demand for this category of workers illustrates not only the low wages but also what is deemed acceptable by these low-status workers, and consequently, what is unacceptable for Singaporean workers. They mostly take on jobs that require manual labour or shift work in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, shipbuilding, personal services as well as domestic work (*Straits Times*, 9th Dec 2009; Yeoh, 2006). Gender, nationality and ethnicity profiles shape the overall form of work permit holders.
The ways these factors affect female migrant domestic workers in Singapore has been well-documented by Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang (see for example, Yeoh, et al, 1998; 1999). Indicative of the feminization of international labour migration, domestic workers are exclusively female and come from five approved countries – the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand (Thompson, 2009). The vast majority of domestic workers in Singapore are from the first two countries with approximately 70,000 Filipinas and 60,000 Indonesians working as domestic help (Yeoh et al. 2004: 11 quoted in Thompson, 2009). Hard physical labour such as construction and shipbuilding is largely performed by foreign males, with Bangladeshis and Chinese nationals among the most visible, though a large number of Thais, Burmese and others also work in these sectors. Seventy percent of the labour force in construction is performed by foreigners, far higher than the national 37.6 percent reliance rate. The manufacturing sector – within which foreigners hold a 51 percent of the jobs – and low-paying service sectors are mainly filled by both men and women from Malaysia and The People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Straits Times, 9th Dec 2009). To understand this particular composition and assemblage of foreign labour in Singapore, it is necessary to first examine the variety of measures employed by the state to ensure that, in structural contrast to foreign “talent”, these workers remain acquiescent, temporary and controlled. The main measures used to create this form of labour force out of individuals are the work permit system, the approved source countries system, the dependency ceiling and the foreign worker levy. It is through these measures that we start to see how these workers are brought into being – how they are valued through their lack of value, or as Wright puts it, how their worth is based on their worthlessness (2006: 2).
All foreigner workers earning SGD$1,800 or less a month must apply for a work permit – this is in accordance with the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act guidelines set by MOM\textsuperscript{20} to ensure that the status of these migrant workers remain transient as individuals. Work permits are valid for the duration of either one or two years and are subjected to renewal by employers. Economic downturns always affect those already living on the margins of the economy the hardest. In times of economic recessions, these restrictions maintain that these are also the workers who are most vulnerable to becoming unemployed and/or repatriated. For example, during the recession in the late 1990s, 7,000 foreign workers had their work permits cancelled in the first five months of 1998 as compared to 6,000 cancellations in the whole of 1997 (Rahman, 1999: 7). My own research also reveals that during the economic downturn in 2009, a large number of foreign workers were brought into Singapore on an In-Principle Approval (IPA), only to be repatriated after a month without working because the company that officially hired them had gone out of business – a point which I will elaborate in a later chapter. The open borders of Singapore therefore, strategically allow this group of workers to be rendered flexible enough to be legally removed from within its boundaries.

Work permit holders face various restrictions that local and some foreign employees on employment passes do not – most notably, the non-eligibility to bring dependants (spouses and children) over to Singapore and of changing employers while on the work permit, which forms a barrier of entry into the local labour market. There are also thorough health checkups, chest X-rays and a test for HIV/AIDS (Yeoh, 2004). Work permit holders are also ineligible for applying for residency – another measure to

\textsuperscript{20} MOM website, \url{http://agevldb4.ago.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-91A&doctype=EMPLOYMENT%20OF%20FOREIGN%20WORKERS%20ACT%0A&date=latest&method=part}, date accessed 4\textsuperscript{th} November 2009.
ensure they remain a flexible, transient and acquiescent group that has no claim to
citizenship. Marriage to Singaporeans, while not outrightly disallowed, is subjected to
approval by the Ministry of Manpower. While foreign workers are a “strategic asset” to
Singapore’s labour force, they are not seen as desirable future citizens of the country, as
opposed to foreign talent. As the then Acting Minister of Manpower, Ng Eng Hen said in
a 2007 Parliament address21,

On the continuing need for the Marriage Restriction Policy (MRP) for Work
Permit holders, may I remind members, that at this point in time we have more
than 500,000 WP holders in Singapore, mainly less-skilled or unskilled workers. Quite clearly, we need to ensure that they do not sink roots in Singapore

Another measure of monitoring the use of foreign labour is the foreign worker
levy which seeks to limit demand on migrant workers. Official discourse argues that this
“is a pricing control mechanism to regulate the demand of foreign workers in
Singapore”22. This is applied in close conjunction with the dependency ceiling quotas
which vary across job sectors. The monthly levy is lowest for “skilled” workers and
where the dependency ratio is less than 30% (that is, less than 30% of the firm is
peopled by foreigners). These are periodically adjusted with shifts in the economic cycle
to protect jobs for local workers.23 For example, the current official dependency ceiling
for the marine industry is one local full-time worker to five foreign workers. Companies
that stay within this guideline then pay $295 per month for each “unskilled” foreign
worker. The government, under the advice from its Economic Strategies Committee, has

21 MOM website,
22 MOM website,
date accessed 5th March, 2010.
recently announced that levies imposed on work permit holders will increase by 20% over the next three years, with the first 20% increments starting in July 2010, with the construction industry bearing the largest levy increase\textsuperscript{24}. This levy increase was introduced to prevent a perceived over-dependence on foreign labour and in the attempt to raise productivity of workers. As Minister of Manpower, Gan Kim Yong says,

\begin{quote}
This way, we allow market forces to operate so that we can efficiently allocate foreign manpower resources, give enterprises some flexibility while motivating them to improve productivity and minimize reliance on foreign workers. It is not a perfect system but it is a practical system\textsuperscript{25}.
\end{quote}

On top of this levy, employers of non-Malaysian foreign workers are required to post a SGD$5000 security bond in the form of a banker’s guarantee to the government as a form of insurance that hired foreign workers will not run away. This bond will be reclaimed by the employer upon the eventual repatriation of the foreign worker, after the termination of his or her work permit. I would argue that this bond, while officially ensuring that the employer repatriates the worker after his or her contract ends rather than leaving the unemployed alien within the country, also motivates the employer to keep the workers under strict surveillance to prevent a “runaway” case. Indeed, these high costs of hiring foreign labour into these jobs sets up the potential for employers to download the burden to workers – a problem which is realized even before the workers arrive in Singapore as I will discuss in-depth later on. Most migrant workers on work permits are in very low paid jobs – the cheapness of their labour, combined with their institutionalized temporality in Singapore ensures that the riches they generate for the

\textsuperscript{24} MOM website, \url{http://www.mom.gov.sg/Home/Press_Release/Pages/20100223-FW_Levy.aspx}, date accessed, 6\textsuperscript{th} November 2009.

\textsuperscript{25} MOM website, \url{http://www.mom.gov.sg/Home/MOM_Speeches/Pages/20100304-SpeechbyMinisteratTheBudgetDebateonForeignWorkerLevyChanges.aspx}, date accessed, 6\textsuperscript{th} November, 2009.
employers overwhelms the costs of their hire as is evident from the increasing numbers of foreigners in these physically demanding jobs. Through these policies and discourses, the existing system of labour control produces a type of disposability or at least inter-changeability to each foreign body labouring in jobs that are “unskilled” such that each worker does not have anything special to offer than another cannot – this enables a quick turnover of individual working bodies for employers, while maintaining a steady inflow of low-paid, low-status workers as a group.

A measure of regulating foreign workers and the division of labour that has not received much scholarly attention lies in the system of approved source countries which varies according to job sector\textsuperscript{26}. These are divided into “traditional source countries” (TSC), “non-traditional source countries” (NTSC), North Asian countries (NAS) and People’s Republic of China (PRC). Employers of each sector are given regulations by the state to recruit only from the approved sources. For example, in the manufacturing industry, only workers from Malaysia (TSC), NAS and the PRC can be recruited, excluding migrants from NTSC. In the marine and construction industries, however, workers can be recruited from all the source countries. This accounts for the concentration of migrants from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Philippines and Pakistan – their exclusion from the services and manufacturing sectors channels them towards construction and shipbuilding/repairing within the Singaporean labour market. It is this enforced division of labour, this structural unequal access to work in Singapore that explains why there is the greatest number of workers from these particular sending countries in these sectors. Malaysians, on the other hand, have fewer barriers of entry into the Singaporean labour market, accounting for their presence in

\textsuperscript{26} But see for example Rahman, M.M., 2000.
other sectors of the economy. It can be seen clearly from this policy of approved source countries that workers’ race/ethnicity and nationality are tightly woven with their positions in the division of labour. It has been difficult to get an explanation from the Ministry for this policy of selective hiring based on nationality. The information is not made publicly available and my emails to the Ministry have gone unanswered. Barr’s work, however, reveals more of the racial consciousness within Singaporean policies, specifically, under the leadership of Lee (1999). As Lee said,

I started off believing all men were equal. I now know that’s the most unlikely thing to ever have been, because millions of years have passed over evolution, people have scattered across the face of this earth, been isolated from each other, developed independently, had different intermixtures between races, peoples, climates, soils … I didn’t start off with that knowledge … we were faced with the reality that equal opportunities did not bring about more equal results. (Quoted from Barr, 1999: 150 – 151)

While having particularly racially-based assumptions hardly makes Lee unique in Asia or anywhere else, it must be emphasized that he has created a regime where racial categorization has been accentuated. These beliefs of racially-based difference is worthy to note, especially in a city that brands itself as cosmopolitan global-city. This forms the foundation for the development of a complex, stratified labor force, one in which the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism is to some extent given the lie by the reality of a racialized labor market segmentation while taking into account Singapore’s unique international circumstances and ability to regulate and modulate the flow of immigrant labor.

Within the materializing of a cosmopolitan Singapore, there are workers who are discursively and actually constructed and situated as peripheral labouring bodies within the economy. In other words, these workers form part of the material bases of cosmopolitanism in Singapore and it is through the investigation of their work and living
experience in the city-state that we can understand what cosmopolitanism means on the ground. Ironically, of course, their participation as workers is crucial to its success yet their autonomy over where and how they choose to apply their labour is curtailed by various mechanisms of control and regulation. These become state apparatuses which form what Burawoy calls the “politics of production” – the institutions that regulate and shape struggles in the workplace, enabling the domination of certain groups over others (1985: 87). The official rhetoric, laws and policies governing foreign working bodies aside from generating economic consequences perceived to be desirable for the country’s growth, form also the ideology and politics surrounding production in Singapore so much so that they shape not only the movements and situations of the foreign workers themselves but how local Singaporeans understand themselves in relation to these workers. The following chapters will go on to show how class is reproduced through a graduated system where further up the hierarchy workplace regimes become less rigid as reflected in higher wages, more skilled workers and less dependency on the employer by the worker. Crucially, this is not to say that there is no experience of inequality within each group – indeed, I will show the different ways in which inequalities are generated, experienced and sometimes disguised in different work places – but rather, that labour is subsumed by employers/firms in different ways that cause greater material harm and precariousness to some than others.
Chapter 4: Bangladeshi men in the Singaporean labour force

Karim\(^\text{27}, 29\)

A person from his village came up to Karim one day and asked him how much he made a day as the owner of a vegetable shop in Dhaka. This person eventually became his agent and persuaded Karim to work in Singapore. He sold his vegetable shop, used up all his savings and, moving his wife and daughter into his brother-in-law’s house, sold his own house to pay the agent the SGD$10,000 for a work-permit job in Singapore. A job, which his agent promised would fetch SGD$2000 a month – much more, Karim was led to believe, than what he was earning selling vegetables, even though he was able to save about SGD$100 a month. Karim had hoped that this new income would bring about a much better life for his young daughter and wife – a life that he would not be able to afford working in Bangladesh. He had never worked in Singapore before but he told me, “I come Singapore because I thinking very nice country. Tourists go Singapore, come back to Bangladesh, many good things to say… Agent also tell me Singapore (has) very good job for me”. He was then enrolled in a training programme in Dhaka for 3 months for ship-repairing – something he had never done before.

While he was working, Karim told me his employer rarely paid the workers on time, if even at all; over-time wages was often only paid to the workers who were the employers’ relatives. One time, Karim, along with a few of his co-workers confronted their employer regarding their wages – they had not been paid for three months. The workers told the boss, “no money, no work”. The employer, along with the managers of the shipyard rounded the men into a corner at the worksite and physically assaulted them.

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\(^{27}\) All names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents.
He fell from a ladder one day while repairing a ship. “Now no job because come here 7 months working, accident happen. I (cried many days) after…” That accident left him with two broken bones in his left hand. The employer sent him to the company’s doctor who issued him a one-day medical leave – *a single day’s leave for a broken hand*. His employer threatened to repatriate him if he could not perform on the job as usual. “I would die if I go back to Bangladesh”, Karim told me. He revealed that he still owed some debts and he had no more savings to fall back on – everything had gone to paying his agent.

Karim knew about the “security companies” that employers often hired to keep workers in check – he feared they would forcibly repatriate him while he was at work one day. Encouraged by his social network of Bangladeshi friends, who are themselves shipyard workers, he left his employer’s dormitory and went to lodge a report at the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). The Ministry then cancelled his work permit and issued him a special pass\(^ {28} \) while allowing him to stay in Singapore, disallowed him to work while investigations on his “Workman’s Compensation case” proceeded. Karim frequently slept at a carpark – he did not feel safe living back in his company’s dormitory anymore since he reported his case to MOM even though his employer is legally bound to house him. He once told me that sleeping at the carpark was “no problem” for him. He said all he had to do is to move to a more sheltered area when it rains. He ate his dinners at Sutha’s – the restaurant on Cuff Road in Little India where I met him.

Karim was repatriated on the 7\(^ {th} \) of July with his Workmen’s Compensation case still pending – he had taken the case to Common Law as he felt the amount of

\(^{28}\) I will discuss this Pass later in the chapter.
compensation money the insurance company initially offered him was too low. He still does not know when his compensation money will arrive. He told me before he left that he would return to Singapore if his compensation money was enough to pay for his agent fees again and if he gets the chance to work for a “good boss”. In spite of the challenges he has had to face, Singapore, Karim says, is safe and “very good”. He tells me that in Bangladesh, there is no constant electricity, hot running water or paved roads. He told me that he would use the advances his lawyer issued him to buy some shampoo and makeup for his wife. I asked him if those items would not be cheaper in Bangladesh. Karim agreed but then explained that, “Go back to Bangladesh, must buy Singapore things because people think they are better”.

Babu, 26

“I come to Singapore so that my family can be happy. We are poor but I want them to be happy. Now no work, no money”, Babu told me the first day I met him in Singapore’s Little India. Not a single day’s work for the 14 men who were brought over to Singapore from Bangladesh after each paying $10,000 to an agent in Bangladesh. The men were all stranded here for a month before being sent back home. Like most others, Babu had sold his house to pay part of his agent fees that amounted to some SGD$10,000. The rest of the fees had been paid by borrowing from his friends and relatives. I asked him if he would come back to Singapore again after being stuck here with no work for a whole month. He quipped with a big smile and a shrug of his shoulders, “why not!” . Puzzled, I asked him how and why. He told me he looked forward to returning to Singapore again – his agent had promised to relocate him to another company. This would give him the
chance to earn enough to pay off the sum he borrowed for his agent’s fees. Babu’s agent in Bangladesh stayed true to his word – a rarity! – and brought him, along with 3 other men, out of the original 14, back to Singapore to work with another employer a month later. The rest of the men were not as lucky. They remain in Bangladesh.

Babu went on to work in construction on a work permit, where he manually carries 50kg bags of cement around the worksite. He works about 10 hours a day and is paid about $18 – a rate typical for Bangladeshi and Indian construction workers. Babu, like other migrants I have spoken to, tells me that workers of other nationalities – Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai, and so on – are generally paid more, even if they do the exact same job as the Bangladeshis. It was difficult for him to sleep at night at first – he never had to share a room in Bangladesh but he tells me that he now shares his partitioned dorm room with 30 other men. Babu said to me when I asked him to describe his dorm conditions, “many people in one place, very hot. One fan is not enough because the air ventilation is no good. But boss doesn’t care. He only wants ‘cheap’”. Every month, his employer deducts $20 and $125 from his wages for “electricity bill” and “food” respectively. This is in spite of – or perhaps precisely because of29 – MOM guidelines to provide maintenance for foreign workers. I ask Babu if he has ever tried to negotiate for better living conditions and higher wages. He tells me he has thought about it but ultimately, “what can we do? If I ask my boss anything, he will ask me to go back to Bangladesh. So no matter how hard the job, I just do”. Babu gets paid about $800 a month before the monthly deductions by his employer. This is a wage that matches the national average for labourers in this line of work (The Straits Times, July 28 2007). He tells me he will send

29 I will discuss these guidelines later on in the chapter.
about $600 back to Bangladesh and keep $50 as his “pocket money for phone card, drinking Coca Cola and Sprite and maybe go out …”. His family uses the remitted income to pay off the debts incurred from paying Babu’s agent – debts that can only be cleared in about a year, if his income remains stable. He says he will go back to Bangladesh after this debt is cleared and pay his agent again in hopes of getting another job because the current one is not paying him enough. Babu expects to pay at least $3000 to his agent for his next job but “if (he) want(s) a good company”, he says the fees will be $5000.

Karim and Babu are two members of a cheap and highly flexibilized sector of the differentiated labour market in Singapore which has been built upon highly strategic cosmopolitan discourses and practices. These young, able-bodied men have been essential factors of production for Singapore’s pursuit of a world-class city through a highly differentiated workforce. As Harvey points out, a spatially-based – that is, one that is grounded – cosmopolitanism fundamentally highlights the exercise of power (2000). One can see how through these discourses of cosmopolitanism and flexibilization (often manifesting in policies like those discussed here), the transnational labour market is socially regulated, dividing and situating workers in different parts of the economy within Singapore, where some workers are exposed to greater harm than others (Yeoh, 2004; Wright, 2002; Peck, 1996). The cosmopolitan discourse used in crafting Singapore as a world-city that is open to the “wonderful and weird” fractures when we look at the dynamics of development, not least of which are the processes that create particular kinds of workers within a transnational labour force. While Bangladeshis like Babu and Karim were initially transnational in their work journeys, the low pay, long working hours and
long standing debts force them into being acquiescent while being locked in their social positions in Singapore. Indeed, Ong argues that migration produces a particularly clear context where uneven power relations and stratification reveal themselves (1996). While her argument reveals exclusionary practices in terms of citizenship, I assert that a parallel argument can be made for the production of classed bodies, by constructing certain people as more suitable for particular types of work through normalized exclusionary practices of the state, companies and within and across different groups of workers in the globalized labour market. Going a step further, it can be argued that the local labour market is very much premised upon these power differences (Peck, 1996). In other words, the local labour market is also a social space, characterized by the unique intersection of processes of labour production, reproduction and regulation (Coe and Kelly, 2002). Although these intertwined processes that hold consequences for understanding of cosmopolitanism and class can be observed in many other cities, I would argue that Singapore makes a particularly cogent case study given its state’s capacity to govern borders and finely calibrated policies of labour market segmentation.

Bangladeshi male migrants are now part of a vast pool of inexpensive and mobile workers that are maintained as such because of powerful structures of inequality that require the extraction of their labour at both the global and local scale. As McDowell argued in her work on low-status service work, these are “warm bodies”, who work on precarious contracts with extremely low rewards (2008). The economic stagnation of Bangladesh and the restructuring of Singapore’s economy – discursively constructed as a cosmopolitan one – set up a highly calibrated transnational labour market for migrants from the former to take on certain jobs in the latter. This migration then emerges from the
unequal development of regions and is the concrete effect of larger structural forces of globalization. This phenomenon which is first and foremost an economic one also shapes and is shaped by the circumstances, needs, desires and attitudes of individuals, motivating them to continue the arduous labouring in the country’s construction and marine industries. People’s economic circumstances condition what they dare to dream is possible. They shape, rather than simply rob people of their agency. I argue that it is the intricate web of structure and agency that reproduces a particular form of class relations within the division of labour in Singapore: exploitation, unequal treatment, unequal pay and status differences are met with migrants’ own enactment of their identities as they become part of a transnational labour force. It is these intertwined processes that reinforce the class project in Singapore, that construct differentiated bodies so that capital can extract labour that is qualitatively different from different groups of workers. As this chapter’s focus, the Bangladeshi male migrant worker is one that essentially embodies cheapness rather than skill for the employers and at a larger scale, for Singapore’s overall development. Bangladeshi male migrants occupy a particular location within the segmented labour market in Singapore – one that is divided by class and embedded with gender, ethnicity and skin colour. The following data and analysis illustrates how this segment of the labour force is maintained as such by connections between the actions of states, recruitment agents, practices of employers and the combined actions of the thousands of migrants who leave Bangladesh for various reasons.

I will first investigate the policies and practices that shape their experience within economic production leading them towards a particular labour assemblage: state policies, recruiting agents, low wages, unhealthy living and working conditions, arbitrary forms of
labour discipline and regulations – all of which form and are formed by a hierarchically structured labour process, that in turn constitutes an exploitative relationship to which these labour migrants are subordinated (Burawoy, 1985). Through the discussion of processes of (hyper)exploitation and subordination, I want to reveal the precariousness and instability to which these male workers are vulnerable. All of the Bangladeshis I interviewed are or, like Babu, have been at some point rendered jobless and homeless. I realize as I write the almost paradoxical task of organizing data about instability and precariousness. I hope, however, that it becomes clear through the following that there is a systemic process working to entrench these workers within a particular position within the labour hierarchy in Singapore, which ultimately marginalizes them from economic production.

These structures, however, are also met with the active agency of the workers themselves – indeed, the sense of loss and frustration I felt in the migrants also collided with their own purposes for taking on the precarious, unstable work that seems to ultimately marginalize them to the peripheries of the economy. Undergirding this agency is the ongoing construction of their gender subjectivities which is always tied with waged labour. It is also this subjectivity, which, when mobilized through their agency, often masks the difficulties and stresses that are encountered by these workers on a daily basis. In other words, the migrants are themselves enabling and participating in this exploitative process, reproducing certain patterns of subordination and appropriation of their labour (Burawoy, 1985). Marx argues that the labour process generates a certain complicity from workers in their own subordination such that they can keep up with their own exploitation within the production process – a sort of ideological conditioning inherent
within capitalism that draws workers in (Burawoy, 1985). Bourdieu, however, also expounds on this notion of ideological conditioning amongst the working classes that manifests through their consumption of goods, where economic dispossession is combined with cultural dispossession (1984). Social formations and differentiations are necessarily conditioned by economic bases – the *habitus*, that pre-reflexive mechanism that orients an individual’s tastes, bodily movements, senses, is inherently a product of the various economic resources differently available to individuals in a given field.

Nowhere is this more clearly theorized than in Bourdieu’s notion of the “necessity of taste” - the working class habitus manifesting as the “necessity of taste” – the direct relationship between income and consumption which conditions the workers’ acceptance of their working and living circumstances (1984). The discussion of people’s social class position as culturally reproduced through their consumption practices, lifestyles, bodily practices and attitudes must therefore always be linked to their economic capital, broadening and deepening the ways in which people’s class positions can be read and recreated. In other words, people’s class location is defined by their consumption as much as by their positions in the relations of production even if it is true that the latter governs the former. Through the consumption of certain material goods and cultivation of particular attitudes that are often marked as “different” or “lacking” in Bangladesh, I argue that these migrants also adopt a particularly normative idea of what it means to be going global, crafting a particular type of cosmopolitan modernity into their everyday lives in Singapore within their economic means. I hope it becomes clear by the end of the chapter that distilled from the broader trends of “flexible accumulation”, there is also the proliferation of actual work experiences lived by the migrants themselves which cannot
be sustained unless workers themselves internalize and actualize their consumption and production agencies as shaped by larger forces of political-economy.

_Bangladeshis in Singapore_

There are an estimated 120,000 Bangladeshi nationals working in Singapore, an increase of some 20,000 from the year 2000 (Straits Times, 2010; Rahman, 2000). This is likely to be a conservative estimate as the actual numbers are not released to the public and also do not include undocumented Bangladeshis taking on spontaneous work under Tourist Visas. Of this number, 90% are on work permit and in the construction and marine industries (Bangladesh High Commission website, [http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=57](http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=57)). Work permits are valid for either one or two years and, depending on the availability of work, are eligible for renewal for up to two years (Rahman, 2000). Aside from the various Singaporean state mechanisms regulating and classifying these migrant bodies by creating a differentiated division of labour as discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that the making of a cheap and available worker is a multi-scale process which transcends national boundaries.

All of the 25 Bangladeshis I spoke with are or have been at some point during their work journey in Singapore on a special pass. This is a permit issued to work-permit holders who have become unemployed as a result of work disputes, usually of the following nature: salary disputes, illegal deployment (work-permit holders are only 31

31 Information on the Special Pass, unlike the Work-Permit and Employment Pass, is not made available on the website of the Ministry of Manpower. Inquiries to the Immigration and Checkpoint Authorities (ICA) have also not yielded any official statistics.
allowed to work for the employer specified on their work-permit cards) and Workmen’s Compensation cases (for illnesses and injuries incurred during work). About 15 of the men I spoke with were on Workmen’s Compensation – a figure reflective of the men who turn to the NGOs for help on an individual basis, highlighting not only the dangers these migrants are exposed to on the job but also how atomized they are as individual workers. Special Passes are issued by the MOM for foreign workers to legally stay in Singapore while their cases are being investigated. During investigations, however, Special Pass holders are not eligible for work unless they apply to be on a Temporary Job Scheme (TJS) which is only applicable for workers engaged in salary disputes. Applying for the TJS does not guarantee a job and all Schemes are only valid for six months. NGO directors say that while the pass is a useful step for providing some recourse to workers who run into employment disputes, they note that MOM also seems to have taken a more stringent approach in deciding which cases are eligible for the pass during the time of economic recessions. During investigations as well, the workers I spoke with do not live with their employers – even if employers are legally bound to provide them with shelter, in particular those claiming Workmen’s Compensation. Most fear the forceful repatriation carried out by “security companies” that employers sometimes hire to keep workers in check. In essence then, the Bangladeshis I spoke with are homeless and jobless workers who came into Singapore under the work permit system only to have fallen through its cracks. After investigations are over, the pass will be cancelled by MOM and workers will be repatriated within a week of this cancellation. The Bangladeshis I spoke with, therefore were not examined during their productive circumstances – that is, they are officially not working. They have been rendered jobless
and effectively homeless as a result of their enforced transience through the processes that I will examine in the sections that follow. In other words, the situation of Special Pass holders is a result of the very processes that exploited and subordinated them within the division of labour in Singapore and has led many of them to become ultimately marginalized from economic production. More than half of the Bangladeshis I spoke with wanted to return to Singapore, in spite of the severe challenges they have had to face in Singapore – a puzzle that I will examine later in this chapter.

**Bangladesh and the global economy**

At one level, the mobility of Bangladeshi men represents another example of how the current global economy consistently relies on migrants from developing countries as the foundation of a cheap and compliant workforce. As capital gets more and more mobile, its drive to increase productivity while driving down production costs leads firms further and further afield. One result has been to shift labour-intensive industries to highly dispersed sites around the globe (Mills, 1999; Kelly, 2002; Dicken, 2003). Another, as this thesis is keen to show, is the incorporation of different migrant bodies into low waged, low status work within global cities. There has been a change in the demography of construction and marine workers in Singapore. The preferred group in the 1980s were Thai male workers, but in the past decade or so, the number of Bangladeshi workers has increased as capital seeks to pay even less to labour (personal interview with president of NGO in Singapore). I am encouraged by scholars who have done extensive work on the feminization of cheap labouring bodies on the global assembly line to serve international capital. It has been persuasively shown that women from developing
economies are consistently constructed as particularly attractive to employers for jobs in the textile and electronics industries because of persistent assumptions such as obedience, patience and dexterity, and as a result are being paid low wages, denied job security and provided limited benefits (Mills, 1999; Ong, 1987; Wright, 1998; 2008; Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Gender, nationality and race are strongly embedded within class. I would argue that just as third world women are being constructed as more suitable for particular types of work, men from developing countries are also being situated as more capable of certain types of work (Hopkin, 1997; Jackson, 1991; McDowell, 2003). This chapter will show that while women take on devalued work as many men take on the most prestigious and fulfilling jobs at the top of the occupational and class hierarchy, it cannot be neglected that Third world men by virtue of their masculinity, nationality and race are led to dangerous and dirty work as well (Sayer and Walker, 1992).

Bangladesh has a current population of about 141 million with a labour force of 60.3 million. 62.3% of its working population is in agriculture, with most farmers taking on non-farm work during the off-season to supplement their household incomes. Most farmers live on farms of less than 2.5 acres and despite rich soils, ideal growing conditions and an abundant supply of labour, agricultural yields are extremely low in comparison with Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The combination of geopolitical location, ecological conditions and historical circumstances has turned Bangladesh into an exporter of cheap labour (Rahman, 2000). Bangladesh’s success in increasing school enrolment has been one of the most notable achievements of the last twenty-five years, although there still remains a significant disparity between rural and urban areas. The

unemployment rate however remains high (United Nations report on Bangladesh, http://www.un-bd.org/bgd/index.html). Without employment security in Bangladesh, workers seek transnational forms of employment in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, the tyranny of global political economy. Work migration has therefore become a means of relieving the domestic market of unemployed or under-employed persons as well as a source of foreign exchange earnings. The amount of remittances sent back to Bangladesh from working in Singapore supports the pattern of temporary migration: between 2007 – 2008, Bangladeshis remitted some USD$130.11 million. At one level then, participation in the global economy through the export of cheap labour does seem to benefit the Bangladesh economy, perhaps explaining the motivations for individuals to continue taking on this sojourn, in spite of the high agent fees and the hyperexploitative work conditions. Research however has shown that the distribution of these remittances in the sending country are far from even (Rahman, 2000). My focus does not lie in the distribution of migration income in Bangladesh but in the reproduction of social class through the division of labour in Singapore as a receiving country. This section has thus far highlighted the reasons Bangladesh has become a resource for cheap labour as a combined result of global political economy and its local conditions. I now turn to the ways in which Bangladeshi men are made a cheap, acquiescent workforce by illustrating how exploitation and subordination are being maintained, resulting in much precariousness through their work lives in Singapore.
Agencies and agents

While I do not think that recruitment is necessarily a causal mechanism for the reproduction of divisions of labour, it is a useful starting point for investigating how people are brought into jobs that form the underbelly of the global marketplace. By tracing how these men are recruited, I illustrate that even at the initial stage, Bangladeshi migrant workers start off in a severely disenfranchised position. As McDowell pointed out, there is an important connection between the global growth of labour markets and the mobility of workers. Further, this correlates with the rise of various forms of temporary, precarious or insecure work of which agency work is an important element (2008). In her work on the export of Filipino labour migrants, Rodriguez argues that labour brokerage is a “neoliberal strategy that is comprised of institutional and discursive practices through which the Philippine state mobilizes its citizens and sends them abroad to work for employers throughout the world while generating a “profit” form the remittances that migrants send back to their families…” (2010: x). While Bangladesh does not have a state-based, centralized overseas employment institution such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), its neoliberal strategies in sending labour migrants abroad is arguably characterized by its lack of state-based labour brokerage. These strategies continue to be legitimized by the remittances that are sent back from its overseas migrants. Remittances from Singapore, as mentioned earlier, were estimated to be some USD$130.11 million between 2007 to 2008, with Bangladeshis lauded as playing an “important role in national development” (Bangladesh High Commission, Singapore website).33

On the labour-receiving end, the growth of Singapore’s migrant work force, through the low wages paid to these workers, is possibly a way in which its economy has managed to maintain growth while preventing inflation. To mobilize a ready pool of cheap labour to take on jobs that local Singaporeans reject, firms turn to recruitment agencies in Singapore with connections in Bangladesh. This transnational assemblage of workers through agents not only reproduces the divisions of labour by reinforcing state policies on labour restrictions for Bangladeshi men in Singapore, but also, through its lack of accountability to its recruits and heavy fees becomes an active process of engulfing migrants and their households in financial turmoil.

There are labour suppliers in Singapore that work as agencies, such as FirstCare which acts as a direct recruiter of foreign workers to companies in Singapore and as administrators (i.e. middle-party) (http://www.firstcare.com.sg/package.php). Employers pay a fee for the agency to carry out the necessary paperwork required to administer workers. These services range from the more straightforward such as applying for the In-Principal Approval (IPA), arranging transportation of the worker from Changi Airport to company dorms, as well as arranging for medical check-up for the workers. There are also murkier services such as “assist(ing) in repatriation of workers upon expiry or termination of the employment agreement, arrang(ing) for free replacement of workers if required” (http://www.firstcare.com.sg/services.php). From the website, it appears there are no additional fees that the employer needs to pay should they require the agency to source for workers on their behalf. It also becomes evident from the information provided on the website that employers have little to no contact with its

34 Efforts to speak directly with agency managers were unanswered.
35 This is a pass which is issued to the worker before he arrives in Singapore. Upon the medical body check up in Singapore, he will be issued a Work Permit.
labour source before the individuals become hired as workers. In other words, it appears that the agency makes it convenient for the capitalist to access a ready labour pool – this orchestration by specialized labour providers enhancing the separation of relations of production from relations in production, mystifying the former while effectively subordinating workers to the latter (Burawoy, 1985). On the side of relations of production, the Bangladeshi is related to his agent as an individual, even though in principle, he is free to choose between different agencies. As Lindquist’s work on labour recruitment in Lombok, Indonesia, migrants almost never approach any agencies directly (2010). Instead, an informal labour recruiter approaches – and to a lesser extent, is approached by – the migrant directly either in the area where the migrant lives or through other forms of social relations such as friends, family or local figure of authority (Lindquist, 2010). My data reveals that it is common for agents in Bangladesh to operate individually and proactively on the search for men to work in Singapore. The data revealed just how mystified the process of recruiting is the closer it reaches the source of labour. There is no information on the webpage of FirstCare to indicate the recruitment process in Bangladesh. My interviews with NGO directors also shed little light on the actual steps taken to source workers in the sending country. There does appear, however, to be a process of social networking for agents to get in touch with potential clients. Like Karim and Babu, the rest of the Bangladeshis I interviewed all told me that they knew the agents who first approached them about work in Singapore. For most of the men, these recruiters are other men they knew from their village. This transnational recruiting process hence takes on a very local dimension and depends on social relationships. As Alamgir told me,
Agent say Singapore many money can make. No need to sell chickens anymore in my life after I go work in Singapore. Salary from Singapore can support my whole family – agent tell me like this.

This was also reflected in Ismail’s decision to come to Singapore to work in a shipyard,

My agent (told) me many of his relatives go to Singapore to work. He also knows that my brother-in-law also go for many years and he send money back. Agent (told) me that I can be like that also. I can make money and have good job ...

This promise of a good job in Singapore does not come cheap: each worker pays between SGD$7000 to SGD$10,000 to their agents for a work permit job even before they leave Bangladesh. The roundtrip air tickets cost about $700, passport fees cost $100 and job training usually cost about $1,500 (personal interview with director of HOME) – the remaining balance is unaccounted for. The NGO personnel I interviewed believe the rest of the money goes to the employer to offset government-imposed levies, to paying for the upkeep of the worker and also to the agent’s personal profit. If it is true that part of the “agent fees” goes towards paying for the workers’ levies and maintenance, this serves the employer by cheapening labour costs while at the same time creating an atomized and vulnerable worker who, in order to access work, is already in debt even before earning any wages. In this way, the worker is sucked into the exploitative social relations by material circumstances. Almost all the Bangladeshis I interviewed sold off various assets – land, homes, jewelry, savings – and took out loans from banks, relatives and/or loansharks to pay for the agent fees. In Marxian terms, to become workers in the global economy, the men sell off their other means of livelihood, putting up only their labour power for sale in return for wages (Burawoy, 1985). To convert labour power – the capacity to work – into labour – the application of effort to provide wages and profit,
migrants must first pay a large fee. Clearly for these men, their exploitation and subordination begins even before they start work. I would argue that the precarity in their work lives is exacerbated as a result of having to pay off these loans (Waite, 2008). Aside from the expensiveness of the fees, I also argue that it is in this very ambiguity, this mystery shrouding the agent fee, that one can detect a form of worker subordination through the continued lack of accountability on the part of the agents. This then begs the question of why these workers take this risk since it is clear that most already are in possession of some assets themselves in the form of land, jewelry, etc. Aside from the structural issues pushing them out of Bangladesh, I argue that this is part of the ideological conditioning that makes a worker subordinate to the uncertainties he is literally buying into (Burawoy, 1985). Alamgir’s belief in the promise of a job was converted into a livelihood of fragility and precariousness.

The individualistic operations taken on by the agents serve to individualize the worker – there is no knowledge of other co-workers until the job training, which only takes place after the agent fees have been paid. My interview data reveals that workers who keep their jobs have a typical debt-repayment period of about one year. It is also the debts incurred from paying the agent that keeps a lot of workers in their jobs, no matter how dissatisfied they are with the work. As Shaiful, who paid $10,000 to his agent tells me,

Some money I borrow from my relatives, some money my parents give me – all bank money they give me so I can give agent. Very hard job now but I do. I cannot work some months and go back – my family has no more money.

At present, although the Singaporean state provides some guidelines for employers to hire foreign workers from licensed agencies in Singapore, it does not impose laws on
labour recruitment methods in Bangladesh as long as workers enter Singapore on valid IPAs, as with the case of Babu (http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/others/employment_agencies.html).

My view is that we should only be recruiting workers who go through the approved channels in their countries so in that way we can minimize human trafficking – because a lot of times that is what its become! Right now, (the government) is approving work permits left, right and center. There should at least be that mechanism in place where (workers) can seek redress should there be a problem. Now it’s a free for all! At least we should have some structure to the labour recruitment process

- Interview with director of NGO in Singapore.

Workers also have no clearly listed documents of what to expect out of their jobs – another way in which labour continues to be disenfranchised.

The workers are disempowered in the sense of not being given the right information…they sometimes have written documents but these don’t often tell the all that they need to know. Even at the level of work-permit conditions and contracts in Singapore, we know how vague they can be…

- Interview with director of NGO in Singapore.

This form of labour regulation, characterized by its lack in both sending and receiving countries, becomes part of the process of labour reproduction within a flexibilized labour market. This recreates a type of external “mystification” where individuals are taking on significant financial risks to become workers where the boundaries and conditions of their jobs are not clearly stated and where the balance of power is structurally in favour of employers.

Dependency on employers

Housing
The degree of precariousness workers are vulnerable to is heightened given their high dependency on their employers. There is a high degree of containment in the daily lives of the Bangladeshi workers that is clearly seen in their living spaces. Aside from their wages, workers also rely on their employers for housing, daily meals, transportation to and from the work site, medical insurance and also eventual repatriation. These are institutionalized within the MOM’s guidelines for employers who are hiring foreign workers. Bangladeshi workers in Singapore are supposedly housed in state-approved, employer-provided accommodations – a formalized practice usually for workers from “abroad” (i.e. non-Johorean commuters, not local Singaporean workers). Under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, employers must provide “acceptable accommodations” for work permit-holding workers. These come in forms of purpose-built dormitories that are commercially-run, industrial and/or warehouse premises that have been partly converted to house workers, temporary quarters on work-sites, harbourcrafts (such as ships and marine vessels) and a smaller number of workers are also housed in HDB flats.

Off-site dormitories such as Simpang Lodge in the northern part of Singapore and SCAL located in the far western part are often “self-contained” and include amenities such as provisions and barber shops as well as recreational facilities like basketball courts, canteens, television rooms and gymnasiums (http://www.scal.com.sg/index.cfm?GPID=105). Another premise housing workers is the recently converted old school compound in Serangoon Gardens, an upper-middle class neighbourhood. This conversion was hotly debated mainly amongst neighbourhood

residents, grassroot leaders and the Member of Parliament for the area. While there is no space here to discuss the NIMBY sentiments, it must be highlighted that dormitory operators have been instructed to install surveillance cameras and implement rules on noise levels. The facility will also have adequate amenities, including provision shops, so workers will have “little reason to leave it”. Finally, the site area will be reduced, setting it further back from homes along certain roads and creating a “buffer zone” between residents of the Gardens and the foreign workers (*Straits Times*, 4th Oct 2008, http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_285769.html). These measures serve to contain and regulate workers by creating an enclave that is quite different from its surroundings. Aside from eliminating the chances of interaction with people who are not in the same work as they are, the installation of CCTV cameras and increased police patrols around the dormitories also extends controls over the workforce of the presumed heterosexual, single, foreign male workers on a day to day basis. As the marketing director of Simpang Lodge says,

> I want to make the police presence felt to keep the residents on their toes … In other dorms, they can't cook, so they'll go out and explore... They may not approach girls, but girls may approach them… We have two guards, one going around, one just outside checking people. No girls can go in…Sex (work) in workers' dormitory happens infrequently, but this could be because of the workers' physical needs. This must be properly managed within the law instead of allowing them to prowl in our neighbourhood residences. The dormitories' security system (CCTV, entry passes), guards, patrolling, strict discipline enforcement and working with neighbourhood police to deter such cases would help to prevent such things from happening…


This above quote illustrates that while there continues to be a stigmatization of female sex workers, it is the closely regulated masculinity of the foreign worker whose
sexuality must be kept in check, “to be deter(ed)” especially since he could easily fall prey to feminine lures, even if he does not proactively solicit for sex. His intrinsic “physical needs” as a foreign, heterosexual male appear normalized yet under the gloss of this rhetoric, these qualities pathologize him as a subject for close surveillance. Containing workers within the company’s dormitory allows for policing and remote supervision through the CCTV to prevent “unlawful” acts – linking workers to problems is a way in which efforts to decrease problems in production hinges upon the problems associated with single, male workers. These housing regulations therefore recreate the low-status male foreign worker as a person that needs to be disciplined, controlled and kept subordinate, reaffirming unequal relations of power and hierarchy embedded within the intersections of an individual’s gender, sexuality and class.

Wages

A not insignificant number of Special Pass holders are on “Salary Claims”, although the exact numbers are not available. These claims are usually lodged by workers who have not been paid for work they have done and can include both regular and overtime work hours. All of the Bangladeshis I spoke with, including those who are not on Salary Claims, however, have also been subjected to deductions from their already low wages for these “accommodation provisions” – a problem reinforced by the lack of a minimum wage in Singapore. This dependency on employers for their basic daily needs also further skews power in favour of the capitalists, who can threaten to withhold or exert their control over these needs. Md Moinul, a Special Pass holder who used to work in a shipyard tells me,
Many months, work don’t have so I only get $450 before cutting. House-money cutting $150 so maybe after, I get $300 every month.

As the economist Maurice Dobb pointed out, the “disagreeableness” of a job, which should decrease its desirability, has not produced the correspondingly higher wages that supply and demand economics would lead us to expect (quoted in Mann, 2007: 109). Dobb goes on to elaborate that there is the tendency in classed societies, for occupations, which have “traditionally been poorly paid to be considered disagreeable, and for those carrying a higher income to be considered more socially respectable …” (quoted in Mann, 2007: 110). My data revealed that this monthly salary, post-deductions is common amongst workers in this sector of the economy – a wage that is far below the official national average for construction and maritime labourers. In 1996, the average starting wage for workers in these sectors was $860. This figure fell to $600 by 2006, a decrease of 30%. This trend of driving down production costs by suppressing wage increases for this particular group of workers is likely to continue. Indeed, the Labour Chief, Lim Swee Say says, “The downward pressure on the wages of low-wage workers will continue to be there for some time as there is no shortage of low-cost, low-skilled workers in the world” (The Straits Times, July 28 2007). As illustrated in Babu’s story at the beginning of the chapter, a monthly salary of $600 after deductions is considered the industry norm at this time. It must be understood, however, that this is in contrast to “semi-skilled” and “professional” workers – all of who had wage increases ranging between 8 to 49 percent within the same decade. Lim elaborated during an interview with a national radio station, “… the cheaper are getting better, the better are getting cheaper. So what option do we have? And the way to go ahead is to be cheaper, better and faster, no other option” (3rd March, 2010 [http://www.938live.sg/News/Singapore/EDC100303-]
This discourse on improving and cheapening labour is advocated alongside increasing productivity where workers are exhorted to upgrade their skills for better pay (*The Straits Times*, July 28, 2007; 8th August 2009).

While Dobb’s analysis of the structural features of the labour market that I mentioned earlier is sound, it does not contribute to the understanding of *value* in a broader sense. My data reveals a reality that is far more complex than rationalized productivity for better wages. As another former shipyard worker who is awaiting Workmen’s Compensation, Hossein, tells me,

> Every month my boss cuts my salary. But I cannot say anything. I (tried) to ask him two times and he said to me, “if you are not happy, you can go back to Bangladesh”. Then after that, he said it is “agent money” because when I come to Singapore the second time, I paid less agent money. So I said, “Why last time you didn’t inform me what you want to cut?” He always said if I am not happy, I can go back. So I let him cut. Sometimes he cut $100 for two months, other months if I work alot, he cuts $300 or $400 like this. One time he said “this monthly (deduction) very slow. You give me two months salary at one go - $2500. He wanted me to work for free! Then how I send back money to Bangladesh? You think I don’t have family? Then I told him cannot. So he cut half my salary - $400 I give my boss. After my accident happen(ed), boss said want to send me back to Bangladesh. My boss (knew) how much it would cost to give me proper treatment – MRI costs at least $3000. The job my boss let me do is something he already (taught) other men so he said I can just go back to Bangladesh – he can pay other men less because they are newer workers. He said he will go and buy my ticket to Bangladesh....

As the narratives at the beginning of this chapter show as well, these deductions can be rationalized as covering housing, food and electricity bills for the worker. In spite of MOM regulations requiring employers to provide for the worker, these arbitrary deductions show that the worker actually pays his employer for his upkeep out of his monthly wages. These men become not only a lucrative labour pool in terms of generating profit for employers but further, the elasticity of their wages contributes to
their cheapness as workers, a combined result of their availability as workers because of uneven development at the global scale, the lack of a minimum wage requirement in Singapore, their high dependency on their employers and the capacity of the employers to cut costs. These measures animate the processes of exploitation and subordination where the men have little course of redress, given their atomization. Hossein’s rhetorical question of “you think I don’t have family?” alludes to his sending remittances back to Bangladesh. As Skeldon suggests, the practice of remitting among migrant labourers exacerbate workplace exploitation by enhancing the workers’ own precarious positions (2008).

In contrast to Wright’s work on masculinities in Mexico’s maquiladoras, men here are not seen as workers who can be trained and upgraded eventually to become supervisors of the work (2006). Rather, at the marine and/or construction site in Singapore, the worker’s lack of skill is his worth and should skills be learnt over time, they are not correspondingly acknowledged through wages and job security. Similar to the Mexican women workers documented in Wright’s research, this exposes the tragic logic of capitalist value production in Marx’s argument that the more profit a worker produces, the poorer they become (Wright, 2006). The reality of the worker’s livelihood as told here is in stark contrast to official discourses of a direct relationship between productivity and wage increases. We see that while the value created by their labour remains constant or increases, Hossein’s labour is cheapened or is threatened to be rendered irrelevant – a way for profit to increase for the employer when the difference between the cost for reproducing workers (wages) and the marketed cost of their products (materials created at the worksite, in this case) increases (Wright, 2006). This further
reinforces Mann’s argument that the wage is a vital part of social life under capitalism. Income can “never be contained within the ‘economic’, neither in its pecuniary nor its symbolic dimensions….It is an economic and cultural medium of value (of production, exchange, distribution and consumption) at the same time” (Mann, 2007: 169). This cultural medium that Mann speaks of relates the worker’s wages to their racial and national identities.

As an interview I conducted with a site-engineer (who is Singaporean-Chinese man) reveals,

Of course Singaporeans don’t want to do construction. Hot sun all day, carry things that are so bloody heavy so we get foreigner workers to do… Banglas are paid less because they cannot do the work as well as workers from China! Sure, China workers can talk back to their foreman but they can at least do the job in less time. Sometimes I have to tell the Bangla three, four times before he understands what I want him to do. And sometimes they pretend to do work! I know they only work when they see me or their foreman approaching. And they are very fragile people, I think. Sometimes I scold them a little bit only and they will give me attitude. Chinese workers are tougher.

In this sense, the work that the Bangladeshis are doing is not only too dangerous for Singaporeans but the wages they are paid for doing undesirable and dangerous work are lower than other foreign workers doing the same job. In this above quote, Bangladeshis are constructed as less skilled, more deceitful and weaker than workers from China, which is supposedly reflected in their wages. Blatant racism is embedded within this discourse, intermixed with concerns of workplace productivity. Clearly from this justification of the wage and the wage itself, what it means to be a skilled and significant worker is not to be Bangladeshi. In other words, Bangladeshis are ideologically and materially slotted into the bottom rung of production value, as evidenced by their wage.
Repatriation

The precariousness Hossein faces again comes through clearly in the above quote, where he, like many others in his class situation as a result of their location in the division of labour is exposed to vulnerabilities, which aside from wage deductions, includes the larger threat of repatriation. Their transience, as recreated through their position within a flexibilized labour market, exposes them to losing their jobs. As state policy enforces the policy that employers are responsible for repatriation of workers, it also creates the condition where the power to repatriate workers lies with employers. Indeed, the notion of transience must be tied intimately with the idea of subordination here where not only is transience part of subordination but Bangladeshi workers also have to be subordinate to prevent their transience from the Singaporean workplace from being enforced. Aside from state policies that render them as transient workers with the work-permit system, their transience is reinforced given their high dependency on their employers as well as their “unskilled” status at work.

Hossein’s story does not end there. He injured his head and his back at work one day when he tried to carry a heavy piece of metal. As he said in the above quote, his employer was not going to pay for his medical fees. I verified this myself when I accompanied him to the hospital one afternoon. It was his third appointment and also the third one he was going to miss because his employer would not show up to pay for his doctor’s appointments. I called his employer who said that Hossein was lying about his accident and later on he told me he was “busy”. I later found out through the NGO that his employer had not reported his workplace accident – a procedure that goes against
MOM guidelines for employers\textsuperscript{37}. Hossein eventually went to the MOM under the advice of his representing lawyer to file a Workmen’s Compensation claim. In the meantime, he put up at the men’s shelter of a local NGO. I asked if he could return to his company’s dormitory – it is MOM policy that the employer continues providing accommodations to their workers if workplace accidents render the worker unable to work. But Hossein told me that he was afraid to do so because like other workers, the threat of repatriation by the employer could be realized at any time by the hiring of repatriation companies. As the director of a NGO wrote,

> Repatriation companies’ are businesses that are set up specifically to help employers manage ‘troublesome’ foreign workers by roughing them up and sending them back to their home countries forcefully. Many employers are more than happy to pay someone to do this since they find it difficult to handle workplace disputes and get rid of foreign workers who do not toe the line... What this entails is not described at all. One such company is RTU Services which (advertises as a) “manpower repatriation and related services” (company). It is obviously not just an escort service that ferries workers to the airport. Its methods, which include the wrongful restraint of people are clearly illegal.

> This form of forcible repatriation is yet another way in which the transience of this group of foreign workers is ensured. Employers who are worried about losing their $5000 security bond should a worker go missing for three months or more often hire these “repatriation companies” for a fee of a few hundred dollars (The Straits Times, 26\textsuperscript{th} Sept 2009). While these companies thrive on the business of employers’ fears, this also sets up a system of labour control through intimidation that employers can wield against workers, particularly if labour can no longer be extracted from the worker, as in Hossein and Karim’s injury cases. Again, the capacity to use these means of removing workers is made possible because the responsibility of repatriating workers lies solely with the

employer, regardless of whether or not the worker has worked and paid enough to recover the fees he paid his agent.

Hossein and Karim’s stories are also examples of the physical dangers inherent within the nature of their jobs. 70 workers died from work related injuries in 2009, up from 67 in 2008 (http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_503494.html). Common work injuries include back fractures, knee injuries and heart attacks with many medical bills exceeding the current insurance coverage of $5000 (The Straits Times, 26th Sept 2009). Injuries and accidents often happen during the transportation of workers to and from worksites as they travel on the backs of lorries and trucks. These are also officially covered under Workmen’s Compensation claims in Singapore. Although the current policy changes by MOM increases mandatory medical insurance from $5000 to $15,000 is a significant improvement, I would also argue that it continues to be this particular segment of the working population, which is exposed to greater dangers at work than say the middle-class Singaporean, that eventually leads to the need for greater insurance coverage. These measures highlight the precarious conditions inherent within the work that is done by Bangladeshi male migrants. Their foreign-ness allows for the rapid turnover of individual bodies through eventual repatriation via the terms of the Special Pass and possibility of forcible repatriation through the repatriation companies. In short, workers are made to leave when their value as economically-productive labouring bodies is spent. The worker’s production of profit for his employer – his labour – is worth more than his value as a labourer. Rather than increasing his value as a worker as he learns more skills over time, one Bangladeshi is interchangeable with the next because of
his “uskill” status. As Marx argues, “the value of labour power varies not only because it produces value…(but) also because it produces waste” (Wright, 2006: 78). The exploited value of the Bangladeshi worker – indeed the attraction of capital to this form of labour – comes not only through his cheapness but also through his “wasting”, that is, his “non-skills” that render him easily replaced.

*Migrant selves*

The economic lives of these Bangladeshi male migrants in Singapore reflect profound structural disparities and uneven development that in many ways render them more vulnerable than other workers to processes and practices of exploitation and subordination as I have elaborated above. As they enter these circuits of production, however, they also traverse critical arenas of cultural and social reproduction. The politics of class goes beyond these exploitative, structural limitations within the workers’ lives. In the choices the workers make, the values they share and the identities they pursue, male migrants from Bangladesh (and elsewhere) are neither passive victims of domination nor simple pawns of structures and processes beyond their control (Mills, 1999). Through their own notions of fulfillment and self-expression, Bangladeshi male migrants also engage powerful meanings about what it means to be a man working in a globalized labour force. Waged work for them, thus, is intertwined with their gender and nationality, even during the time they are on Special Passes.
Gender and mobility

Gender relations are often important factors in explaining and legitimizing the movement of young men to work in Singapore. Whenever the men spoke of their decisions to come to Singapore, it almost always was in relation to their roles as men in their households. A continued conversation with Karim from the opening narrative reveals,

Bangladesh no good job for me, so I come to Singapore. I cannot ask my wife to go and work. Because it is not good! Ladies in Bangladeshi don’t work – not like in Singapore. If she work, who can take care of my family? I am a man so I must take care of my family. No matter how hard the job, nevermind. I do because I know I must support my father and mother, also my wife and small daughter.

Mannaf, a previous shipyard worker who has been sleeping at a parking lot intermittently for three months while awaiting his Workmen’s Compensation Claim tells me,

… last time when I (had) a job, I (sent) maybe 80% of my salary to Bangladesh. Cannot keep so much salary for myself. My family will be happy if they know I give them my salary. It is my job to my family because I am a man…. Now I cannot tell my family my situation! Sometimes they ask me why I don’t send money back but I just say I give money to my friend to start a business here. If they understand my condition in Singapore, my mother and father will get heart attack and my wife will cry everyday. So I one person ‘tahan’38 no problem… If my wife knows, then she go work in a factory –(there are) many men working in factory! What if she sees, and she (thinks), “my husband no use, not sending money back, I want to go and marry another man”, then what will happen?

This suggests that even with their having migrated, masculinity for these Bangladeshi workers continue to be readily accommodated within existing patriarchal structures, confirming their resilience and versatility rather than signaling any major shift in the sexual balance of power. As Bourdieu argues in Masculine Domination, “gender

38 This is a Malay word often used in Singapore that means “tolerate”.
asymmetries continue to be thrown into visible relief” where gender continues to have a pronounced autonomy vis a vis economic relations (2001). Karim’s emphatic claim that is it “not good” for a woman to be working continues to reinforce the standard of a man’s role as the economic provider while a woman’s role is to take on reproductive labour within the household – indeed, many of the men have told me that the reason they take on work overseas is because they are men and getting used to unfamiliar territory is easier “for a man”. This is as Bourdieu argued, where “social positions themselves (are) sexually characterized and characterizing … in defending their jobs against feminization, men are trying to protect … themselves as men, such as manual workers … which owe much, if not all of their value, even in their (own) eyes, to their image of manliness” (2001: 96). Consequently, a gendered moral framework is reproduced, where good men continue to take on paid work and virtuous women work within the house. Traditional patterns of masculinity and femininity may be more stretched across space, borders and scales but it would be not be too far-fetched to argue that there is a persistent asymmetry of power between men and women (Jackson, 1991).

The loss of paid employment, then, is experienced often as a threat to the livelihoods of not only the workers and their households but also to their manhood. Bearing the responsibility of remitting the money and having the capacity to do so is tied to Mannaf’s gender identity. In believing in the primacy granted to masculinity, Mannaf, like many other migrants, is further entrenched within masculine domination himself: limited by the lack of secure employment and exposed to certain vulnerabilities because of his job, he experiences challenges to his values as a Bangladeshi male, as a son and a husband. Similar to the female migrants in Mill’s study of Bangkok’s rural migrant
workers, these tensions underlying the men’s labour migration also prompt them to negotiate a series of linked fragile compromises – balancing personal consumption to remit most of their money to Bangladesh, having to keep their homeless and jobless situations from their families and wanting to maintain a particular form of masculine construction in relation to their wives (1999). The cultural dominance of gender structures illustrates that the experience of class cannot be fully understood without also understanding the permanence of other social collectivities, even in times of vulnerabilities (Bourdieu, 2001). This also shows the oppressive aspect of masculinity not just towards females, but as experienced by men, as well, as they grapple with precarious lives without becoming redundant. Maintaining these delicate roles is possible because of pre-existing gender politics and also a strategy that responds to political-economic conditions and inequalities that restrict their access to material resources and opportunities in Singapore. As these men try to balance structural fractures with dominant cultural discourses and personal values, they experience these disjunctures most sharply as personal misfortune and hardship. Their silence becomes part of their dominated habitus: their hardship in Singapore cannot be seen as sheer passivity but rather, actively contributes to the symbolic violence that rendered them unable to speak of these hardships in the first place. As Bourdieu argues (2001: 38),

> the practical knowledge and recognition of the magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated that are triggered by the magic of symbolic power and through which the dominated, often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed, often take the form of bodily emotions – shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt…

It would be possible to argue also that these dominant discourses of gender couched within the pursuit of happiness through waged labour motivated them to come to
Singapore in the first place while also obscuring how their hardship is rooted within the exploitative relations of the paid work they can access. These discourses become embodied by the migrants over time, indeed, *become historicized*, through their experiences informed by, and engaging with, structures of gender and economic domination (Bourdieu, 2001).

Overall, these Bangladeshi workers I spoke with were impressive in their determination and commitment to the labour market in Singapore. Indeed, I found particularly striking that most of the men I interviewed, like Babu and Karim at the beginning of the chapter, look forward to returning to Singapore to work, in spite of having experienced the hardship of being jobless and homeless. Aside from the bleak job market in Bangladesh, the very notion of a singular and general factor accounting for this movement seems inadequate to reflect a set of relational processes between variable structural circumstances in different places and the active agency of these young men. Aside from wanting to provide a more stable form of livelihood for their families, many of them also felt that Singapore was a “good place” to work in spite of the difficulties they have to face. Hossein elaborates,

> I like Singapore law. It is good. Singapore police don’t take money from people. There are a lot of laws here - good! Not like that in Bangladesh (where there are) many gangsters. If you earn $10,000, maybe you have to give $1000 to gangsters for protection money. It is not like that in Singapore! My friend also wants to come to Singapore to work. He says he wants me to arrange for him. Even though Singapore is a small country, it (has) very nice roads, very good MRT, many gardens – in front of HDBs or condominiums, there are always gardens! Also have electricity 24 hours a day. Singapore is also very multicultural – many things have, many things can see! I like this. In Bangladesh not like this – I think it is called “monoculture”... It is better if I can stay in Singapore with a good job.
Md. Ishaak, a previous shipyard worker awaiting Workmen’s Compensation and who has been sleeping on the corridor outside of his lawyer’s office, also echoes this sanguine attitude about Singapore,

I (went) to MOM today, the train (was) full and people stand very close to me but no pushing. Singapore people are gentlemen. Singapore law also very good. Police very good. Bangladesh law and political situation no good. Singapore very good. I think my back “spoil” already – fractured. I cannot do hard work now – my luck is bad – so I think I cannot come to Singapore again. I want but I have no more chance to come again.

These powerful constructions of a Singaporean modernity urge Bangladeshi male migrants to continue making this labour migration in spite of their subordination as waged workers in low-skilled, low-paid jobs. This is arguably part of the ideological conditioning that creates an almost hegemonic effect where workers accept the exploitative conditions, blurring the lines between structural impositions and active agency (Burawoy, 1985). Discourses of modernity and gender serve to capitalize on these migrant dreams – reinforcing these workers as a subordinate social group to help reproduce existing structures of power. The workers’ own goals and desires then propel them towards becoming labour migrants who see these obstacles as something individualized (e.g. “bad luck” and “responsibility as a man”) rather than collectively as workers subjected to hyperexploitative conditions. The poignancy of their class situation comes through when we see that they are valued precisely because of their disposability, their positions in the division of labour in Singapore and their yearning to work in Singapore in temporary, low-paid, low-status work only fuels these unequal power relations that exposes them to more harm than other groups of workers.
Class tastes

These attitudes and dispositions manifest – whether consciously or not – through their consumption patterns, further complicating their class subjectivities. This does not merely entail an examination of the things they buy but also what orients their taste towards specific goods. Through these consumption choices and orientations, indeed, through their very symbolic power, Bourdieu argues, social collectivities are formed (Weininger, 2004). Indeed, all of the men with whom I spoke indicated the desire to purchase “Singaporean” goods and bring them back to Bangladesh. As Ishaak explains to me,

Ishaak: I think I will buy some make-up for my wife and shampoo for other ladies in my house and village. For my father, I will buy torchlight.
Jia: Why can’t you buy it back in Bangladesh? I think it would be cheaper there, right?
Ishaak: Yes, of course cheaper in Bangladesh! Even buying it at Dhaka airport will be cheaper. But no problem. People will see that I buy Singapore shampoo and Singapore torchlight. My father will be happy, my wife also happy and my villagers will also think “He had good job in Singapore that’s why can buy Singapore things”.
Jia: And why torchlight for your father?
Ishaak: Because my village (doesn’t) have electricity 24 hours a day. Sometimes at night, he want to go somewhere, he (needs) a torchlight. Bangladesh (has) torchlight also! But Singapore’s torchlight is better I think. All Bangla men buy torchlight for their fathers and brothers when they go back… my villagers will say I am a good son.

As this above conversation shows, there is an “economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic” (Bourdieu, 1984: 1). That Ishaak would rather buy apparently mundane items such as shampoo and torchlights in spite them costing more in Singapore suggests the symbolic significance of being able to purchase these goods as well as his cultural competence. Ishaak’s taste for these items, while not economically rational even if it is embedded with a clear gendered rationale, is a result of his pre-existing cultural
knowledge about which items to get and how to expend his wealth to get symbolic mileage. Through these items, people from Ishaak’s village can imply his position in the division of labour (regardless of whether or not it is true). The symbolic properties of these items, indeed, their value, lies within their ability to illustrate conditions of acquisition and are regarded as “attributes of excellence, constituting one of the key markers of class and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction, that is … the infinitely varied art of marking distances” (Bourdieu, 1984: 66). This illustrates the power relations that create social reproduction in places (Bangladesh) outside of Ishaak’s economic production (Singapore). While it is not this project’s focus to discuss the reproduction of social classes in sending areas, I argue nonetheless that this illustrates the far-reaching geography of classes. As much as work migrants’ class trajectories on the production side stretch from Bangladesh as a result of the global assemblage of Singapore’s labour market, so do their class subjectivities in terms of their consumption. This continues to show how local encounters with global capitalism must look beyond the imposition of new demands and power relations from the outside but also in light of how this process may be received by workers on the ground who are themselves also occupying positions in different cultural fields.

These consumption choices are made up of people’s economic and cultural capital – resources upon which individuals draw to exercise their class identities. People’s class habitus – within which are couched gender subjectivities as well – then orient the expenditure of their economic and cultural capital in practical ways that give coherence to a lifestyle, most visibly seen through the notion of taste. A cultural product – the torchlight, shampoo – is a constituted taste, constituted through the process of
objectification by the social field in which the agent (in this case, the Bangladeshi worker) occupies a position. Through his consumption of these products, he further legitimizes its objectification, assigning the product and its consumer a prestige, realizing itself as well as its consumer’s class identity (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, Bourdieusian discussions of class move beyond ideas of exploitation within capitalist production and engage with social reproduction through consumption without neglecting people’s positions in the realm of material production. The habitus organizes how people perceive the social world but at the same time, this perception is also a result of how people are themselves produced in the division of classes. The habitus is an internalization of one’s conditions of existence and is “converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions”. This explains why an agent’s “whole set of practices (or those of agents produced by similar conditions) are both systematic, inasmuch as they are the product of the application of identical (or interchangeable) schemes and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another lifestyle” (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Simply put, different conditions create different habitus. Through this concept of the habitus, Bourdieu bridges the often (mis)used dichotomy between agency and structure within class practice. It must be kept in mind however that the ways in which people consume commodities and ideas reflect more than just the economic. The acquisition or at least yearning to acquire certain goods serve as symbolic measures of success.

Theoretically, this also intertwines Marx’s analysis of class with Bourdieu’s – an idea most clearly distilled through Bourdieu’s articulation of the “taste of necessity” (1979; 1984). It is through this notion that we can see how class as reproduced through
people’s daily lives is not only always embedded with symbolic interests but further, these interests are always shaped by economic calculation. The various moments of daily life provide many occasions for an expression of habitus with each comprising an opportunity for the subordination of function to form. It must be emphasized, however, that the choosing of form over function varies in nature, depending on people’s economic conditions – as can be seen through the comparative reading amongst the Bangladeshi migrant workers with the Johorean commuters and Singaporean financial workers. Bourdieu argues that the “taste for necessity” inclines the working class habitus to assign “absolute priority to function over form, to insist that art carry a moral message” (Weininger, 2004). The petite bourgeoisie, however, exhibits a lifestyle born of the combination of an aspiration to the bourgeois lifestyle on the one hand and insufficient economic and/or cultural capital to attain it, on the other (1984). While my data on the Johorean commuters revealed this – indeed, by jobs and income, they would fit more readily into the petite bourgeoisie class – these constraints were more clearly felt amongst the Bangladeshi migrants, precisely because of their lower incomes and social status. As a previous shipyard worker, Farouk told me,

I like to go to Sentosa with my friends … very beautiful place. We take the train from Vivocity\(^{39}\) and sometimes we eat something there. But I don’t know why some of the Bangladeshis like to go into the shops. You have no money to buy the clothes inside so why you go inside for? It is not important. Just look from outside, eat and then go to the seaside!

Khairul, another previous shipyard worker also tells me,

Last time when I go out with my friends, sometimes we drink Coca Cola or we buy something small to eat in Little India. But we never drink alcohol because it is not good for (our) body. Sometimes we buy cigarettes but very expensive in Singapore! In Bangladesh, I think can buy one whole carton (for the same price).

\(^{39}\) There is a monorail station within Vivocity Mall that ferries people to and from Sentosa, a man-made island off the southern coast of Singapore.
as in Singapore. Last time, after boss cut my salary, I have about $300 left so I can go and enjoy. This $300 very fast finish, you know! After I buy phone cards to call Bangladesh, buy drinks, buy something to eat – very easy to spend this $300 in Singapore. Now I don’t have money so I don’t spend so much – no problem. I just buy less. $100 is (a lot) to me now. Last time I have salary so $100 or $200 is very small to me. But now, that is a lot!

From Farouk and Khairul’s claims that certain things are “not important” and “no problem”, it is clear that “practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness by departing from the logic of interested calculation” (Bourdieu, 1979: 177). Their economic calculations extend to their consumption of all goods. It is therefore possible to argue that domination works through people’s consumption as well. Their adaptation to their low incomes becomes another form of domination where they have internalized their dispossession through their habitus. Farouk’s claim of not understanding why his friends want to go into stores selling things they cannot afford suggests a practical orientation towards necessity. His not understanding makes possible the disappearance of the very political-economic conditions which produced this orientation in the first place, enabling this subtle mode of domination to be maintained. This point is seen in Khairul’s claim that it is “no problem” for him to be spending less than when he used to have a job. As I highlighted in my theoretical arguments, if there is an apparent relationship between income and consumption, this is because taste is almost always the product of economic conditions so that one’s wages – or lack thereof, as in the case here – and position within waged labour are always culturally expressed through the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). This also means that different incomes will generate different tastes – indeed, “one man’s extravagance is another man’s prime necessity” – a point I will return to in the other empirical chapters.
The Bangladeshis I spoke with also often rationalized their consumption choices and tastes by moralizing their stance against a different group. As Hossein tells me,

In Bangladesh, ladies cannot wear short pants! Very (conservative)! Maybe only babies can wear but after primary school, people don’t wear short pants to go out. At home okay. Here in Singapore, men and women both wear short pants. In Bangladesh cannot like this – women wear like this not good. And here, always see men and women holding hands on the bus, on the MRT, at the shopping center. In Bangladesh, only in the park at night you can see. But in Singapore, I wear short pants also because I am not happy. In Bangladesh, I will not (dress) like this. Always shirt and long pants”

The above quotes illustrate a form of dispositions taken on by these male migrants. The moralizing of how women dress in both places is one of the ways in which Bangladeshis form a sense of distinction from another group of which they are not a part. Their distaste, their sense of vulgarization towards women wearing shorts is very much a symbolic struggle over what it means to be appropriately dressed – a struggle that will become clearer later on, as I show how distinction, and more broadly, class, always exists in relation to one another.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the understanding of social class reproduction through the division of labour in Singapore by analyzing the class situations of low-paid, low-status Bangladeshi male migrants. The cosmopolitanization of Singapore’s labour force as discussed in the previous chapter is a discursive model which is realized upon the calculated differentiation of workers. On the one hand, the Bangladeshi men’s labour migration highlights the powerful and complex structures of inequality in global capitalism and in Singapore’s labour market through the various policies and practices
that maintain their economic exploitation and subordination, as I have examined here. As workers enter these new forms of waged labour, with precarious conditions of low wages, close regulation of their (re)productive bodies, enforced transience and sheer physical dangers of their jobs, it becomes clear that their work lives are not merely economic in the narrow sense, but, deeply entrenched within, are complex social goals and cultural discourses that linger even after they fall out of work. Through the notion of the habitus, we see that these are individuals who operate as subjects engaging with, rather than being passive receptors of, social constructs such as class and gender. As Enloe argues, “…without women’s own needs, values and worries, the global assembly line would grind to a halt” (1989: 16 – 17, quoted in Mills, 1999). My argument shows that this needs to be extended to include discussions of masculinities and its intersections with class subjectivities as well. Despite and perhaps precisely because of their exclusion from material benefits of work and, finally, because of being special pass holders, Bangladeshi migrant workers continue to grapple with dominant narratives of gender and modernity. Much of this manifests through the necessity of taste – a notion which is experienced by the other groups of workers I examine in this dissertation but in ways that differ drastically because of their lack of access to better wages and jobs. Through the conceptual tools with which I examine the reproduction of social class, we see that certain groups of workers are exposed to greater danger and harm in their daily lives, more so than others. Class is always relational. The following chapters will illustrate how different groups of workers are linked precisely through their class-based differences, both through their work trajectories and their forms of symbolic classification and identity formation.


Chapter 5: Commuting to work: Johoreans in Singapore’s labour market

Dan, 29

Dan is a machine-operator at a Singaporean stationery manufacturing plant. He is originally from Kuching, Sarawak and told me that he was very reluctant to show up for his first day of work after completing his studies because of the low pay. He called up his elder brother who had already been working in Singapore for a while who told him to “buy a ticket and come to Singapore immediately”. Taking his brother’s advice and through that network, Dan got a job and had initially planned to only work in Singapore for a year to “gain some experience” and to “see what it was like living in a big city like Singapore”. He ended up working in Singapore for 10 years.

Up until March 2008, Dan was living with his partner in a 5 room flat in Seng Kang⁴⁰, paying rent of $800/month. The landlord suddenly decided to increase his rent to $1,800 – an amount which the both of them could not afford. The couple had already bought a house in Johor but it would not be ready until the later part of 2010. They decided to move into a rented house in Johor while still keeping their jobs in Singapore. This, Don said, made the most financial sense. He said the cost of living and living standards in Johor are much higher than in other parts of Malaysia. At the same time, however, the salaries earned from working in Johor are not much different from the rest of the country. He said it is only possible “to survive” in Johor if one owns their own business. By working in Singapore, he said is it “not so difficult to (maintain) his current lifestyle”.

⁴⁰ This is a neighbourhood in the Northeastern part of Singapore.
Don lives with his partner in a gated community that is approximately 25 minutes away from the causeway. From leaving his home to arriving at his workplace, it takes about an hour and a half. I asked him about his consumption habits, to which he quickly replied he has “little left to spend after paying for everything”. His current lifestyle consists of caring for his three dogs, his lawn, paying for cable television and high-speed internet, maintaining two cars and his split-level townhouse with a garage. His rent is significantly lower than what he used to pay in Singapore, at 850 Ringgit a month. He also told me he had made a deposit for a specially filtrated water called “Diamond Water” which is supposedly very good for health but has since decided that it is beyond his budget and hence has had to forgo the down payment of 300 Ringgit. He also reminded me that parking in Singapore is not cheap, at about $100 Singaporean Dollars a month, excluding the monthly installment payments for his car and petrol. He also holds a California Fitness gym membership in Singapore. Electricity and water he says, are “cheap in Malaysia” but it still costs 200 Ringgit a month because they “must have air-conditioning) at home”. He says that after all these monthly bills, there is very little left for “frivolous spending”. He does not buy brand-name clothing, he says, because there is “no need to” while living in Malaysia. While he was living in Singapore, however, he felt there was pressure to buy “nicer clothes” and more expensive items because that was what most people had. In Malaysia, he says, people are a lot more casual and “don’t really care”. I asked if he would ever stop commuting to work in Singapore. He says he has a good job here and the pay is “not bad”. He says that “clubbing for gay men” is more accessible in Singapore as Malaysia is still a very “conservative Muslim country” in
many ways. The only thing that would prompt him to stop commuting to work would be if he gets his own business running – an idea which he is already considering.

Kelly, 27

Kelly has been commuting to Singapore for the past ten years. Through her elder sister, she found a job at an optical shop where she still works. She decided to move to Singapore to work, while living with her elder sister in the city-state. During that one year of living in Singapore, Kelly said that her grandmother missed her very much and also that she could not save much every month because of the high living costs. She moved back to Malaysia and rented a room in Johor Bahru, moving in with her boyfriend, her friends and grandmother. Kelly told me, however, that her grandmother is not happy living in Johor – “it is not a place for us to live for long. The neighbours are not friendly like in KL and it’s a dangerous place, especially because my popo is alone during the day”. Kelly says that she is saving up to buy a house in KL for her grandmother to live closer to the rest of her family. Currently, her commute starts at 5am every morning, on the back of her boyfriend’s motorcycle and takes about two hours each way. She arrives home at about 8pm every night.

Kelly says that because of her low education level, she was not able to get a better paying job in Malaysia – she had worked for 800 Ringgit as a clerk in KL. Aside from the higher salary, Kelly also told me that she prefers working in Singapore because she felt that working as a Chinese person in Malaysia was difficult – “Malays are more comfortable in Malaysia. Everything also can get government support. We Chinese and the Indians have to depend on ourselves”. She said that she could feel her life change
after working in Singapore – being able to purchase brand-name clothing and electrical appliances. This has, however, caused some tension with the rest of her family members who remain working in Malaysia, “Their thinking is different. They think that I am showing off when I say we should eat at a restaurant. But I think I work so hard, what is wrong with spending a bit more on food and clothes that are nicer?” Singaporeans are different, Kelly says. There is little they would not spend their money on, she told me. Malaysians are more prudent – a sentiment reflected in not only Kelly’s story but most of my Johorean respondents as well. Also like other Malaysians I spoke with, Kelly was keen to say that her current job is probably something that Singaporeans would not want to readily take on. As she says, “Malaysians are here because they cannot hire Singaporeans. Singaporeans are asking for more – they want higher salaries, better jobs. Malaysians are more like “oh ok I can do that for that price”, Maybe because their expectations are lower? So maybe the boss will prefer the Malaysian because they don’t ask for as much. Easier to get Malaysians to do what they want”.

The commute across the causeway is dangerous, tiring and very stressful. The new Sultan Iskandar Immigration Complex, she feels, has further increased the commuting time because of its sheer size, the winding hallways and continued long wait times. In spite of this, Kelly says she will keep commuting until she has the chance to get her Permanent Residency (PR) status in Singapore. Her current boss has mentioned that he will help her apply for an S-pass\textsuperscript{41}, which will give her a chance at applying for PR.

\textsuperscript{41} This is a pass in between the work-permit and employment visa. It is for mid-level skilled foreigners who earn a fixed monthly salary of at least $1,800. S Pass applicants will be assessed on a points system, taking into account multiple criteria including salary, education qualifications, skills, job type and work experience (MOM website, http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work_pass/s_pass/about_the_s_pass.html).
In this chapter, I address the class identities of workers in Singapore, particularly, the lower-middle class Johoreans who commute into Singapore daily for work in its manufacturing and low-paid service industries. Similar to the Bangladeshi workers, the flow of this group of migrants is also generated by uneven development led largely by expanding processes of economic globalization. Their experience of these structural disparities in the global political-economy condition their agency of choice and desires, leading them to make the stressful daily transnational commute: a commute which they sometimes make for up to 20 years. I reinforce my thesis that these workers enter not only circuits of economic production and exchange but also participate in socio-cultural reproduction and consumption that point to their changing class identities. I show how these workers’ other social identities like race and nationality are embedded within their class subjectivities and how these are renegotiated upon entering different spaces. I highlight how these commuter workers from Southern Malaysia earn a very different livelihood from the Bangladeshi workers through their work conditions – much of which can be explained by their recruitment process, their lower dependency on their employers and the larger variety of jobs they are allowed to access as Malaysians. Their structural positions within economic production, that is, within the division of labour in Singapore also provides them access to particular lifestyles that are different from other groups of workers examined in this study, illustrating the cultural logic of capitalism. Their experience of this lifestyle is very much expressed in the ways of the petite bourgeoisie as conditioned by their locations within the labour market in Singapore and expressed often in contrast to Malaysians who continue working in Malaysia and other groups of workers in Singapore.
**Contextualizing the workers**

The flow of workers from Johor to Singapore has increased particularly since the 1980s when the Singapore government sought formal agreements with Malaysia and Indonesia to develop a Growth Triangle with Riau and Johor. Through this Growth Triangle, we see, among other things, the immediate hinterland of Singapore spanning interstate boundaries. Scholars have argued that the Growth Triangle would not exist were it not for Singapore’s strategic niche in the global flow of commerce (Macleod and McGee, 1996). Within this process of cooperation, Singapore would provide the skilled labour, business services and capital, Johor would provide the skilled and semi-skilled labour and recreation land while Batam and the rest of the Riaus would provide low-cost labour and some natural amenities like the beaches. I would argue then that the Growth Triangle – and Singapore and Johor’s inter-related developments in particular for this research – is premised upon uneven development. This unevenness is often glossed over as “comparative advantage”, where Singapore taps into and contributes to extra-territorial flows of people, capital, commodities, regulations and resources: Singapore would provide the capital and expertise, while Johor and Riau provide the cheap resources of land and labour (Sparke et al, 2004; Bunnell et al, 2006).

Towards the mid to late 1970s, Singapore started facing labour shortages. It was until then believed that the country could employ both low and mid-technology labour side by side (Perry et al, 1997). Yet, it appeared less so by the 1970s. The government’s desire to increase the amount of higher-value added production was primarily driven by the increasing value of the Singapore dollar, which raised production costs in the country.
Further, Singapore would soon lose its “Developing country” status at the World Bank, which would mean giving up its GSP trade benefits on labour intensive products (Rodan, 1989). As the international investment climate picked up in 1978, Singapore policy-makers took on new strategies to move Singapore towards a more sophisticated technological base, thereby taking it out of competition with lower wage countries and lessening the pressure in finding more labour for economic growth. Singapore turned to join the New International Division of Labour by re-positioning itself by moving the economy into higher levels of productivity and value-addition. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the Corrective Wage Policy was implemented to raise wage costs to increase productivity – a move, it can be argued, by the Singaporean state to discipline capital (Rodan, 1989; Perry et al, 1997). Further, generous tax and fiscal incentives were provided for appropriate new investments and dramatic expansions to social and physical infrastructures. Singapore was becoming increasingly complex and diverse in its tapping of foreign peoples, ideas and resources, through the upgrading of its services sector within its city-state boundaries and the offshoring of the more low-productivity manufacturing industries that it had been until now known for. As the economy moved “upscale”, certain activities became increasingly marginalized in the city-state’s space-economy but because they are still important to the economy as a whole, they were no longer maintained in the city’s new hinterland. As a result, Singapore’s higher-end services grew by 14.6% in 1989, peopled largely by skilled migrant workers (Rodan, 1989).

Lower technology industries, like textiles and electronic manufacturing were offshored to Johor and then later on, to the Riau Islands as the SIJORI Growth Triangle
developed (Macleod and McGee, 1996; Sparke et al, 2004; Lindquist, 2010). Much of Johor’s industrial development was a result of direct capital investment from Singapore. Population also grew in Mukim Plentong because many of these workers were discriminated against when they tried to find employment in Singapore up until the late 1970s (Guinness, 1992). Singaporean policy makers decided to tap into Johor’s labour pool for the growth of Singapore’s globalizing economy, boosting a historical corridor of labour movement between Southern Malaysia and Singapore. This flow of workers between the two countries was hence facilitated by the increased porosity of Singapore’s borders and already existing working population in Southern Johor. Conversely, the borders of the other player in the Growth Triangle, Indonesia, have undergone stricter regulations. While capital and Singaporeans move easily to and from Batam, the transnational mobility of labour from Batam into Singapore has been circumscribed. Since the 1970s, economic growth and higher salaries in Singapore and Malaysia have made it increasingly lucrative for Indonesians to cross the Straits of Malacca in search of wage labour (Lindquist, 2010). It can thus be said that Singapore’s economic restructuring had repercussions beyond its national boundaries, including the transformations of labour markets in its immediate region. In another manner of speaking, the development of Johor illustrates broader transformations in the global economy. The rising costs of living in Johor can also be attributed to the proximity and porosity of the borders between Malaysia and Singapore. Indeed, it is the close proximity to Singapore and inflow of foreign investment has also driven many Johoreans to seek higher salaries in Singapore (Guinness, 1992).
It has been argued that these low wages are a result of the fact that Malaysia has been keen to provide cheaper labour to the global economy as part of its export-oriented development platform from the 1970s. It is worthy to note that these developments closely relates to Singapore’s own economic restructuring, by no coincidence (Jomo, 1996; Kahn, 1996). The region’s economic restructuring regimes were closely linked to increased competition in the world economy and the relocation of labour-intensive industries to where labour could be extracted for far lower costs. Malaysia became a target for such relocation strategies partly because of its low labour costs, partly because it had an English-educated workforce and also because its government was looking to shift its economy from import-substitution to export-orientation to create employment especially for Malays, as various policies and practices under the New Economic Policy (NEP) show (Guinness, 1992; Jomo, 1993; Kahn, 1996). The preference for Malay workers in the workforce, while not perceived as an indisputable benefit by the Malays themselves, has led to many Chinese and Indian workers seeking work in Singapore (Guinness, 1992: 71). Economic development in Malaysia must be understood through a racialized lens, which long antedates the emergence of the NEP and is a post-colonial legacy of the British. Colonial administration in Malaya was carried out as an extension of the traditional Malay Sultanates. The British policy of conferring legitimacy on the conception of Malays as the “rightful inhabitants” of the Peninsula went on to create the Malay Reservation Act which made it illegal for non-Malays to purchase and own land (Bunnell, 2004: 37). The Malay was constructed as unsuitable for wage labour in tin mines or the plantation network and was seen by the colonial government as under threat from immigrant others – i.e. Chinese and Indians (Bunnell, 2004: 39).
While there is little room here to discuss the details of Malaya’s post-colonial geography, it can be said that through its commercial exploits, the British formed the broad contours of social divisions based on race (Bunnell, 2004; Thompson, 2003). It is upon this foundation which one can start to make sense of the race riots of “May Thirteenth” in 1964 that shattered the illusion of post-independence sentiments of common citizenship among the various national subjects of Malaysia (Bunnell, 2004). These riots became a powerful symbol of protecting Malay nationalism and have thus been said to have legitimized the exercise of Malay state power to subdue non-Malay assertiveness in the name of “national harmony” (Bunnell, 2004: 42). Against this background, the NEP brought about a new form of societal division, one that is based upon race-based economic development that favoured bumiputeras or “natives”. Although this term and its implications are not unambiguous even amongst the Malay communities, it did come to include ethnic quotas that were Malay-centered in education, employment in the government sector, social services and private corporate enterprises (Bunnell, 2004). The NEP later on came to be seen by ex-Prime Minister Mahathir as a crutch for Malays who were “afflicted by a subsidy mentality” and he called for an overhaul of existing policies to reconstruct Malay identity (Bunnell, 2004: 50; Kahn, 1996). I mention this to highlight that Malay identity – like any other identity – is constantly under transformation and must be seen here in relation to economic interests and projects. Rationalized racial tensions that have been historically institutionalized in Malay(sia) moreover, have sometimes encouraged Indian and Chinese Malaysians to seek work elsewhere. This illustrates the significance of state power in producing racial categories and outcomes as “state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation
Aside from the commonly known growth model of the “global factory”, the 1980s also saw the growth of the middle-class professionals as well as the “Not Quite Theres” (NQT) (Kahn, 1996: 66 – 67). The latter of whom are people aspiring towards a lifestyle accessed by professional white-collared workers yet earning a lower income than the upper echelons of the middle-classes. It is this group of the new rich who are actively shaping the urban landscapes of Penang, Johor and Kuala Lumpur, evident in the proliferation of new shopping malls, Western-styled fast food outlets, and the expanding demand for a wide range of consumer goods such as clothing, electronic goods and cars (Kahn, 1996). It is this group of workers with whom I spoke for this research, most of whom are Chinese and Indian commuters. The rise in this group’s aspirations for an improved standard of living, as noted in Guinness’ study of urban change in Southern Malaysia, has often not been matched by actual increases in their wages (1992). Indeed, the benefits of industrialization in Johor’s southern tip remain in doubt. The strong, often authoritarian role of the state in ensuring attractive conditions for capital investment have resulted in an exploited workforce: wages remained low partly through employers’ preferences for a female, unskilled workforce and the use of casual workers recruited through contractors.

The extensive participation of Malaysians in this national and international economy (as they cross the border to work in Singapore) is hence one of the consequences of the profound transformations in both countries’ political-economic conditions. It could be argued then that the migration and commuting of Malaysians in
active reaction to this form of graduated sovereignty in Malaysia through race reinforces structural inequalities in both Malaysia and Singapore (Chang and Aoki, 1997). The experiences of these commuter workers highlights their incorporation and yet transience within the economic and cultural hierarchies of the Singaporean economy. Many of the workers I have spoken with are keenly aware of their status as work-permit holders in Singapore. The uses to which these commuters put their Singapore-earned wages, particularly the acquisition and display of market commodities as emblems of style and status in Malaysia, represent one way in which they challenge their marginal status in Singapore as well as reinforcing dominant cultural discourses of the NQTs in Malaysia. Their commodity consumption through waged labour in Singapore points to tensions over disparities of wealth and status within their sending and receiving communities. These tensions – a crucial form of social reproduction – in turn shape the complex motivations of labour out-migration and the meanings given to this form of mobility by both the migrants and their households.

Since the 1980s, the number of commuters who cross the border everyday from Johor to Singapore has increased from about 25,000 in 1990 (MacLeod and McGee, 1996) to an estimated 80,000 in 2008 (personal interview with official at the Malaysian High Commission in Singapore). Many of the workers are also from other parts of Malaysia – Penang, Selangor – and have migrated to Johor just so they can commute to Singapore each day. Johor is therefore also a mid-point for their work sojourn. Similar to the other node in the Growth Triangle, Batam, where many internal migrants from Indonesia seek work, Johor is a node for many Malaysians (Guinness, 1992; Lindquist, 2010). For the commuters, however, Johor is the border to a larger, more lucrative labour
market through which they would be able to access higher income and the entailing lifestyle this transnational livelihood can bring. This suggests that migration and commuting are not alternatives but are part of a work journey that stretches across a larger scale. Indeed, this suggests that the commute to work in Singapore is sometimes preceded by a much more extensive geographical and historical process that is set in motion even before the migrant/commuter begins work (Chen, 1992). While I do not examine the changes in Johor as a result of commuting per se\(^\text{42}\), this does explain why the remittances and income spent by commuters reach beyond Johor and to the original sending communities of the commuters. I will show how these Singaporean earnings contribute to the reproduction of social class in the sending areas, which are sometimes fraught with tensions. All the Johoreans I interviewed are work-permit or S-pass holders, with the exception of one who recently got her PR status. This means that they earn no more than $2500 SGD a month. Their monthly wages ranged from $1200 to $2300 – significantly higher than the Bangladeshi migrant workers but still lower than the Singaporean financial workers. They work mainly in construction, carpentry, factories, administration and retail.

**Contextualizing the commute**

The workers commute on motorcycles, via Singapore public transit buses, company buses and some Johor-based buses. Up until the recent opening of the new Customs and Immigration Complex in Johor, commuters were also allowed to walk across the causeway between the Johor and Singapore immigration checkpoints. The

\(^{42}\) For an in-depth look at the changes in Johor as a result of industrialization, see Guinness, 1992.
daily commute for many of these workers can begin from as early as 4am and some arrive home at about 11pm at night. These times depend on where the commuters live in Johor, where they work in Singapore as well as the time they start and finish work. The commuting journey itself – that is, from leaving the house to arriving at the checkpoint, to waiting at the immigration and finally the time taken to get to the workplace – can take up to 3.5 hours each way, everyday. A few of the commuters I interviewed also joked wryly that they really hoped no other terrorists escape again otherwise, they will again be stuck at the causeway for 4 to 5 hours. This is in reference to the incident of the escaped terrorist, Mas Selamat, in early 2008, resulting in extra-long wait times at the causeway.

Getting to work in Singapore

The process of recruitment to work in Singapore on a work-permit for this group of workers was not often through an agent, as with the Bangladeshi migrants. Of the commuters I spoke with, all of them secured employment either through informal but established networks – family members and/or friends already working in Singapore such as with Dan and Kelly – or through direct application to the company. My data also showed that many employers hired new Johoreans by announcing openings to their current workers and encouraging them to spread the word among people from home. This personal and material assistance provided important support for new arriving commuters. While these commuters did not have to get used to living in Singapore since they continue holding residence in Johor, the lack of a middle-person meant that they did not start their work lives in Singapore in debt, as with the Bangladeshis. Without neglecting that there continues to be exploitation as defined by the nature of capitalism in Marx’s
terms, I argue that their livelihoods in Singapore therefore appear less precarious, their persons less subordinate to the labour process than the Bangladeshis who have had to pay their agents some $10,000 to access work-permit jobs in Singapore. As Biao’s study on Indian body-shops illustrate, informal Indian networks not only enabled swift recruitment but, more importantly, were measures for guaranteeing competence and qualifications (2007). This form of recruitment, however, can also come with its own set of uncertainties, as I discuss further on.

The Johoreans I encountered also were drawn from a broader range of work in lower-paying service sector work such as hairdressing and retail, manufacturing and carpentry. This is in part explained by the social networking that is embedded within practices of recruitment as mentioned above. It is also explained by the labour policies in Singapore on the hiring of Malaysians. Unlike workers from other nationalities, Malaysian workers are eligible for work-permit jobs in every sector of the economy, hence with a greater choice of work structurally within the labour market. The employers of Malaysian workers are also exempt from paying the security bond of $5000, although levies for hiring foreign workers still apply.43 Even though MOM guidelines state that employers should provide accommodations for their workers, none of the commuting workers I spoke with are living in company-provided housing in Johor. Instead, many of them are able to afford sharing a rented apartment with other commuters, like Kelly or are even able to buy their own house in Johor, as in the case of Dan. This also means that these workers are less dependent on their employers, compared to the Bangladeshis – none of them are subjected to arbitrary wage deductions for room and board. This lower

dependency on employers also means that neither are the commuters subjected to forced removal by way of repatriation companies. In short, Johorean commuters are not subordinate to hyper-exploitative work conditions of the sort faced by the Bangladeshi workers.

Due largely to a reliance on personal networks, Johoreans who act as informal recruiters of workers normally only recruit from limited places in Johor. As Biao asked in his study, does this mean that workers could easily form alliances based on their place of common origin? (2007: 92). This was seldom true. The person who brought the worker in – the brother or the aunt of a new commuter – rarely intervened on the worker’s behalf. As Hafizah told me, the hair salon at which she is working required her to work longer hours than was originally promised. She told me she felt “embarrassed” and that it was “not very nice” to question her employer too much because it may have made her cousin – who had introduced her to the job and who also worked at the same salon – look bad. She told me she believed that she must “know how to behave” around her cousin because if not for her, Hafizah would still be working in Malaysia for less than half of what she is paid in Singapore. While without the burden of debt resulting from high agent fees, Hafizah’s informal recruitment still brought with it its own set of uncertainties. She found it difficult to delineate between a professional relationship and a more personal one. The flexibility of her labour geography, then, serves to undermine, rather than heighten the autonomy she has over her work. This becomes another way she, and many others like her, access and experience work through a recruitment process that is laden with micropolitics of precarity (Elcioglu, 2010).
This evidence also suggests that not all migrant labourers on work permits to Singapore experience the same precarity, neither in the same space nor time. Without undermining the micro-politics of recruitment commuters like Hafizah, their migrant status is less precarious than that of the Bangladeshi workers who have had to take on large loans even before entering Singapore. This different degree of precarity in the lives of Johorean and Bangladeshi workers as a result of the labour market locates them within different social groups. This resonates with Waite’s argument – that low paid migrant labourers cannot be labeled in a singular manner (2009). Waite also reminds us, however, that the neo-liberalization of the global economy also leads to the non-standardization of work. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, standard work is generally seen as full-time employment with extensive statutory benefits and entitlements (Waite, 2009: 416). While the commuters I spoke with were working on a full-time basis, none of them have extensive statutory benefits such as the Central Provident Fund (CPF)\(^4\) in contrast to the local financial workers I interviewed, given the former’s employment status as Work Permit holders. This means that class differences are hence also about the unequal degrees of precarity in a person’s life, depending on their position within the division of labour.

*Working in Singapore: all about the money?*

The Johoreans I met all felt the stresses of the daily commute. The long hours, causeway jams, being exposed to the elements if on a motorbike while waiting in line at customs are all part of the journey they make everyday to work in Singapore. Yet, there

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\(^4\) CPF is a social securities savings plan for all Singaporean and Permanent Resident employees ([http://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/CPF/About-Us/Intro/Intro.htm](http://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/CPF/About-Us/Intro/Intro.htm), date accessed 27\(^{th}\) Dec 2010).
are reasons which are clearly material that explain why these workers choose to commute to Singapore. As Priya, an Indian-Malaysian woman working as an office administrator and Ah Cai, a Malaysian –Chinese man working as a construction worker tell me respectively,

What factored most for me was the salary. I was earning less than 1000 ringgit a month in JB. So when there was this job opening (in Singapore), I saw that the starting pay was already $1200. That was when I decided I would work in Singapore

Maybe if you can ask people in Singapore to lower the rent, then my family can live here. But salary is still better here, that’s why so many of us come...Actually I really hope my salary will be enough to cover my medical bills – my lungs have been polluted just by waiting at the causeway everyday on my bike

Many of these commuters I interviewed also cited racial relations in Malaysia as a reason for their seeking employment in Singapore. JP, an Indian-Malaysian man who is a supervisor at a printing firm says,

Working in Singapore is good – at least people of different social backgrounds are treated more or less the same here. In Malaysia, the racial bias very obvious and I as an Indian, definitely feel it. Chinese and Indians are the hardworking ones there but the Malays get the most benefit just because they are Malays

These sentiments are also reflected in what Priya tells me,

If you are an Indian in Malaysia, people sometimes make fun of you. You know there are not that many opportunities for you. You know you cannot qualify for a lot of government benefits. You can see from the racial quota that 80% of subsidized housing is for Malays even though you can see from the types of cars they drive they don’t need this subsidy. Working in Singapore is still better that way.

These quotes show that there is some yearning for a more multicultural, more cosmopolitan sort of life which these respondents associate with living in Singapore – regardless of whether this is true for everyone. This yearning is conditioned by their minority status in Malaysia. Their race is therefore embedded within their decision to
participate in this particular work journey. This stems from the *bumiputra* system that was set in place since the 1970s with the New Economic Policy where Malays enjoy more rights, privileges and claims that non-Malays, pushing many Chinese and Indians, such as the commuters I met, to seek employment elsewhere (Ong, 2000; Thompson, 2003). The data also suggest that it is primarily at the regional and local scale that more nuanced discussions of the relationship between race and class emerge (Pulido, 2006: 27). This also shows that race itself is not biologically given but politically produced in different ways in difference geographical-historical processes. It is within such contexts of complex and fluid racial hierarchies, produced in historically and geographically specific situations that we have to understand the configuration of race, class and nationality for these Johoreans (Glassman, 2010: 3). Chinese and Indian-Malaysians seek economic opportunities elsewhere in part because of their racialized position within the graduated, non-homogenous Malaysian identity. My data also illustrates that they feel they fare better working in Singapore than in Malaysia because of the existing racial hierarchy favouring the *bumiputra*. Malay-Malaysians, however, continue to be more empowered in the workforce in Malaysia because of the *bumiputra* system. At the same time, as much as their race (Malay), tied to their nationality (Malaysian) serves as an advantage for them in Malaysia, this identity construct appears to disadvantage them across the border in Singapore. They are not on par with Malay-Singaporeans because of their citizenship status. Their ethnicity as Malays within the existing CMIO population composite in Singapore also further disadvantages them. This is reflected in the small number of Malay-Malaysian commuters within my respondent pool. This strongly confirms how much of a social construct is racial identity, as well as how closely tied is
its contextual functioning to the formation of classes and class fractions. This is to say that one’s position in a given labor force's racialized social hierarchy is not pre-given by one's biological "race" but is constructed out of the ways race is deployed, sometimes among very ethnically similar people, to create labor market segmentation and rationalize uneven social prospects of the sort that are inevitable in a capitalist class structure.

Some, such as Stuart Hall, may argue that this is an example of life being lived through race rather than class. I would argue, instead, that this suggests how race is embedded within class, much as how gender is also embedded within class. In this present example of the racialization of a Malaysian’s access to work, race is certainly an important medium in which class relations are experienced. The political-economy that produces surpluses and and their differential appropriation in terms of capital and labour at the same time produces class differentiation that becomes racialized. Taken as a whole, the race-class nexus suggests a wide spectrum of relationships between race and class hierarchies (Mann, 2007). There is no space here for a full review of this but I would argue that these are powerful social structures that become entrenched within one’s position in the division of labour, affecting access to resources. I thus accord class theoretical centrality not because it is inherently more important than race or even inherently distinct from race but because I am predominantly talking about people’s positions within relations of production, and within this conceptual framing, class is thus the central relation with which all other social stratifications interact.
The correspondence between goods production and taste production

Earning Singaporean dollars means these commuters have the economic capital to enjoy a certain lifestyle which Malaysians working in Malaysia cannot access. Muthu, a housekeeping supervisor at a hotel who is Indian-Malaysian says,

After working in Singapore, I don’t have to watch my budget so much anymore. Anything I want, I can just buy. If my wife and daughter want new clothes, I can straight away buy for them.

Dan, a Chinese-Malaysian man working as a machine operator in a stationery-manufacturer’s also tells me,

I live in a gated community … I have 3 dogs, cable tv, high speed internet, 2 cars, a garage, the house is air-conditioned, and weekends at home with my family. I also started buying Diamond Water which is specially filtered so it’s healthier. I also have to pay for my monthly gym membership. No way we can afford this by working in Malaysia.

Within their new economic conditions, it also means these commuters have to traverse different cultural circuits. Their consumption habits and lifestyle choices are therefore an outcome of their cultural capital, which is in turn shaped by their new economic conditions. Whereas the Bangladeshis often expressed to me their demand for “cleanliness” and “tidiness” in their dress, the Johoreans such as Dan are relatively more free from necessity (Bourdieu, 1984: 247). From the last quote, it becomes clear that this group of workers can afford to look for fashionable garments and comfortable living spaces as opposed to the poorer classes whose tastes and needs are sometimes reduced to essential goods and virtues. For example, with his financial resources, Dan is able to act on his taste that Diamond Water is better for his health. In other words, his economic means allows him to consume that which he believes holds more virtue for his health
than regular water. Their motivations for commuting to work in Singapore thus extend well beyond narrowly-conceived economic reasons. Seran, an Indian-Malaysian man who is working as a dog-trainer tells me,

My life has changed since I started working in Singapore – I think my dressing is different from other Malaysians … When you look at me, do you think I’m Malaysian or Singaporean? A lot of people think I’m Singaporean! Which is good, I guess. I would rather buy clothes in Singapore even though it costs me more. I think I also talk like a Singaporean…international movies and Nokia models also come out here first so you know, its very modern and advanced. You can say I feel more confident after I started working in Singapore.

In this above quote, even mundane goods like international cellphone brands and movies become powerful forms of capital within Seran’s identity – it lends him a sense of cosmopolitan **distinction** from other Malaysians (Bourdieu, 1984). His taste for Singaporean dress and manner of speech are the practical, embodied ways in which he expresses and negotiates his class identity. The “Singaporean attributes” which Seran holds become a type of power and privilege which is attributed upon the holder of these attributes. This reinforces a certain state of micro, yet salient power relations, contributing to the existence and reproduction of classes. Working in Singapore is not just about getting a higher income, but also about acquiring new tastes which assigns people to new class identities.

While Bourdieu discusses at length the cultural dimensions of class in relation to the scale of the individual’s bodily practices, he does not leave the economy out of it. Rather, social formations and differentiations are necessarily conditioned by economic bases – the habitus is inherently a product of the various economic resources differently available to individuals in a given field. The empirical discussion of people’s social class position must therefore always be linked to their economic capital. As Kelly says,
I don’t understand how some people, especially Singaporeans, can spend $2000 on a handbag! … When I first started working, the first thing I bought for my grandma was a good rice cooker and then I bought for myself some Converse shoes. It is branded but not too expensive and I have always wanted a pair …

As I argued earlier, taste is almost always the product of economic conditions. Attitudes of prudence and thrift – or as Bourdieu calls it “the necessity of taste” – amongst the working class, are therefore regulated by their specific positions in the division of labour, by their own economy of means (1984; 372). If Marx was right in saying that economic relations are very much social relations, then this part of the discussion shows that social relations and more specifically, people’s orientation of taste, are themselves powerfully conditioned and differentiated by economic relations as well. This above quote also shows the correspondence between goods production and taste production (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, as Bourdieu argues (1984:230),

The field of production, which clearly could not function if it could not count on already existing tastes, more or less strong propensities to consume more or less clearly defined goods, enables tastes to be realized by offering it, at each moment, the universe of cultural goods as a system of stylistic possibles from which it can select the system of stylistic features constituting a lifestyle”

One could argue then that to some extent, one’s class identity, as situated by one’s taste for certain goods, was already set in motion even before one was able to afford those goods. An individual’s taste orientation is charged with the implicit or even unconscious desire to objectify certain goods as desirable, as eventually reachable “within their means” – this further illustrates taste as a system constituted by a person’s position within the structure of different conditions, providing people with a sense of realization when they can finally own them, such as Kelly’s Converse shoes. Her desire for those shoes were already semi-formulated back when she was not working in
Singapore and not earning the income that she now does – objectifying those shoes as an important cultural product for her was already part of the process of conditioning. This does not negate the idea of the taste for necessity but rather, illustrates the historical formulation of this taste. Bourdieu argues that “tastes that are actually realized depend on the state of the system of goods offered” (1984: 231). This is to say that as individuals move into different circuits of production – as Kelly starts working in Singapore – the sort of goods that are available to her change as well. These products meet her own cultural interests as shaped by her class conditions and position (“branded and not too expensive”), therefore offering her the possibility of being satisfied (“always wanted a pair”). Indeed, there really is “something for everyone” (Bourdieu, 1984: 231). Through this act of consumption choice, people’s positions and identification of suitable goods “go together” because they are situated in roughly the same positions in their respective spaces.

*Embodying class: the habitus*

This class identity also feeds their habitus which is a pre-reflexive structure that enables people to be classified and also to classify others. As Seran and Dan respectively say here:

> You can sometimes tell who is Malaysian and who is Singaporean just from the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they walk, their manners”

> I can tell just by looking which Johoreans work in Singapore and who are the ones who work in Malaysia. Also, I think Singaporean gay men dress very well, take care of themselves at the gym and go clubbing a lot but not so in Malaysia”

> From this quote by Dan, who is gay, we see how his sexual orientation intersects with his class identity and shapes his reading of gay men in both countries. Class is
reproduced through the commuters’ practical and embodied knowledge of Singapore and Malaysia, differentiating them while also allowing them to differentiate others.

As mentioned earlier, many of the commuters are from Malaysian states outside of Johor where their families continue to reside so, often, the effects of their class changes are felt beyond Johor. Seran says,

I want to give my brother a better university life than I had so I sent money back to Penang for him. He doesn’t have to use old textbooks like I did now …after I work for a few more years here, I want to go back and help my father expand his business.

Dan also tells me:

When I go back to Kuching now, I definitely notice that Kuching men like long hair. I don’t know why! In Johor there isn’t this fashion. Kuching people also think that I am “back from the big city” but there isn’t this feeling among people in Johor because so many (Johorians) work in Singapore.

Lisa, a Chinese-Malaysian working as a retail assistant shares Dan’s sentiments,

I don’t feel so different in Johor but when I go home to Selangor, my family and friends sometimes think that I am hao lian if I use something that I bought from Singapore.

The above quotes demonstrate the changing class identities of these commuters as they enter different spaces. Their participation in the labour process in Singapore conditions their socio-cultural experience back in Malaysia – an experience that can sometimes result in tension within their households and sending communities. In other words, there is ongoing social reproduction outside of the spaces of capitalist production.

While they may be seen as “better” or more “advanced” than Malaysians who are not working in Singapore, they are also aware of their class status in Singapore. Muthu and Ah Soon, a Malaysian-Chinese man working as a carpenter’s assistant say respectively,
Singaporean Indians think they are better just because they speak a lot more English than I do. But I can speak English also!

Promoters, home renovations, operating of machineries mostly done by Malaysians. Why? Because Singaporeans don’t want to do. Singaporeans are highly educated. If I ask you to be a promoter, you want to or not? I don’t think so because the pay is low and the work is hard.

This was my turn to feel slightly sheepish, even shameful about my own class bearings, because he was right – I have never considered taking on work as a promoter in a department store. I think there is something curious about the pride/shame dialectic here – a dialectic which is conditioned by people’s positions in the Singaporean division of labour – from Muthu’s emphatic claim of being able to speak English and Ah Soon’s logic of Malaysians doing harder work for lower wages than Singaporeans. Lowith argues that this is what distinguishes the working classes from the bourgeoisie. The latter has no critical consciousness of its condition, whereas the former is one which is “conscious of its dehumanization and … alienation” and at the same time, it is precisely this consciousness, this self-reflexivity which makes the proletarian “less dehumanized than the bourgeois because he is so in a way which is clearly apparent, not concealed from him or idealized” (Lowith, 1983: 109). In Singapore, the inferior status and difference of the Johorean worker are essential features of the political economic context of its division of labour. These politics of wages serve as forums in which to articulate claims to status and class differences. Bringing in the nationality of these Johorean workers through the seemingly objective fact of “skills differentials” and “willingness to do jobs that Singaporeans don’t want to do” generates not only material earnings but also reproduces class. In Ah Soon’s quote, it appears as if the Johorean commuter “(continues) to be subordinated to the division of labour and (his) own instrument of
production” (Lowith, 1983: 110). Similar to Mann’s work on Black American workers in California, however, I do not argue that the above quotes show a commitment to a working class identity by the Johorean workers (Mann, 2007). While it is difficult to “prove” or ascertain that these workers truly believed that they are only worthy of their jobs and wages in Singapore, it can be argued that there is a sense of self-conscious class positioning by these workers. This understanding of their position in the relations of production shows that they are not passive receptors of the existing economy of wages, in spite of what their wages and accessibility to jobs interpellate them as being (Mann, 2007).

Ah Soon’s sentiments resonate with the Singaporeans with whom I have spoken: the Singaporean attitude towards Johoreans seems to be complicit at best and painfully discriminating at worst in the reproduction of class differences between them and the Johoreans. As Aileen, Singaporean-Chinese client assistant at an international bank, and Kenneth, a Singaporean-Chinese man working as an operations analyst at an investment firm, succinctly sum up the middle-class Singaporean attitude towards Johoreans working in Singapore,

What grounds are there to interact with these workers? They wouldn’t feel comfortable at the places I am comfortable at. I wouldn’t feel comfortable drinking at their kopitiams (coffee shops)! I am working at Raffles Place and they are probably at the industrial area doing some factory work.

We dress and talk differently. Our accents are different even though we speak the same language. Mindsets are also different. Their skills are different. What they can or cannot do is different and what they are willing to do is also different from us. Like it or not, we have to swallow the bitter pill. If not, who is going to clean the office for you? The Singaporean? Of course not! The Johorean will!
The distinctions that Singaporeans draw between themselves and the migrants are based on a combination of their human capital, their willingness to accept low status work and lifestyle choices. The class identities of Johoreans and of middle-class Singaporeans are therefore constructed based on the articulation of difference – they are hence also connected through this relationship of difference. Class is indeed mutually constitutive and relational rather than separated and unvarying. Through the rhetoric of multiculturalism and almost grudging acceptance, there is the reinforcement of class inequalities and privilege in the workplace where certain people are constructed as more suitable for certain types of work.

Conclusion: Difference Matters

This chapter has shown that Singapore has been sustained by uneven development and maintains this by keeping its borders porous to an extent. It also shows that the local labour force continues to draw many of its low-waged workers from beyond its national boundaries. The reproduction of difference and distinction amongst local and foreign workers – and amongst the latter group as well – is a mutually reinforcing project of structural forces in global neo-liberal capitalism as well as the agency of workers in everyday settings (Wills et al, 2010). We see that commuter workers have the agency to negotiate their own identities, without neglecting that there is a dominant cultural hierarchy within the division of labour. This view enables us to understand the class-making project as complex – one that is fraught with cultural nuances which are powerfully shaped by but cannot be reduced to people’s economic conditions alone. Seemingly neutral discourse suggesting the division of labour is based on work skills and
willingness to take on dirty and dangerous work disguises finely calibrated regulation and
discrimination against certain workers – continuing to reproduce difference and
inequality in the global city. Geography always matters. Indeed, the class position of
these commuters is also shifting, often redefined as they move across space and
mobilized at particular times, scales and places.
Chapter 6: Classifying cosmopolitanism: the financial middle-classes

Lionel, 45, Singaporean male

Lionel, is Singaporean-Chinese and was educated entirely in Singapore. He is a private personal banker with a Scottish bank in Singapore. His job scope includes acquiring new accounts, wealth preservation and management for clients and their families. He started work with a Singaporean bank and worked there for three years before finding his interest in risk management. From there, he moved into another local bank where he worked as a risk analyst, assisting the management in balancing risk management. After one and a half years, he moved onto the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) where he was part of the committee in risk management. Lionel felt this move was strategic for him to “get a more macro view of risk management”.

He found himself in a “career crisis” after two years working in MAS, and felt that he was “at a major turning point, a cross junction” where it could mean a lifelong career in risk management if he were to continue in the same field. He decided that he wanted to “make a career move where it would fit into who (he) would become six years from now”. He then went into security banking with an American bank in Singapore “for a while” before joining the British bank as a private banker, a step which he felt was “the next step up from normal retail banking”. His current job requires him to travel abroad, particularly to Indonesia, where many of his clients reside. His business portfolio is made up of people from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds – Italians, Germans, Indians and Chinese – and various lines of work and family backgrounds. Lionel feels that he was successful in his application to this job because he is “comfortable with people”. He told me that even though the ability to bring in revenue was “95% of the job”, success as a
private banker also meant he had to be a “strong team player and have the type of personality – whether you are dynamic, resourceful, the types of businesses you can bring in”.

Lionel’s response suggests that success in financial work is complicated – job productivity formed a large part of it but the processes through which one achieves this productivity rate are compounded with personality traits that fit into corporate strategies; soft skills, if you will. He tells me that success in his business relies heavily on trust and credibility and that his customers will evaluate the “whole package: experience and appearance”. Lionel feels the dynamism and the opportunities to travel in his line of work fit well with his personality because he “is someone who cannot really sit still… I am very comfortable in an environment where there is a lot of change”. His main disadvantage, he notes, would be his “not so mature appearance” so he feels he has to take extra effort in presenting himself to his clients in a way that reassures them that he still knows how to best manage their finances.

Elizabeth, 25, British

Elizabeth is a white senior office executive with a Swiss bank. Her job responsibilities include managing a team of eight people in all aspects of office processes. She left London in 1994 because she “got fed up with the place” where she was doing contract work in finance. She then traveled to Kuala Lumpur to join her father who was working there. From there, she took on an interest in scuba diving and decided to become a professional diving instructor for five and a half years in Malaysia. She returned to London in 1999, where she applied to a university in London. After being accepted,
however, she decided to defer it because she felt that she “couldn’t give up (her) salary and it would have cost too much of life and time”. She worked with the Swiss bank in its London office and upon news that she might be getting retrenched, she sourced for work both in and outside of London. She went for an interview with the director of the bank’s branch in Singapore and decided to take the offer after some negotiation even though it meant taking a pay reduction to relocate. For her, the move to Singapore was more of a “life change” where she feels she can experience “different cultures in South East Asia”. Elizabeth thinks that she was able to get the job because she had acquired skills and experience from her work in the London office but also because she was “tenacious, pushy and had a bit of balls to come here, being a risk taker”. Her current work in Singapore requires her to travel to various offices around the world. In particular, she remembers her short-term work experience in the bank’s New York office. She felt uncomfortable there because she felt the “sexual and racial discrimination there was really quite shockingly disgusting”. She also felt that her educational qualifications mattered less than her personality did, which helped her in fitting in and “winning the confidence of the management team and director in Singapore”.

Similar to Lionel, Elizabeth feels her professional success did not solely depend on her technical skills; her personality was important in the bank’s decision to hire her. Even more so than Lionel, though, Elizabeth feels her successful employment had little to do with her educational background. Contrary to McDowell’s bankers in the City of London, the employee’s perceived value appears to have shifted from having the educational background of private schooling and a good university to the issue of embodying corporate fit (McDowell and Court, 1994).
This chapter seeks to address how bodies are socially reproduced as different even amongst financial professionals, which continues to illustrate how global capitalism is lived by different people in very different ways through the division of labour in Singapore. This section reinforces rather than dilutes the argument that the neo-liberal global economy is a volatile construct peopled by class differences and processes. Before I begin my empirical examination of the reproduction of class through the construction of selfhood and workplace culture, I first contextualize my work by addressing some of the literature that sheds light on issues of the “doing” or performance of identities at work in new service economies. I also clarify some of the terms I will be using.

A question central to this project has been directed at how certain people are constructed as more suitable for certain jobs than others in the neo-liberal global economy in the context of Singapore’s division of labour. The way in which I approach this is to analyze the powerful discourses and practices which reproduce this particular form of class relations. More specifically in this chapter, I examine how and why relations of power and domination sustain associations of social identities in professional work in the financial sector of the new economy. Nigel Thrift notes that features of global capitalism, such as the growth of high-tech firms, the increasing importance of mobile and highly skilled talent, the rise of entrepreneurship and venture capital have been branded as the “new economy” or “knowledge-based economy” (2001:414; 2000). The financial organization’s management body must situate itself so that it can set the mechanism for reproducing business culture and identity that will embody particular values of the new economy. Thrift identified the chief ways in which a management body tried to achieve this. Firstly, it became more diligent and comprehensive, a more spread
out body – “do more, contribute more, help each other more” (2001:418). Secondly, the major body must be passionate so as to engage others emotionally, not just in terms of technical skills. The third way to achieve success in the global economy is for the management body to become more adaptable. Bodies occupying jobs in the new economy have to be involved in continuous learning and to work toward leading change – “be prepared for surprises” and to be “innovative and creative” (2000:681; 2001). This learning has to be carried out in a shared community rather than as an individual. Finally, the management body has to be participatory to the degree that bureaucracy in the organization is persuasive rather than coercive and “goes with the flow” (2001:419; 2000). These characteristics already set financial work markedly apart from construction and/or low-end service work.

These measures at the organizational level transform the notion of work in the new economy so that it has greater cultural intensity. At this point in the division of labour, the values of a financial employee are calibrated in highly different ways from the Bangladeshi worker or the Johorean commuter. This vogue of conducting financial work also changed the rate and nature of embodied social interactions (Schoenberger, 1997). To write off the new economy as simply a discourse is to gloss over discourse’s materiality. This is because while the youthful and exuberant countenance of the new economy benefits many of its stakeholders, it can also further entrench unequal social relations that remain regressive.

This leads us to questioning how individual workers adapt or negotiate their other social identities (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity) to fit into this participative and culturally-intense nature of financial work. As Bourdieu argued, the possession of
cultural capital by high-status employees is evidenced not only in their educational and professional credentials but also in the “embodied states, as modes of speech, accent, style, beauty and so forth” (1984:243). Thus it would be more accurate to connect the presentation of the body, the individual and the organization in attempting to understand the dynamics of social segregation in everyday workplace interactions and, at a broader level, the division of labour at the cosmopolitan workplace.

While the theorization of class-ed practices, social relations and how these can be traced all the way to the stylization of selfhood can lead to the understanding that the body and self are fluid and changeable, this is not to say that the socially-marked body at work is unencumbered by the wider structures of power that affect and reflect the organization of firms and deep-seated patterns of occupational segregation. Indeed, in previous chapters in this dissertation, I have shown that working bodies are very much subjected to intense regulation, often inflicting greater harm onto some people than others. My data on work in the financial sector show that it is the construction of selves that is very much an enterprise inscribed by specific forms of power to the extent that this construction can be reinforced and inculcated across scales – the new economy, the organization, the occupation, the self. In her work on high status financial professionals in the City of London, Linda McDowell asserts that the idea of gender performance is particularly helpful in understanding the construction and maintenance of gender identities and gendered power relations in the workplace (1994; 1997). The body and personhood is open to a stylized repetition of acts. McDowell argues (1999:55),

the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.
This is a statement that is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s argument, in particular, in *Masculine Domination* (2001). McDowell also notes that the reproduction of gender norms is not limited to women. She notes that men are allotted different performances of their gender roles, depending on their work position. I would also add that while McDowell’s work is largely based on gendered bodies and identities, the key points to her argument could also be applied to the other axes of selfhood, such as race, ethnicity and class. Indeed, she points out that a body is not itself pre-sexed (or pre-ethnicized) for cultural forces to inscribe upon, but is constructed by political forces that constitute systems of dominance, resistance and negotiation (1999). A person’s identity is hence a “persistent impersonation, a fabrication, a performance that passes as real” (McDowell, 1994: 234; 1999; see also Butler, 1990).

I would argue that just like being female, being of a particular ethnicity is not so much located in biological difference as it is in a cultural performance in which “naturalness is constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex (or ethnicity)” (McDowell, 1997: 164; 1999). The aim of this fabrication is the production of a coherent identity. Reminiscent of Bourdieu’s work on habitus, McDowell notes, “through acts, gestures and clothes, people perform their identity that is manufactured, manifested and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (McDowell, 1999:55). I hope it is clear that the issue of identity performances and selfhood is crucial to understanding the linkages between the individual and social relations.

Performativity in the financial workplace is not limited to individuals in wealthy industrialized countries either. Beverly Mullings demonstrates in her analysis of female
bank professionals in the Caribbean that along with the new economy, the increase of the number of women in high positions does not necessarily challenge gender inequalities (2005). Instead, Mullings shows that gender regimes and different valuations of feminine work are embedded in everyday workplace practices to the extent that women are hired for traditional feminine traits of being caring and nurturing. At the same time, women are also seen as being more diligent, focused, and responsible and feel pressured to perform up to those identity expectations (2005:18).

*Intersecting class with other social identities*

Class interests and identities can intersect and compete with gender, ethnic, language and national identities. In theoretically recognizing this, it is reasonable to argue that these identities could either hinder or enhance a person’s access to the professional class identity. As mentioned earlier, all forms of capital are considered powerful components of class identities and practices in Bourdieú’s framework. He did not, however, explicitly and systematically incorporate other capitals into his empirical analysis of social space, even though he did mention the importance of these in passing (Veenstra, 2005). The importance of gender, ethnicity, language and national identities in the manifestation and experience of workplace cultural distinction emerged through my empirical data. To the degree that workplace divisions are still relevant to class groupings, the fact that women occupy less physical space on the trade floor and Malay and Indian people are a rarity in the financial sector altogether, suggests that a gender and ethnic-blind class analysis for Singapore’s financial professionals would be incomplete at best and incorrect at worst. My analysis in this chapter will illustrate the processes...
through which these forms of power are relevant to the delineation of social class
groupings. In order to engage meaningfully in the theorization of workplace culture in the
financial sector sector, I argue that we must empirically explore both the structural
processes through which companies attempt to control access to and shape workplace
culture as well as how employees themselves monitor their identity performance at work
through everyday interactions with their peers.

I have organized my research findings into two sections. In the first, I will
demonstrate empirically the structural processes through which firms try to incorporate a
“cosmopolitan” culture as their corporate strategy. We see that over various stages of the
recruitment processes, those responsible for hiring personnel are careful to screen not
simply for technical capability and credentials in potential middle-level professionals but
also, and perhaps more importantly, for a specific cultural capital that demonstrates to
them an individual whose supposed habitus will be suitable for the firm’s business
culture. I assert that there are certain mandated elements of the individual’s identity that
are required for access to the professional classes – elements that are often constructed in
terms of “cosmopolitanism”. The careful framing of “cosmopolitanism” as the legitimate
culture enforced at work can also be seen through the installation of different
programmes and policies as well as the promotion criteria for workers. I will also
illustrate how workers themselves create and maintain a particular sense of
cosmopolitanism in their everyday workplace attitudes and practices. I argue that
cosmopolitanism is more than a social identity and/or culturally-open disposition – it is
also a powerful filter that limits access to certain performative kinds of work in the
financial sector. This leads to the second part of the chapter, where I show how normative
and precarious the practices and attitudes of cosmopolitanism are. It is in this second
where I show how class continues to be reproduced through its intersections with race,
ethnicity, nationality and gender at the diverse workplace.

*Recruiting the cosmopolitan employee*

Part of it is not only qualifications but also your personality: how well you can fit
into the corporate environment (Human Resource Manager, Bank A)

Recruitment is a crucial element in the constitution and reproduction of
organizational cultures. In this section, I will demonstrate how the recruitment process
itself – in terms of interviews, tests, assessment techniques and selection criteria – is
embedded with particular understandings of what an ideal cosmopolitan employee should
be. Here, I present research which investigates how the cosmopolitan work culture of
financial institutions is reproduced in the recruitment process through two major factors
of the recruitment process: the pre-organizational cultural capital that new recruits bring
with them when they join the banks and the nature of the selection process itself. From
these two factors, we can see that the organization’s perception of what constitutes a
cosmopolitan individual is embedded within the interviews and other selection
procedures. Aside from work and academic qualifications, the research also reveals that
the cultural and social backgrounds of recruits play a vital role throughout the selection
process. By examining these issues, we can begin to understand how recruitment
strategies not only create a corporate culture which is closely linked to organizational
form but also provides a springboard for particular social norms and values that shape
social relations within the workplace and perpetuate organizational strategies
(Schoenberger, 1997).
I draw upon my interviews conducted with one human resource manager, Kaitlyn Brown, from Bank A, a foreign wholesale bank and with Rosalie Chan, the director of the Asia-Pacific operations for XYZ Human Resources group. I will also be referring to the various websites of the banks the respondents work for recruitment policies and programmes.

Firms are keen to promote their work environment as diverse and peopled with talented individuals. For example, the first two lines on Credit Suisse First Boston’s website reads,

We're an extremely diverse business, with equally diverse needs in terms of skills and experience. Our diversity recruitment strategy is focused on “casting a wider net” as we continue to build a pipeline of exceptional talent.

The career webpage of locally-owned United Overseas Bank (UOB) says, “We believe in investing in the best people and providing an environment that encourages and rewards superior performance and enterprise”. This initial observation already suggests that employees in the financial sector must be able to deliver on job productivity in a dynamic and diverse environment.

The cultural nature of financial work was revealed further down the website of Barclays bank where there was a list of values prescribed to employees that would “make Barclays a great place to work”. These are: seeing the world through our customer's eyes, great leadership and teamwork, delivering on our promises, high performance and great behaviours driving exceptional rewards and respect, trust and integrity. It was also stated, “our values - or guiding principles - are the glue that binds our organization together and shape everything we do”(Barclays Bank homepage\textsuperscript{45}). These attributes are not only

\textsuperscript{45} Barclays Bank, \url{http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car_2_1_culture.htm}, date accessed 4\textsuperscript{th} December 2009.
addressing the technical skills of the desired Barclays worker but also suggests that a type of social interaction is expected so that “teamwork” can flourish and “respect and trust” can be established. Indeed, from this quote, the corporate ends of this strategy are understood as achievable only if these values are upheld in their entirety.

UOB also asserted, “An employee of UOB is expected to perform according to the four Core Values of the Group, namely, Integrity, Teamwork, Trust & Respect, and Performance Excellence”. There were also captions following each “Core Value”, denoting what each of them entailed in work performance. For example, under the mandate for “Teamwork”, it is stated that “We work as a team in which everyone, even the most brilliant, is united to reach our personal and corporate goals through cooperation and mutual loyalty” (UOB website).46

These are hence attempts to create a set of standards not only to show what recruiters look out for but also to guide the social and professional interactions within the bank (Schoenberger, 1997; Thrift, 2000; 2001). These “standards” tell us less about the actual process of recruitment than flagging the types of people they are keen to hire. For example, the corporate values of UOB do not address the technical skills expected of an employee, except for “performance excellence”. From these corporate discourses of ideal Barclays and UOB employees, we can start to understand the importance of presentation of self and social interaction at work. Such encouragement for team-building is part of a series of practices stressing the increased productivity of business and knowledge transfer through active participation in heightened practices of interaction (Thrift, 2000).

http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car_2_1_culture.htm, date accessed 3rd Dec 2009.

46 United Overseas Bank website
To enable this process of interactivity among workers of diverse backgrounds, however, individual bodies must be addressed. A closer observation reveals that fitting into the firm’s overall strategy is just as, if not more, important than simply job productivity and skill delivery. Further down the website of Barclays, for instance, it was stated, without elaboration, under “What We Look For” on its career page, that “…there are certain qualities that mark our Barclays people straightaway”. This suggests that to become an employee of Barclays, one must be able to fit him or herself into the corporate culture and image clearly. This was further revealed in my interview with Kaitlyn who said that Bank A hires people who “know they are working with a team to help get the job done” and that the ideal employee at the firm would be a “strong team player” because “it is so important to have that to be successful here”. Rosalie also says, “I would still go through the interviews of what you want to do, rather than what I want you to do. Then I would try to see if your values, your expectations would be in line with what I am looking for”. This evidence is in line with Schoenberger’s argument, that “cultures are necessarily integrative and act to produce stability and consistence in the firm” (1997: 117).

It is thus reasonable to argue that self identity construction, social interaction and work success are inter-connected to the extent that the professional self must be narrated in ways that are consistent with the organization’s identity in order to gain membership into the firm. The people who gain entry into this sector must demonstrate that they are symbolically fitting with the corporation’s culture. Indeed, this suggests that there is a pre-supposed cultural context of the firm and it is within the firm’s objectives to hire people who can re-produce and/or enhance that culture with their entrance. As
Schoenberger argues, the relationship between culture and strategy is largely instrumental (1997).

The attempt to institutionalize “diversity” at work also comes through the ways in which different peoples are constructed as suitable for different work niches and cultures in the bank itself. Barclays, for instance, states, our culture varies between areas - the atmosphere on a trading floor, for instance, is quite different to that of a retail bank. The advantage of these differences is that they allow us to attract people with all kinds of skills and ambitions and offer many different career paths.47

While this suggests an institutionalized recognition of difference – different skills in different people – it also serves to limit people’s mobility into different work areas by constructing a type of “suitability” for particular cultural geographies at the firm.

Talking to Rosalie, it was revealed that, during the first interview for a middle to upper level management position in a bank,

as much as 30% (of the decision-making) will go into how you fit into the corporate image, 30% goes to the impression, another 30% will be how you talk, your gestures, your posture, your dressing. Less than 10% is your qualifications. I don’t stress so much on the qualifications because if you get to this stage, chances are those things are already taken for granted.

From this, it becomes clear that technical skills are not the prime factor in employment at this stage of the recruitment. Aside from being able to fit into corporate strategies and images, there is also a strong performative element to the recruiters’ assessment of the interviewee. Rosalie elaborates,

If I were to short-list ten people now…you look at the person once they walk in through the door, confident and professionally dressed, hair nicely done up, little to no makeup for girls, you form an impression. Chunky jewellery might be ok for the advertising industry but banks deal with professionalism and hence we are

more knowledge-based and conservative so you cannot have somebody giving off the impression that you are a young rocker, punk. You want somebody out there who exudes professionalism and addresses the values of a bank!

An individual’s dress at the interview is therefore already a signifier of his or her perceived “fit” into the firm’s corporate culture. The literal fashioning of an individual’s identity and assessment of their presentation begins once the person enters the interview room to the extent that assumptions are made about the person’s prior identity assemblage which then, further, leads the interviewer to make assumptions about the potential employee’s future work performance. The narration of the self via dressing is hence directly connected to the individual’s perceived ability to manage tasks successfully in the financial industry, where initial approval is based on the individual’s ability to convey “conservatism” and “knowledge” through his or her dress during recruitment. Assuming the candidate has already met the academic criteria, the superficial presentation of identity during the interview itself could filter his or her access to the professional classes. The final sentence in the quote also reinforces the importance placed on how the employee should be representing and embodying the cumulative shared learning experiences of the firm. This strategy of the firm, thus, indicates a type of work that requires a set of values in which product quality is very important, as opposed to values which may have, in the past, emphasized quantity of output (Schoenberger, 1997: 117). Part of the cultural work of the firm then, is to make actual practices (choosing whom to recruit) appear to be consistent with the announced values (in the case of Bank A, the recruited must be a “team player” or the “recognition of difference” at Barclays) (Schoenberger, 1997: 129).
Candidates who make it to the later parts of the recruitment process are assessed more on the intangible, “soft” qualities that allude to a certain type of cultural capital.

Rosalie points out,

If there is a Japanese firm in Singapore, most of the clients would be Japanese…you would most likely have a Japanese national, not because the Singaporean is not capable but because the Singaporean may not have had the exposure to the Japanese culture, especially if you are a service provider…

A client advisor assistant at a Scottish bank, Irene, also notes,

(My company) definitely tries to recruit according to your familiarity. I mean if you’re European, they will probably put you at the European desk. If you are Indonesian, you’ll be at the Indo(nesian) desk. Like me – I speak Bahasa Indonesia and the clients’ reactions will usually be like, “oh you speak Bahasa! So much easier!”. It’s natural, right?

From these two quotes, there appears to be a pragmatic and strategic side to hiring certain people with particular social backgrounds. The decision to employ an individual, thus, relies partly on the clientele and efficiency towards service delivery. From the point of view of the firm, pre-organizational cultural capital and access to social networks are important because they could fulfill wider corporate objectives.

_Socializing cosmopolitans into corporate culture_

Once hired, the newly recruited employees will usually go through orientation programmes, where they will be introduced to particular policies and programmes that address the values and strategies of the firm. This section will first note the programmes that are meant to align new recruits with the corporation’s values while the later part of the section will draw upon the respondents’ actual experiences with these programmes,
hence shedding light on how far these initiatives are effectively grounded in actual workplace practices.

On the website for Credit-Suisse, they indicate their goal,

…to achieve an inclusive workplace where everyone is treated with dignity and respect and where each individual has the opportunity to advance and succeed. Individuals of different genders, races, ages, religions, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations and disabilities are thus brought together to create a world-class team of financial services professionals…

There are also annual awards given out from external agencies such as the “Singapore Family Friendly Employer Award” and the “Corporate Equality Index for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Employees” awarded by the Human Rights Campaign. These initiatives signify the organization’s attempt in fostering an inclusive work culture in a diverse, multicultural environment not just for the staff within the company but also its attempts to reach out to external groups for recognition of its global, cosmopolitan image.

There are also attempts to encourage networking among people of diverse backgrounds at work. Citibank, for instance, has launched a programme called the “Employee Network” as “part of [their] strong commitment to diversity and inclusion”. This programme aims to “provide members with an opportunity to share common experiences and build awareness of diverse cultures and communities within the company”. To do so, there are talks by guest speakers, panel discussions that promote growth and development for the company and also mentoring programmes for new

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recruits. This implies that cultural facilitation in the firm is encouraged via inter-personal engagement among staff and through the promotion of external recognition.

There are also regular internal reviews in some institutions, carried out at 6 month intervals, as Kaitlyn revealed to me. During these reviews, employees literally get graded – they are awarded A, B, or C – based on their job performance and reputation. According to her, employees have to get at least 2 As to qualify for a promotion after each round of reviews. I would argue that these reviews are part of the corporation’s strategies to maintain a standard of work performance and communications within the institution. It is also possible to argue that employees’ attitudes and socializing patterns are motivated by this pragmatic knowledge.

The research, however, demonstrated a more complex issue of cultural (dis)order at work than that mandated by the organization. Kaitlyn put it blatantly to me,

There isn’t a very very good mix at work…you would find there are cliques like the Taiwanese people would always eat out together and in the past, there have been programmes at work that try to organize things (in Bank A) to try to bring people closer together, to try to get them interacting but I think it is not something that they are doing so much of recently.

Analyzing her response begins to shed light on two things: interaction at the multicultural workplace is divided by social identities, in this case, national identity in particular. Secondly, the actual measures to maintain an inclusive work environment are not as comprehensive or effective as the information on the websites initially suggested. All of the respondents, with the exception of two, told me that they have never participated in any programmes geared towards promoting diversity and inclusion at work.

As Kenny, an operations analyst at an American investment company tells me,
I do find racial differences at work – it doesn’t even have to be outrightly violent. A lot of times, people just hang out with people like themselves – the Chinese hang out with the Chinese and the Caucasians are kind of hippie, you know…this is more obvious over lunch, sometimes over drinks, even just talking in the workplace. Sometimes when you go to the pantry, you’ll see the Indians talking at one table and the Chinese at another table and the Hong Kong guys at another table.

Such responses suggest there continue to be contradictions and tensions among financial professionals of different social groups. Organizational programmes are both limited in themselves and also challenged by the inertia of social divisions among employees. I would argue that in the attempt by the organization to create a cohesive cosmopolitan identity through discourses and policies, this continues to perpetuate difference and “other-ness” at work. It would not be too far fetched to also argue that this so-called cosmopolitan identity maintains its elite status by articulating difference. These differences among groups at work create the basis for struggles and negotiation, the outcome of which will determine the kinds of change that are chosen or resisted. Indeed, such organizational measures have the power to construct the legitimate workplace culture, which in turn, allows certain individuals of particular identities into the professional classes while excluding others. In order to understand how identity politics intersect with a person’s entry to and career mobility at work, we need to examine the various processes of these struggles and negotiations that are embedded in everyday work practices.

My aim in this chapter so far has been to seek an understanding in the creation of a cosmopolitan, diverse culture in financial institutions at the organizational scale. From examining the recruitment process, we can already see that there is a distinctive screening not only for people with suitable technical skills, but, and I would argue, more
importantly, for people who exhibit an identity that could fit in well with the professional image of the firm that is constituted by a selected criterion of cultural and social understanding that demonstrates a brand of globally-situated financial knowledge. Interestingly, people who have never had long term experience abroad can still be selected to work in the organization. This is possible through their ability to construct and present a self that coheres with corporate fit.

I will now examine how transnational financial professionals create and maintain a professional cosmopolitan identity via everyday workplace practices and attitudes. I explore in some detail how there is a strategic alignment of an individual’s identity with corporate culture – we see how work, as a cultural process, is necessarily social to the extent that responsibilities are allocated and contested within a specific identity politics, how this process is justified as well as who is part of the corporate community and who is excluded.

Performing cosmopolitanism

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how the institutionalization of a particular form of “cosmopolitan” workplace culture, as the previous chapter had explored, is interpreted “on the ground” by people who have gained access to the financial workplace. This section will show how middle-class employees strategically shape their professional relationship with one another both through their dispositions and through performances valued as “corporate fit”.

The rhetoric of diversity for a dynamic and cosmopolitan workplace seems well accepted by many financial elites, both Singaporean and transnational. As Lionel, a 31 year-old Singaporean-Chinese male, puts it
If you put a diverse group of people together, the workplace is more dynamic because they are very—they are not in a strait jacket thinking…different people do different things and different holidays…people also talk about different things and when you come into contact with this a lot, you naturally tend to see things from a different angle, you see things more holistically…I think it is more on how you present yourself than the colour of your skin…

The general acceptance of a multicultural and diverse work environment also seems to be a strategic way of negotiating success in the workplace. There appears to be more emphasis on fitting into corporate culture rather than into gender, ethnic or class identities. As Gwen, a 43 year-old British-Indian female and Jamie, a 35 year-old British white man say respectively,

I think one of the most important things that anybody who is offered a position is the way you think that person would fit in to the group, to the corporate image… and I think that my desire to make my team a strong team is to focus on having a common objective and goal and working with one another…

If you’re in an environment that is very mixed, you’re socializing with the locals, if your clients inevitably are going to be locals, you will have a greater chance of being able to understand them or deal with them without upsetting them which is really important in business…

It appears that this skill of opportunist networking in the context of the cosmopolitan workplace can be mastered over time. In other words, the cultural capital of directing one’s identity in the workplace can be accumulated so that we cannot understand the cosmopolitan identity by separating social networking and pragmatism. These values of the dominant culture, as Gwen describes above, “must be internalized so that people have a sense of the rightness of things and also of their rights in the context of the culture but without needed to appeal explicitly to that culture for validation” (Schoenberger, 1997: 129). As Chaandra, a 25 year-old Indian puts it eloquently,

It’s a whole game, that’s what it really is…a game of how to deal with different types of people and how to communicate with them. And, more importantly, how
to get them to communicate with you. Nothing in life is free, right? But at the
same time, you want to be able to get as much information as possible from as
many sources by putting in the least amount of effort…I know how to best
position myself and I know how to disseminate information that I am giving or
getting for maximum benefit. It is not gossip. It’s a question of knowing what’s
happening when and how to take advantage of it.

From this quote, power relations within the workplace become clearer. As
Bourdieu argued, knowledge is a matter of positioning (1988). There is a particular
position that financial professionals can create for themselves through active, opportunist
social networking so that they are at a vantage point to create opportunities for
themselves. From Chaandra’s perspective, then, the cultural capital of professional
identity at work comes with certain rules, regulations and strategies: participants (that is,
fellow employees) can navigate by learning the “tricks of the trade” of social skills,
which includes being able to overlook, or at least seemingly work around, ethnicities,
nationalities and genders. Once an individual has the cultural capital to do so, he or she
would have access to the information circuit where they are able to receive and
perpetuate information about work. This is a power-laden position because it affects who
gets what information and hence, who would eventually be able to capitalize on the
knowledge so that they are in a better position to access the dominant strategy at work.

Chaandra elaborates further,

This guy was brought over from India and when he wanted to resign, he didn’t
want to tell anybody on his team. He told me. No reason why he should – quite a
senior guy. But because of the relationship I had with him, he told me. I met him
for lunch and while I met him for lunch, I might as well meet his team of people
so I called some of them…so I sort of got the network going by rounding up this
finance person and this IT person as well. I like to serve the role of the
connector…so I had coffee with them for twenty minutes before I rushed to lunch
with the guy I was meeting. And then I’d set up another from the department of
finance for coffee afterwards. I received a lot of knowledge of what’s going on in
the company because they were all willing to talk to me, be open to me.
While cosmopolitanism may appear to be inclusive of gender, ethnic and national groups, it continues to be a powerful sorting tool that places people in different social and professional positions along the power-knowledge spectrum at work, depending on their networks. Moreover, social interactions carried out through opportunist networking seem as important as those in more formalized networking during office meetings and seminars as illustrated in the above quote. As Beaverstock argued, internal networking within the firm is one of the most important processes for facilitating knowledge transfer and accumulating specific firm intelligence (2005). It appears then that the ability to craft a cosmopolitan attitude and identity is one that classifies people in the financial sector.

**Classifying cosmopolitan consumption**

Middle-level financial workers also share common consumption habits which become tangible markers and symbols of belonging to a coherent professional class that may not appear to be associated with any particular gender, ethnicity or nationality at first glance. Keith, who is a 27 year-old Singaporean Eurasian tells me,

They all like to have Mont Blanc pens, expensive Mont Blanc pens – not the $200-$300 kind. I am talking about the $1000+ pens! They also wear Ferragamo shoes and all that… for me personally, I buy cheap shoes, but they have to look expensive because I think if you want to be successful, you have to dress like you are already “one of the bosses”. Sometimes when we are waiting for a cab after a meeting and they ask, I just say “yah, this is Zegna” – actually its not! I met this MD of a large company and I happened to wear my Hugo Boss tie for that meeting – usually for big meetings, we wear the expensive ties – and he was telling me he has a big collection of Boss ties. I told him I collect Rennie Schegahl ties and he said “oh those are very nice, even though they are abit expensive…” And I was laughing inside because Rennie Schegahl ties cost $2.50 each and I do have a bunch hanging by the door. So ties, I don’t really pay attention to because I know it’s very hard to tell if they are expensive or cheap…but you still feel you need to maintain a certain image… So I will continue wearing my expensive-looking-but-cheap shoes.
Shelley, a Singaporean-Chinese, 24 year-old client advisor assistant also says,

There are also back office people who want to dress like front office people – they wear cuff-linked shirts everyday. They make sure not a single strand of hair is out of place, etc. Those people who are trying to impress people for whatever reason will dress like that… they want to give people a sense of “wow”. It’s a feel good thing for them. But after you talk to them for a while, you know they are not the front-office type.

From these quotes, we can see that the bourgeois cosmopolitan image is one that requires active maintenance and performance. These goods become associated with a particular well-to-do identity at work: that of the professional cosmopolitan. While these goods could be “read” as simply bourgeois and not necessarily cosmopolitan, I would argue that in this context, they do signify a sort of world-class savvy in consumption. Indeed, adorning the body with these global brands signifies that the owner is a person who has the cultural and economic means to embody cosmopolitanism. In other words, to be decorated with these material assets, the individual is also dressing himself or herself to fit a specific image and to play a certain role in the financial workplace. Appearance can be passed off as the signifier of conduct: if one could “carry it off”, to look was to be. Indeed, Shelley’s quote suggests that appearing to be is different from appearing as – there is a fine line between embodying and displaying dispositions. The representation of one’s own body from the very beginning is to build up his subjective image and his bodily hexis and is thus obtained by “applying a social system of classification based on the same principle as the social products to which it is applied” (Bourdieu, 1984: 193).

Further, as Shelley tells me,

I think you can tell which lady is from a foreign bank and which lady is from a local bank. Just look at their bags. The foreign bank lady will carry a branded bag – maybe Prada? – and the local bank girl will carry just a normal brand but then, she will also be prettier than the girl who works in the foreign bank.
Indeed, the logic of social heredity sometimes endows those “least endowed” (i.e. the “local bank girl”) with the “rarest bodily properties, such as beauty, and conversely, sometimes denies the “high and mighty” the bodily attributes of their position, such as height or beauty” (Bourdieu, 1984: 193). Within this universe of class-ed bodies then, one can map out the reproductive logic of social structure. Bodily properties, such as beauty and manner of speech are perceived through the social system of classification. Prevailing wisdom tends to rank and contrast the properties among the dominant and the dominated where one’s distance from the top (i.e. being in a high-ranking position, working in a foreign bank or being in a front-line job) can either be compensated through one’s soft knowledge of the game (e.g. Keith’s choices of ties and shoes) or one’s groundedness in natural expression (e.g. beauty). Further, this natural expression can also betray one’s distance from the top, no matter their consumption taste – such as Shelley’s remark on one’s speech giving away one’s actual job position. As Bourdieu argues, the body as a social product, is the only tangible manifestation of the person (1986; Skeggs, 1997: 102). The sign-bearing, sign-wearing body is also a producer of and produced through signs which can physically mark an individual’s class pronunciation. In this sense, it is possible to argue that gender subjectivities require a particular coded display of class: of consumption choices, physical appearances and, perhaps most salient of all, of dispositions which not only locates one’s distance from what is cosmopolitan but also enables others to read one’s position within this division of labour (Skeggs, 1997). Class identity within the financial sector is hence based on a form of exclusion – one which is carefully calculated upon individuals’ attitudes and behaviour, which is shaped vis a vis but not limited to a person’s technical skills.
Taste of necessity vs taste of luxury

Bourdieu argues that the basic opposition between the tastes of luxury and the tastes of necessity is specified in as many oppositions as there are different ways of expressing one’s distinction vis-à-vis the working class and its primary needs (1984: 183). This, he argues, amounts to the “different powers whereby necessity can be kept at a distance” (184: 184).

As Calvin, a 28 year old Singaporean-Chinese investor tells me,

I have always liked beers so I drink more in bars after I started this job. I also picked up whisky but I don’t think that has anything to do with my job. I don’t know if it’s really about the new salary. Maybe I started spending more on guitars now that I am earning my own income compared to when I was a student because most of my money is now disposable. I just buy a lot of guitars. I’ve also started looking at the stock market but I guess that’s normal for everyone. I suppose I still budget – I don’t spend every single cent I make although I know people who do. But it is not like I keep such a close eye on every dollar I make…

This above quote illustrates an economy of practices that is subtly yet systematically different from the Bangladeshis and Johorean commuter workers. The disappearance of economic constraints (“I don’t think its because of the new salary”; “its not like I keep a close eye on every dollar I make”) is accompanied by a change in social tastes – in Calvin’s case, towards whisky and an interest in the stock market. It is not so much a fundamental change towards rising above and beyond the constraints of economic resources anymore – rather, it is the relaxation or the distancing of his constraints as he earns a middle-class wage. Calvin’s attitude and practices illustrated here also ties in with Bourdieu’s argument regarding the habitus. It is precisely because of his existing material conditions as a middle-class financial worker that he is apparently objectively adapting to certain goals or practices. This is suggested by the regularity of his interest in the stock market without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the
tools needed to attain them as well as his interest without the deliberate orchestration of another actor (Bourdieu, 1977).

Reproducing racialized identities

As the notion of a cosmopolitan identity becomes perpetuated through and embedded within everyday workplace practices, it can lead to an increasing notion that a sense of self can be imagined as transcending ethnicity, nationality and gender. Indeed, there is the sense that people can be mobilized beyond their various social identifiers. Chaandra says,

I don’t rely on my ethnicity cos that’s what a lot of these people who have these problems tend to do – they rely on their ethnicity: “I am Indian, therefore I treat you this way”. I don’t have any of these problems. I forget sometimes that I am Indian even which is an amazing, amazing thing.

A closer look, however, suggests that racialized relations take on a different dynamic than gender and sexuality in terms of accessing financial work. For most of the respondents, their colleagues were mainly Chinese. All of them had at least 3 to 4 foreigners as colleagues while, as one of the respondents pointed out, “there are literally 1 or 2 Indians in the workplace and no Malays”. Not only does this ethnic composition fail to correspond with Singapore’s racial makeup, the responses I recorded also suggested more calculated ways, both practically and discursively, of excluding these ethnic groups in the workplace. Singaporean Indian, Jayakumar who is in his 30s tells me,

The Malays… I hardly see them. Because there is really one of them at night and the other one in the day! Very few of them. So you hardly notice they are there. I had Malay friends who were just turned away like that. It’s quite bad lah. I also know a lot of Indians and Malays who have told me it’s damn hard. I think you see mostly Chinese because of the education levels? If you go to the mailing room, it’s all Malays! Maybe it’s their culture? They are the ones who sort and
deliver the mail. Out of the 5 people who sort mail, 4 are Malays. Maybe it is what they want out of their lives?

The invisibility of Malay persons at work highlights some of the ethnic inequalities in gaining access to the global financial workplace. Racial identity is still a salient issue that filters particular groups of people out of the professional classes in spite of the organization’s supposed values of diversity and inclusion. Keith says,

The ethnic breakdown in my office is very strange…Mostly Chinese…I recommended this guy, who had almost 10 years of cash management experience…he wasn’t asking for a lot of money, he can do sales, project implementation, can trade, will hit the ground running and roll out projects straight away. But they didn’t hire him, I felt, because he was Indian. They don’t want Malays as well.

This was common theme in what Gwen, a British-Indian in her 40s shared with me,

I found it quite interesting because the people in HR didn’t realize I was of Indian origin since my name was Nelson and maybe I looked Latino or South American. We were hiring and they were going through the CVs… and everytime an Indian CV came through, they threw it into the bin without even looking at it.

It appears that the power imbalance in racialized relations is a lot more blatant than with gender. An Indian person encounters a lot more difficulties in accessing the financial workforce and, consequently, access into the financial professional identity in Singapore, while with gender and sexuality, there are more ways available to employees who can negotiate their performance of it to intersect in strategic ways with their professional identity and job performance. Not only is this a significant point of deviance from official workplace policy, but, as mentioned in Chapter 2, it also contradicts Singapore’s ethnic policies at large where racial discrimination in hiring is illegal, especially since “Indian” is one of the state’s four official races.
Aside from these blatant measures in keeping out particular racial groups, power imbalances between groups are also seen as normal. As Kelvin and Shelley tell me in the following respectively,

I would say our racial breakdown is pretty much Chinese. One is Malay and the other is Eurasian. But that’s because we are predominantly dealing with Chinese people... Of course when you work with the whole department, you get to know only certain people.

I wouldn’t say there is any racial discrimination. Although sometimes I suppose I find the Swiss to be quite impolite. Like they speak in German or Italian when there are Chinese people around. There was once a promotion of an Indonesian Chinese lady to a high management level. Then a lot of the higher ranking Swiss men were not very happy having a female taking over their roles. They were gossiping in German in front of her and the head of Singapore told them off and said “I think you’d better speak in English to be fair to everyone”...The Swiss think they are all superior to us and that’s why they were really unhappy when someone not like them was promoted.

These discourses that render the current racialized makeup as normal are some of the subtle practices that maintain racial power imbalances in a multicultural workplace. While it is valid that workers are not likely to know everyone who works at the office, I think it is also important to note these quotes as reflecting some of the processes that produce and re-produce this imbalance so that it appears normal and a mundane part of the work experience.

Exclusions of particular racial groups are also discursively processed in the day-to-day language in the workplace and these manifest frequently in office humour. As the following by Keit and Chaandra respectively suggest,

The advantage is I like to crack a lot of “Maht” jokes and Indian jokes so I don’t really have to look around before I crack those jokes and I am not afraid they would reach or hurt that person who is a Malay and it comes back to me, because they are all Chinese and they all get the joke!

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50 This is a derogatory term that refers to Malay people.
I wouldn’t call them racist jokes. I’ve had jokes made to and about me! I come right back with “you English sod!” and they’re cool with it! It’s fine! It’s not a problem. Very relaxed, very open. There are some Jewish jokes too.

While it was expressed to me that these jokes are not openly intended to harm or be malicious to certain groups of people, the very fact that people can joke about it suggests an undercurrent of racial politics in workplace culture that employees have picked up enough of to share in a humorous way. It could be that this everyday, taken-for-granted nature of office humour further entrenches racialized power imbalances in the workplace. Humour is therefore a subtle, yet complex way of supporting the internal status quo of everyday racialized power unevenness between particular groups within the workplace. The colour bar is reproduced through people’s participation in it via office humour, which can also cause feelings of frustration for some people. Jayakumar shared,

I used to have this one Chinese staff under me. She will pass stupid remarks like “eh you so black ah, like black out like that” – this kind of thing lah, so wah lao\(^51\), I also du lan\(^52\) her… But I think they cannot everything come out\(^53\) because I speak Mandarin (laughs). It’s very hard lah, if your manager can still poke fun at your colour – I’ve been through that. You cannot have people who discriminate like that.

Simply recognizing the presence of power imbalance in the workplace is important, yet not quite sufficient. We also have to recognize both the overt and subtle ways in which work practices and discourses, over time, produce and re-produce specific racialized dynamics that express alliance, domination and subordination. Jayakumar has been working in Singapore’s financial sector for more than 10 yrs. He has faced discrimination but he stayed on, he said, to “prove that he could make it”. This suggests

\( ^{51}\) Wah lao is a Hokkien term used to express exasperation.

\( ^{52}\) Du lan is a Hokkien term used to describe feeling of aggravation, annoyance and anger.

\( ^{53}\) The phrase “everything come out” refers to completely letting loose.
that ethnic tension is salient – it is not quite enough to push him to leave, but it is still present in his daily work experience enough for it to intersect with his professional self-identity. Jayakumar’s ability to speak Mandarin has enabled him to negotiate his racialized identity to cope with the discrimination that confronts him at work.

For Keith, his Eurasian identity sets him apart from the Chinese majority of the bank’s employees but his ability to speak Chinese, like Jayakumar, also protects him from blatant discrimination. His physical appearance could also pass off as that of a Caucasian person – a conscious identity negotiation which places him at the front line of many professional interactions both externally, as above, and internally. He says,

I am a poster-boy. I literally mean the poster boy! We have this employee survey thing and I am on the poster! So whenever we have any meetings or seminars, I am the one there! When they give out the pamphlets to invite the people, my name is always there, with me in the background. The speakers are usually invited from elsewhere, like we have this speaker from XYZ company and from Bank B, I was the speaker within.

Keith’s quote can contribute to the understanding of both local workplace identity politics and, at a broader level, cosmopolitanism in Singapore. While he is a racial minority at the office and does face certain pressures because of it (having to handle the difficult accounts, for example), his identity is also engaged as the face of the corporation’s image. His visibility as a “poster boy” within and outside of workplace boundaries is based upon his ethnicity. Keith’s visibility is not because he represents the dominant race of his workplace but because his ambiguous racial identity is believed to set his firm apart from other local banks. This not only suggests the shifting nature of his identity according to the work contexts, but is also symptomatic of the cosmopolitan culture: it is more available to those who look more Caucasian, hence, cosmopolitanism.
in the context of the financial workplace in Singapore is more accessible to those with particular ethnic appearances than others.

*Gender - A matter of course: The “natural” attributes of being a woman*

As mentioned previously, my study is not primarily about gender relations but about how people’s access to professional financial work is filtered by their social backgrounds, including gender. Drawing upon my interviews, I examine the multiple ways in which gender identities were carried out in the bank, which suggested different gender performances between and within gender groups. This also suggests that gender is one of the key ways in which the “cosmopolitan identity” remains exclusive – through the construction and/or performance of difference via gender. In short, gender is a way in which “Other-ness” is created and maintained in the workplace. On the one hand, gender inequality in the workplace is not as crude in the Singaporean workplace as described in McDowell’s study of financial workers in the City of London (McDowell, 1997). As Andrew, a white Scottish man in his 40s, told me, “HR is very very strong these days” in trying to prevent overt gender discrimination and outright derogatory comments at work. On the other hand, however, there continues to be a gendered interpretation of the rationales for identity negotiations and task assignments at work.

Similar to McDowell’s findings, my research has found that the embodiment of “natural” gendered attributes is often used as a rationalization for women’s work positions (1994: 1997). With reference to the quotes below, it can be argued that a woman’s position in the bank, and at a larger scale, across the financial sector, is
“naturalized” by notions of female attributes. Justin, a 27 year-old Singaporean Chinese man says,

...for women, like personal assistants, secretary, accounts, payables and receivables...work that requires for you to be more meticulous and patient.

From the above quote, it can be understood that women are perceived as more suitable for some work than others not because they may have technical qualifications that render them more capable as a secretary, but because their gender identity ties them to particular attributes - such as paying attention to detail, and patience - that are constructed as natural. Kelvin says,

I work in a private bank and private banks tend to hire more ladies...probably 60% women...it’s just the way it is, the front end. You look at all the private banks, chances are they are all women ... because you are selling a product, people tend to feel more comfortable talking to a female than a man.

Kelvin has expressed what some of the other respondents have alluded to – the distribution of women across the financial sector is rationalized by their apparent identity as women. Women are seen as more appropriate for the sales line because the nature of the woman in the bank is constructed as fitting with the nature of the sales job. Face to face interactions with clients, who are almost always male, are deemed to be more productive with a female salesperson to the extent that being female is part of the sales job norm.

Interestingly, Gwen who is the director for the Asia-Pacific eCommerce platform in an English bank, also responded,

I think a male can be too testosterone-heavy...a woman would probably have a softer style, you know, bringing people together, building consensus and I think that sort of nurturing, natural characteristic works well.
This suggests that the construction of the female self is not only understood by the men at work but the “high-flying” woman in the bank can also see the “natural” aspects of being a woman as not only normal, but advantageous as well. In Gwen’s example, by emphasizing the imbalanced working styles of men and women, there can be a consensual balance in decision making during work.

These attributes of being a woman can affect the position of females in the bank’s hierarchy in very concrete ways that are often passed off as a matter of course. Keith says,

The women who are not in senior positions are having babies. They are taking a lot of leave, because of their babies. Sometimes they come to work and their son is giving trouble at school, they have to run off. Other than that, they are taking leave before they give birth and after they give birth, they take leave for confinement and then they tend to fall sick after that and they take (medical leave) for another few months… the women who are in higher positions, you can see they have a dedication there.

Keith’s response was also echoed in other respondents. Women’s status in the banks can sometimes be understood as a pragmatic decision: it is not as efficient to hire a woman for a senior position because she may have “womanly duties” to attend to that could interfere with her job productivity, such as childbirth and taking care of her children. This notion was reinforced when contrasted to the rationale for favouring men in senior positions. He elaborates,

…because when you put a man, especially at a high position, you know this guy is probably not going to disappear for three to four months at a stretch because he got pregnant. So it’s for a very practical reason

The gender division of labour in the workplace is also closely tied to the supposed family-oriented characteristics that women are expected to have. As Chaandra illustrates,

On the trade floor itself, you probably have 90% men and 10% women split. And that too is a preference. You don’t see many women willing to work in such an
environment because it does mean you have to give up a lot of your social life and family life. It’s not uncommon, let me just say…it’s all part of the job. So (people who work on the trade floor) have chosen the job over the family.

*Types of femininities*

My aim in this section is to bring to the fore the processes through which the female self is not a singular, homogenous construction among different people. In short, I will illustrate how different femininities are presented at work. The diversity in the workplace is embedded with diversities in the presentation of female subjectivity to the extent that there is a production and re-production of different sets of gendered norms and acceptable behaviour. It becomes clear here that femininity is constructed as varied across different areas at work. A woman’s body type, choice of dress and overall disposition can locate her in a particular social position at work, yet this is also dependent on her professional status. In spite of notions of “inclusion”, there continues to be social differentiation to the extent that some gendered bodies are more suitable for certain types of work over others. While there may be no overtly crude gender discrimination, the research showed that there continues to be gender-based identity negotiation embedded within everyday discourses and humour at work.

All of the respondents worked in institutions where the trade floor is male-dominated. For the few women who do work in trading, it appears they generally perform the roles of the tough, immaculate, females. Tian Ci, a Singaporean-Chinese IT executive in his late 20s tells me,

You’d be surprised – some traders are aunties! Outside of work, you would think they are just some huang lian po54 But they are tough in the office. You would think that she is just a mother if you saw her outside! When you see her on the trading floor, you’d really be scratching your head, thinking how she got there.

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54 This is the Chinese derogatory term for women who are seen as “old hags”.
This aggressive behaviour was noted amongst respondents who interact with female traders. It is already reasonable to think that these women assemble their identities with traits that are often associated with men because feminine bodies are considered unsuitable for the trade floor. Women who are seen as aggressive at work may challenge the idea of females who are nurturing and consensual, hence creating the notion of a diverse work environment, yet the construction of their work identities continue to produce gendered notions of what it means to be successful at work. This construction of the aggressive female could then be an attempt to show that just as she can take on masculine characteristics, so too can she perform the job, hence fit into corporate objectives, as well as a man can, if not better. Chaandra says,

The women on the trade floor are a lot more confident than those in the back office. They don’t take nonsense from nobody. Very hard women. They do tend to dress up more and they generally got the Don’t Mess With Me attitude. It’s hard to say in a multicultural environment but Hot is Hot! Male counterparts dress well on the trade floor. Women on the trade floor? They dress perfect. Their dress sense is a big factor – no doubt about it, they dress to impress. Except for a few, but that’s because they don’t have the best body type in which case they don’t give a damn. For women, esp. You’ve got to look good. Unless you are really THAT good and there are very few of those. Those women don’t take nonsense from nobody!

Gendered identities are also reconstructed through office humour. As Tian Ci elaborates,

I think women would feel okay at my workplace even though it is mostly males. Back office girls are also usually not as well-kept or as pretty as front office. There are some ... How do I say... some lower-educated people who do not have a false front when they speak to anybody. There was this time when I was sitting beside the printer and this Japanese lady happened to walk by to collect something. There is this typical Singaporean Ah Beng who has many years of experience. He has a loud R&B song for his cellphone ringtone, speaks in Hokkien and scolds vulgarities like nobody’s business. So he turned around and called the lady’s name. He then shouted out to everybody, “Actually you look quite pretty from the back”. And then I started laughing because I knew what he was going to say next. And then the lady just ignored him at first and then he blurted out, “that’s because they cannot see your face!”. She just smiled – that’s the back
office girl for you. I guess once you get used to how they speak, you know he is not being malicious. He is just trying to lighten up the mood in the office at the expense of her of course – everyone calls her Dua Bui. Cannot say that to a trader!

Female presence in financial work is marked in several ways. On the trade floor is therefore marked by two extremes – she can either be immaculately dressed, which is linked to a tough attitude towards work or she can be frumpy, which is linked to a laissez-faire attitude. Women who work in the back office are rationalized as less physically attractive but less aggressive, if not passive towards frequent jibes about their appearance, as Tian Ci’s quote illustrates. This construction of feminine standards, of which the first one is the dominant, is seen as above and beyond different cultural ideals of beauty. As a result, it seems as a diverse and inclusive ideal while continuing to exclude particular groups of people such as women who do not “dress to impress” or who are not considered pretty enough. It must be pointed out that all the female respondents who work in operations have had technical training for their work while some of the women who perform front line work do not. It may not be too far-fetched to argue then that there is greater pressure for those whose work requires more bodily presentation to demonstrate their corporate fit not only by technical capability but by their cultural capital and physical appearance as well. Keith explains to me,

There is this one girl – some of the guys think she is really attractive. She comes in and she likes to wear low-cut or very frilly skirts and big flowers and stuff like that everyday. She speaks with a very fake American accent. She is from the marketing team so she organizes events, like arrange for food, emceeing, book the room, stuff like that. She doesn’t have a finance background…(but she carries herself that way) because it works. From a male perspective, when you meet or speak to a woman who is physically attractive, you tend to be nicer to her. You give her more attention. You have an emcee up there who is attractive, it works better than someone who is not to represent the bank.

55 This is the Hokkien term for “fat pig”.
Evidently, the woman that Keith described does not only carry out her work duties with technical resourcefulness. Her portrayal and “doing” of her femininity in marketing work is executed with the understanding that a certain physical appearance can locate her in a particular position within the professional classes, in spite of her lack of financial training. Her choice of accessories, clothes and way of talking become her way of differentiating herself from the rest of the females in the workplace to the extent that her success at work can be conferred through the daily, almost ritualized, performance of her identity.

Female presence in the financial workplace, even in traditionally male-dominated arenas like the trade floor, does not mean that women radically challenge the reproduction of any heteronormative and/or sexist overtones. The femininities seen at work are not simply products of processes of feminization but rather, continue to be the process through which women are gendered and become different sorts of women – they are, at best, “ambivalent femininities” (Skeggs, 1997: 98). The investments one makes in her femininity enables them to gain access to status and distinction within the financial classes. Conversely, the lack of access, as conditioned by the lack of economic means, such as the woman working in the local bank, can sometimes be sympathetically read as more “authentically feminine” because she is seen as prettier. It could be argued, however, that various constructions of femininities in financial work continues to be a useful contextualized cultural resource, where even the apparently more subversive constructions of femininity, such as tough women or the good-natured woman who laughs off “fat jokes” about her are used in the service of maintaining a particular status
quo – one which marginalizes particular body types, tastes and dispositions. Their performances are ambiguous but not necessarily transformative. I would here draw attention to a point made in an earlier chapter – one’s oppression does not only come from the other but from one’s self in relation to others as well. Just as the Bangladeshi male migrant’s belief in the primacy of masculinity powerfully reinforces his silence on his suffering, the feminization process of the middle-class financial worker sets up a form of symbolic violence through its reproduction. While Bourdieu views material forces such as the division of labour and segregation within the work force as central to gender oppression, he also regards the internalization of symbolic gender norms within physical dispositions as the most important element in the reproduction of sexual division (McNay, 2006). It would be inaccurate to think that Bourdieu sees an antithesis between the material vs the symbolic. I would argue that through the choices one makes and the way in which one carries out his/her identity – indeed, the experience of gender, as with any other social category – is shaped by their agency which, in turn, is shaped by both discursive and material power relations.

Conclusion

The selective incorporation of people into professional financial work in Singapore has created a segment of the labour market that is well-educated, articulate and well-travelled. We see that this group of workers are coveted for both their technical, and, more importantly as I have stressed here, cultural knowledge. More specifically, what we see is a set of embodied resources being brought into the global marketplace strategically for capitalist firms so as to achieve corporate objectives (Thrift, 2000). This form of capitalist work practice, however, is based on certain performances of personhood and
social interaction both at the institutional and everyday, interpersonal levels. I have demonstrated here that access to the professional classes in financial work is dependent on the performance of a cosmopolitan identity, which is an exclusive and often paradoxical identity. On the one hand, there is the pragmatic need to accept diversity at work. On the other hand, however, in the performance of this cosmopolitan identity, bodies continue to be closely regulated to the extent that gender, ethnic, racialized, national and linguistic identities are further entrenched in the workplace. I have also shown that the reproductive processes of class identity, personhood and exclusion are interwoven and presented in the structural as well as the everyday performative practices and experiences of work in a “cosmopolitan” setting.

By drawing upon Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, I have begun to clarify how people’s pre-reflexive actions and dispositions can locate them in particular social spaces. This already suggests how people’s access to work is not entirely based on technical skills but on their pre-organizational sense of the tacit rules that dominate the workplace (Skeggs, 2004). In this sense, habitus is a powerful and often intangible sorting tool that subjects people to certain social statuses. This internal organizing mechanism of habitus is not only applicable to understanding the complex web of differentiated social relations but also useful for understanding the “body politic” of the individual. I also illustrated how a person’s embodied habitus, or hexis, marks him or her as more suitable for one space over others. As Rosalie pointed out, hiring personnel often assess the eligibility of a potential employee by noting how the individual walks and sits during the interview. Even after gaining entry into the financial sector, individuals continue to identify and
differentiate themselves according to the dominant practices and discourses of the workplace.

In Bourdieu’s terms, the way in which people actively engage in these processes of identification and differentiation serves to codify their bodies. In the attempt to banish vagueness about their possibly convoluted identities, individuals have a hand in shaping the way in which they are perceived at work, such as the gay man and female trader who are overtly assertive. This suggests that even though there is a dominant cultural hierarchy at work, individuals also have the agency to negotiate their own identities – this view enables us to understand the workplace much more as a site of active, ongoing struggles among people of different backgrounds. I noted in chapter three, however, that agency here does not mean complete free will. This framework suggests that even though these people actively perform their identities to fit into corporate culture, there is a degree of oppression at work to the extent that the people who can best adhere to the dominant corporate culture are distinct from others symbolically. For example, on the one hand, Chaandra noted that his ethnicity is not a barrier for him – which could suggest that diversity is being recognized. On the other hand, however, he also said that he always makes the effort to network strategically so as to access professional information as efficiently as possible. He further noted that this ability to communicate sets him apart from others who might be conscious of their ethnicity or gender. In this example, Chaandra feels the routinized performance of his cosmopolitan identity is strategic for his professional advancement; yet, it is always done in relation to the powerful dominant culture in the social field of financial work – the need to network in spite of gender, ethnic and racial differences. This also articulates Bourdieu’s notion of distinction, which
is always constructed in relation to the symbolic power that dominates the group. By investing through his actions and dispositions to the dominant cosmopolitan culture at work, Chaandra is building up and sustaining his own symbolic capital. Consequently, those who still have technical capability, such as the Singaporean graduates Chaandra pointed out, are denied entry into the professional class because they are seen as unsuitable for the global, cosmopolitan identity that the firm demands. It is therefore the de facto cultural differences that allow for distinction.

Although access to financial work does not often openly discriminate, the micro-politics of everyday interactions among employees continues to situate them as unequal in social status. Financial employees either then actively fabricate their identity to fit the dominant corporate culture’s expectations of them or they are marginalized from social networks as a result. This can culminate in actually hindering the individual’s workplace mobility since employees can be graded according to how well they fit into corporate culture. Furthermore, since much of this work is based on knowledge transfer, those who do not fit into the social networks at work could well be left out of information circuits as well. As a result, they set up a cause/effect mechanism that reproduces intolerance and inequalities in the workplace.

I have also shown empirically that the performance or “doing” of identities is crucial to workplace success to the extent that individual bodies address particular roles according to their gender, racialized, ethnic and language identities. Furthermore, there are diverse presentations of gendered bodies that can physically locate them in different office spaces and tasks. For instance, the “hot and aggressive” female is rendered more suitable to the male-dominated trading floor, whereas the “flouncy and flirty” female
succeeds in marketing because her image “works” to her advantage. There are also multiple masculinities at work – interestingly, the findings suggest that there is a more prominent idea of the ideal man in the financial workplace than the ideal female. This could mean that the alpha-male is still touted as most bodily suitable for the professional classes in financial work. The inequalities of certain groups – such as the Malay people and effeminate men – become naturalized over time through discourses that render them either as normal or humorous. The physical presence of these people in the bank suggests that there is some structural leeway for them to access the financial workplace, yet, their experiences via the everyday interactions show that there continues to be intolerance against certain groups of people.

In spite of the banks’ articulation of policies and values that emphasize “diversity” and “inclusion”, there is a very specific type of individual that gains entry into the professional classes in financial work and after initial access, there are also specific task allocations for particular types of people within the sector. Indeed, the notion of “cosmopolitanism” is used as a screening tool as well as a culmination of processes that select particular groups of people to be included in the social networks and knowledge-transfer – elements that contribute to work success. The performance of the cosmopolitan, corporate fit at work hence serves to produce and reproduce the power inequalities to the extent that there are specific displays of employees’ gendered, racialized and ethnicized selves that are constructed as “fitting” with the organization’s supposed cosmopolitan values and task allocation. It becomes reasonable to think that the on-going performance of a professional cosmopolitan identity is much more fragmented when we take these historical and social backgrounds of employees into consideration.
Class reproduction within the financial sector is sustained through the strategic notion of “cosmopolitanism” and through the normative performance of the cosmopolitan employee.

I have demonstrated in this chapter more than others that personhood and selfhood are products of, and produce, class inequality. The practical and discursive claiming of selfhood can be understood as class performativity as selfhood brings with it entitlements not only denied to others, but reliant on those relationships with others either as a resource or a limit to their entitlements (Skeggs, 2004). The notion of cosmopolitanism, then, is used as a screen that selectively filters individuals’ access to the professional classes in the financial sector, thus setting the mechanisms for social inequality and struggle at work. Ideas of “diversity” and “inclusion” are hence used to mask the intolerance and inequality that continue to pervade the global workplace.

It is worth repeating that while the data has illustrated that many of the practices of class identity and its reproductive strategies within financial work center around the demonstration of cultural capital and cultivated habitus, I do not argue that there is no ongoing exploitation in this workplace. Conversely, neither am I undermining the display of cultural capital as a class reproduction tool amongst the Bangladeshi and/or Johorean commuter workers. Exploitation and subordination are both intricately linked and are intrinsic in various forms within all capitalist relations. Indeed, in the next chapter, I will reinforce the argument that it is these intricate relations of class differences within and across different groups of workers that characterizes the division of labour in Singapore. In this chapter, however, it is within these middle-class echelons that the Bourdieusian issue of cultural capital is more pronounced as a form of, and hence holding greater
explanatory value for, class reproduction than the sheer exploitative aspect of class as captured in Marx’s writings (Wright, 2005).
Conclusion

*We need to think about the relationship between responsibility and knowledge: to ignore or make class invisible is to abdicate responsibility (through privilege) from the effects it produces*
- Skeggs, 1997: 7

*If “class” is the answer, what is the question?*
- Wright, E. O, 2005: 180

**Bangladeshi migrant worker. Johorean commuter. Banker.** These identities come with specific forms of class realities through intersections of different social categories. These intersections are always read through a nexus of power relations in which different types of workers are discursively and materially attributed different values. This thesis has shown how the category of class is reproduced in various ways and how it is experienced by different groups of workers within the division of labour. For a capitalist form of organization to be maintained, it is the social relations of class that must animate economic processes. As I argue in the theoretical chapter, class difference does not simply lie at the root of economic exploitation and social marginalization within this form of capital accumulation and production. It is also about what sorts of challenges different people must overcome to access a livelihood that is perceived to better their lives. Because it is about social relations, class cannot solely be understood through the analysis of structural conditions either, although these will shape and to some extent, coerce people towards certain economic lives. Class is a form of *subjectivity* that is inhabited through other categories such as gender, race and nationality. Rather than to construct identities and subjectivities as stable categories or modes of
being, I problematized the processes through which identities, particularly class identities are created, differentiated and maintained.

The workers in this study emerged as subjects through the nexus of structures and power relations that not only located certain groups of people in particular positions within the division of labour in Singapore but also produced certain ways of being. Class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representations: it was entirely central to the lives of the workers, either consciously or unconsciously. Within this form of economic organization, each group of workers was incorporated and valued differently and had differentiated access to resources. Class, in these terms, was structural – in that the division of labour organized what economic opportunities were available to them – and also operated through a myriad of capital transformations – culturally, symbolically, economically – which are more available to some workers than others: both aspects of which are not discrete, each shaping the other.

I situate my work within existing research that demonstrates how there is nothing “merely cultural” about studies of discursive and symbolic events (Wright, 2006: 7). These processes are central to those political and economic practices that are identified as capitalist power, exploitation and resource distribution. Capitalist economic production, however, also guides the shapes and forms of social reproduction, central to which are consumption and lifestyles. Within social reproduction, there continues to be domination and symbolic violence that reinforce hierarchy and difference amongst people who occupy different positions within the division of labour. In short, people’s economic lives shape and are shaped by their lives as social beings; class processes are constituted by every other aspect of social life. Class is created and maintained through discourses of
exploitation and domination in the intertwining realms of economic production and social reproduction.

The ways in which I have elaborated on the concept of class in this dissertation have been shaped by the kinds of questions for which I sought answers. As quoted earlier, Wright succinctly asked, “if “class” is the answer, what is the question” (2005: 180). This is a concept that seeks not only to explain the broad variations in the social organization of inequality but also a narrower but no less important question about the subjective identity of individuals in society, which, in this thesis, is one that categorizes people within a system of economic and social stratification. The questions one asks are not without their own theoretical moorings and normative concerns regarding the world in which we live (Wright 2005, 180). The theoretical approaches with which one chooses to frame and answer these questions hence also depends very much on the questions themselves. The dimensions of class theories I have selectively utilized and combined here, namely those of Marx and Bourdieu, collectively provide explanatory power that cannot be found in simply one or the other. This is not as messy as it sounds: both Marxist and Bourdeusian class theories have their own particular, and complimentary strengths in addressing different issues. Indeed, Bourdieu himself argued for the flexibility of his theories and the necessity of inconsistency (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

It was through my fieldwork that I truly grasped how unstable and fluid empirical realities and the theories that frame them can be. This was where the extended case method became a useful tool not only for making sense of our empirical world through a particular theoretical lens but also for explaining everyday practices when theoretical
prescriptions start to falter (Burawoy, 1998). This methodologically self-conscious way of extending, reconstructing and piecing together theories was particularly useful, indeed, even necessary in a project where I discussed different groups of workers who face highly variagated forms of differentiation and labor market segmentation. By using Marx’s notion of exploitation and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, I have tried to make the implications of the division of labour in Singapore more comprehensible and at the same time, more nuanced. We could see that different groups of workers were valued differently. The Bangladeshis and the Johoreans who were valued for their cheapness and, if not their disposability at least their ease of replacement, were incorporated and positioned differently from the middle-class financial workers. The number of work permit holders suggests that as a cheapened sector of the labour force, they are valued precisely for the ways their “non-skills” contribute to Singapore’s growth as a cosmopolitan city. To ensure their cheapness, however, existing policies and discourses create them as temporary workers who must be monitored by employers and the state. In painful irony, their position at this end of the division of labour is made permanent by an enforced transience through forms of domination and control over labour. Not only do these measures mark these bodies as different from other groups of workers, it also creates different experiences of class between them and workers who are not on work permit.

The problem that most immediately revealed itself was that of the sheer vulnerability and exploitation that the Bangladeshis were exposed to – which is uncharacteristic of any other group in this study. Recruitment agent and labour broker fees immediately engulfed them in debt even before they started work. The presence of
the special pass illustrated just how precarious the work permit system can be for these workers. While the special pass is a step towards institutional recognition of how dangerous and fragile the livelihoods of work permit holders can be, it also systematically locks workers into a state of unemployment as most holders of the pass are disallowed from work. The control an employer has over his/her workers continues the looming threat of repatriation by the former and has rendered many special pass holders homeless – a form of vulnerability not experienced by any other groups of workers in the study. It is especially through this group of workers that we see how Marx’s argument regarding exploitation must be urgently applied: the division of labour generates more fear, fragility and harm for some workers than others (Wright, 2002). Although it has been argued that Marx’s class analysis should not be reduced to being a moralistic analysis and is, above all, a political judgement, I would argue that the strength of the concept of exploitation lies in the way in which it channels our focus towards the deprivations that some groups of people face in this form of socio-economic organization of resources (Smith, 2000).

This is not to say that other forms of class reproduction were neither present nor as salient within this group of workers. While the Bangladeshis did not have access to the sort of capital that could be capitalized upon, that is, those forms of capital which are flexible, such as the cultural capital of the middle-class professionals that can be converted and traded-up for symbolic capital and economic gains, they still made the most of what they had by developing a taste for what they could afford and often used this taste choice as a way to distinguish themselves from the “overspending” middle classes. As Skeggs argues, working-class culture is not point zero of culture, rather, it has a different value system” (2004: 153). Indeed, commodity consumption not only featured
as a reason for people to move to Singapore to work, but also emerged as a form of
differentiation amongst the three main groups of workers discussed. For all of these
workers, consumption became a particularly useful way of understanding their
experiences of class as it not only reflected economic need and material interests but also
how these shape the acquisition and display of consumer commodities, serving as
symbolic measures of success and status in Singapore. These consumption practices often
produced powerful constructions of class identity, which can both empower – as with the
middle-class workers who have the economic means to purchase the right tie, bag, shoes
– or silence – as with the Bangladeshi male migrant who still chooses to purchase
household items before returning home in order to disguise his state of joblessness in
Singapore. Although apparently irrational economically, this form of consumption
becomes a channel through which workers participate in social practice and cultural
expression. It may not free the worker from particular social bindings – the exercise of
the worker’s agency here continues to reproduce the primacy of a normative masculinity,
where the man continues to be seen as the economic provider. The way consumption
becomes a lived, salient aspect of class reproduction lies in whom it empowers or
silences, for whom it is the cultivation of the taste of necessity or luxury. This illustrates
that Bourdieusian class processes of distinction operate precisely within – not beside or
separately from – Marxist class processes of exploitation.

While the Johoreans I spoke with did not need to pay the high amount of broker
fees, their work journey was a stressful daily affair with the long distances and frequent
causeway traffic jams. Local labour policies in Singapore meant that Malaysians do not
face the same barriers of entry into different sectors of the economy as other work permit
holders, such as the South Asians. The research, however, revealed that accessing work in Singapore often relied on social capital such as established networks of family and friends who are already working in Singapore. Their position in the division of labour in Singapore also did not allow them to purchase affordable housing nearer to their work places, yet Johor’s close proximity to Singapore meant that a daily crossing to access high wages was still feasible. Their acknowledgement of the fact that they are taking on jobs that Singaporeans refuse to suggests that they are far from being passive or blinded receptors of the work they perform. Commuting, it could be argued, became part of their conscious strategy to access a different livelihood and lifestyle. Aside from not having to pay for broker fees, these commuters were also not as reliant on their employers for their daily needs such as accommodations, meals and transportation to and from work. Their greater autonomy compared to the Bangladeshis arguably meant that they were less vulnerable to outright coercion from their employers.

Among the middle-class financial workers, expression of forms of cultural and symbolic capital emerged as a more pronounced indication of an individual’s value at work as seen through recruitment and promotion practices. This is not to deny existing forms of exploitation within the middle-class: indeed, that they do not own the means of production suggests they are still selling their labour for a wage in the workplace, hence participating in a labour process that to some extent subsumes their working bodies under capital. Without reducing one set of relations to another, I argue that theirs is a complex class position in that they are able to nonetheless appropriate part of the surplus through skill exploitation/domination and that the performance of a particular form of identity is central to the structuring of class identity (Wright, 1985). While many of the financial
workers I spoke with held relevant degrees, particularly for the back office workers, the ways in which people were recruited continue to show that their value at work goes beyond technical skills – that is, a normative performance of a cosmopolitan identity. The middle-class financial worker uses his/her leisure pursuits to increase their productivity and market value – a resource that does not hold value for the Bangladeshi or Johorean workers. The ongoing performance of being worldly, accepting diversity, wearing the proper brand names, participating in particular leisure activities, being able to joke about different things become part of fashioning the cultural omnivore. It becomes part of the strategy to legitimate the cosmopolitan self in the “hip work” that takes place within the financial sector (Thrift, 2000). This cosmopolitan work identity, like all social identities, is an unstable one that requires ongoing maintenance and intersects with other subjectivities – gender, race, nationality and sexual – with some individuals being seen as more readily suitable for particular types of job tasks. Cosmopolitanism here becomes a class identity above all else: it is rooted in the division of labour and is created through processes by which some people are denied access to economic and cultural resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients. Phrased more strongly, this illustrates that Marxist processes of class exploitation are precisely present within – not separate from – Bourdieusian class processes of distinction.

The strong emphasis on personal appearance and the reading of other peoples’ appearance at work suggests that it is a central marker in the ability to make use of one’s cultural capital in matters of economic and symbolic exchange. Appearances here are not only about clothes – although this is an important component – but are also about one’s tastes, attitudes and bodily dispositions as oriented by the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). To
participate in a class identity is to embody an economy of practical mastery that underlies and facilitates everyday readings of who is similar and who is different from oneself (Bourdieu, 1984: 73). It is also central to how one knows others as belonging or not belonging – it becomes part of the powerful discourse that legitimizes certain people over others in different spaces and over different job tasks within and outside of the financial workplace (Skeggs, 2000). This was demonstrated in many of the middle-class workers’ attitudes of disdain towards towards Johoreans and Bangladeshis although the term “class” was hardly ever invoked in my conversations with them. Instead, their working-class traits are presented as the outcome of individual and/or cultural pathology, as when Kenneth and Aileen emphatically pronounce that they would not be comfortable drinking in a coffeeshop or taking on jobs that Johoreans would take. Another example would be how the lack of Malay and Indian colleagues is rationalized as “what people want out of life”. Indeed, this form of cultural violence is part of the normative middle-class project of maintaining itself as distinct. This form of collective identity both disguises and rests on the “We are not them” of identity reproduction. Ideas about identity re-assert an often unrecognized class position, reproducing a form of middle-class sense of entitlement to particular cultural capital and bodily practices. This is one of the most salient ways that class is written on the body as it can be read as “rights, privilege, access to resources, cultural capital, self-authorization and propriety” (Skeggs, 1997: 152). Personhood and selfhood are both a product of and produce class inequality. Claiming selfhood can be seen as a form of class performance because selfhood is not only about accessing entitlements denied to others but also reliant on others being made available as a resource to draw upon for the constitution of this self.
The Bangladeshis and Johoreans do not use, accrue and develop culture in the same way as the middle-class financial workers. Their relationship to legitimate culture is different – what they have had to give up, risk and confront in order to achieve capital are different. The strength of Bourdieu’s class analysis lies in showing that culture becomes an exchange-value in self-formation, a resource and a form of capital (1984; Skeggs, 1997). It is this exchange that becomes valuable in class identity – it is this relationship of entitlement to and denial of resources that projects to us the inequality occurring across our social landscape. In a way, this is not entirely distinct from Marx’s argument that the transformations of things into possessions through the appropriation of labour (i.e. exploitation) is facilitated not just by economic organization but more fundamentally, the social organization of workers and owners of the means of production. Bourdieu’s analysis allows us to see how culture, conditioned by people’s access to economic resources can be made into objects to be possessed for their symbolic value (Skeggs, 1997). This is not to deny the importance of economic organization or work but to suggest that through its capitalization, culture has an exchange value, and can involve exploitation and appropriation. Like any resource, it is accessible to some, denied to others. This is not to say that low-waged workers have no culture. A class-ed reality is far more political than that. The cultural items that low-waged workers do produce, that they can afford to consume are often not as valued as those produced and consumed by middle-class and elite workers. They are not seen as suitable for cultural practices that bring about the sense of distinction for the middle-classes. It is these barriers of entry which continue to reproduce class differences amongst the different groups that I indicated in my research questions. Within the circuit of resource distribution, whether
material, symbolic or cultural, the identities being reproduced through their co-optation are always fragile and unstable, always requiring ongoing maintenance through the processes I have illustrated.

I started by introducing how I wanted to analyze problems of class reproduction through the division of labour in Singapore which strategically relies on migrants and the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism. I have shown through my theoretical and empirical chapters that there are twin structural processes occurring at the same time that shape the class experiences of these different workers, the structure of the local labour market in Singapore and also the larger context of the migration process itself. We see that certain migrants have to bear the high costs of migration. For some people, such as Chaandra and many of the middle-class bankers introduced in Chapter 5, the migration process increases their flexibility, mobility and amount of capital in the marketplace. This is a migration pathway clearly not shared by either the Johoreans or the Bangladeshis. This is not to say that the middle-class is not governed or monitored within this division of labour but that segments of the working population are differently disciplined. Couched within the cosmopolitan discourses salient not just amongst the middle-classes but also within Singapore’s official rhetoric, there are gradations of governing that occur along a continuum that overlaps with pre-existing racial, national and gender hierarchies at different scales.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I set out to illustrate the lived reality of cosmopolitanism in Singapore’s division of labour. This dissertation is a case study where cosmopolitanism is not only based upon class stratification but further, where class becomes racialized differently, in different work contexts. I argue that an integrated
reading of Marx and Bourdieu’s notions of class allows me to draw out the differentiated positions, dispositions and challenges that different groups of workers face. This research design is also a strategic way to question the liberal construct of cosmopolitanism which is not capable of drawing out the pervasive and persistent reproductions of racialized and class-based stratification.

In what I have written here, it has been impossible to convey entirely the pain, pleasure, humour, sharpness – indeed, complexity – of the different groups of workers involved, whose narratives and experiences have profoundly shaped my research process. Nonetheless, I hope I have provided an outline of these experiences which contain enough substance that it can be built upon in future research.
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