

South Asian Migrant Diaspora Performativity

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Abstract: Economic promise draws migrant workers to global cities. Migrants from South Asia add considerably to the blue-collar labor force with which cities like Singapore manage their economic demands. In Singapore, the migrant diaspora while economically visible, materially acknowledged, and ostensibly protected under the law, is arguably in a situation of social invisibility. Migrants are potentially marginalized communities, and from the lens of Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci, their habitus and practices exclude them from hierarchical relevance in terms of the position in the field that they occupy as specific sociocultural agents. There is also a delineation of urban space within the city to create acceptable 'zones of occupation'. In such areas, the South Asian migrant diaspora are state-legitimised, and are seemingly given the space to self-actualise and self-define. This paper argues that these cloaking conditions create a climate where everyday performativity comes into importance. The invisible migrants, in both formal and in formal circumstances, overtly and covertly, consciously and subconsciously generate corporeal performance in order to assert their own position within, and despite of, the hegemonic parametering of the relational space for migrant and citizens. This paper explores the constituent aspects of the performativity of South Asian migrants, and the multifaceted responses that this elicits from the state and the citizenry. This paper interrogates the performativity of the migrant self along a spectrum from contestation to accommodation, and examines the interstitial outcomes of invisible existence due to the circumstances of economics and capitalism.

Introduction

This paper offers an examination of the nexus of economic migration, global cities, and the position that diasporic presence acquires through performativity in non-theatrical circumstances. This paper interrogates how the corporeal body of the migrant, and acts of sensorial embodiment by the subject/object, attracts the gaze of audience, and vis-a-vis this spectatorial process renders subalterns visible.

Globalisation and Global Cities

The process of late 20th and early 21st century globalisation begs the observation that the 'world is flat' (Friedman 2005, 7). Friedman suggests that there is a leveled space that allows access of movement to multiple agents of economic activity. Additionally, Brian Turner argues that there is the irrefutable fact of the free flow of goods, services, people and indeed, intellectual and cultural properties across porous borders (Turner 2011, 246-246). The individual is able to literally and metaphorically circumnavigate the world. Economic migrants, who have the inclination and will to journey, now can access global cities that can accommodate the needs and demands of those in search of the betterment of their material condition. The consequential benefits should be an enriching of global experience as well as the creation of more opportunities to mitigate inequities, as

more of the world's population has greater access to opportunities and experiences that cut across the old barriers, defined by John Rawls as the 'lottery of birth' (Lippert-Rasmussen 2009).

Global cities have the potentiality to accommodate the global citizen and offer, as Larry Ray suggests in his book *Globalisation and Everyday Life*, the heady intoxicating mixture of "(being) a trans-cultural space shared by a mixture of cultures in various relations of ethnic segregation, integration, assimilation and cultural hybridization" (Ray 2007,29). However, a series of negative consequences can result for economic migrants, and this is the academic interrogation in this paper.

Axiomatically, alongside the apparent homogenisation of cultures, which Larry Ray points to (2007, 29), there can be consequences to economic migrants in global cities that are unpalatable, if not egregious. The global city is imagined as a cosmopolitan site, which embraces globalisation, and keeps its borders relatively porous in order to harness and facilitate the free interaction of capital, knowledge, finance, and labour. Global cities acquire position in the field, and hence become magnets for wealth creation (Gugler 2004,1-26). Examples of such global cities are London, New York, Sydney and Singapore. Such cities necessarily require different categories of labour to fuel the needs of the city, and migrant workforces feature as part of the labour composition of global cities. Migrant workers in the global city, in the climate of capital generation, have the propensity to be subject to pernicious consequences. These consequences range along a spectrum from facing tacit racial and classist prejudice in the host country to battling employer neglect and open abuse. Additionally, economic migrants as a diaspora who leave in search of betterment can be subject to space politics in the host country, and the enclaving of groups based on economic roles. Further to this, there is the institutionalised and hegemonised exclusion of such individuals, which can result in damaging dispossession and alienation.

The Singaporean Case Study

This paper investigates Singapore that has, over the course of forty-nine years transformed itself into a global city. Singapore has a high position on United Nations Human Development indices. Furthermore, as reported by the World Bank in its *Doing Business 2014 Report*, the country holds the top international ranking as the easiest city in the world for doing business. However, despite being a carefully instrumentalised global city in terms of public policy, Singapore like Japan, faces the demographic challenge of a declining birth rate, and the impact this has on population growth. In 2014, the *CIA World Fact Book* estimated that Singapore had the birth rate of 8.1births/1,000 population. This ultra-low birth rate is historically attributable to birth control policies that were implemented in the 1970s to restrict population and to facilitate economic and human development

after decolonisation in 1965. Paradoxically, this created a slow but steady decline in the birth rates in Singapore by the late 1980s. Factors responsible for this were complex. Concomitantly, they included education policies that created more life goal options particularly significant to women. Equally, there occurred the social phenomenon of delayed marriage and its resultant effect on fertility. Finally, there were paradigmatic transformations about the value of a family as opposed to singlehood. What ensued from these factors was significant socio-economic consequences for Singapore, particularly where labour needs were concerned (Straughan 2012, 1-20). Singapore is a city with limited land and natural resources, and there is a reliance on labour as a vital economic resource (Lo and Vadaketh 2014, 33). As such, the future economic robustness of this global city is dependent on variegated strategies to augment the current labour force and mitigate the shortage created by the nexus of the various factors mentioned above. These strategies range from the use of smart technology multipliers, legislations to change the retirement age, and especially the manipulation of barriers of entry for migrant workers (Lo and Vadaketh 2014,1-20). A combination of these strategies serves the pragmatic socio-political interests of this global city.

Economic promise draws migrant workers to global cities like Singapore. Migrants from South Asia, for instance, add considerably to the blue-collar labour force. They are institutionally termed ‘foreigner workers,’ and such migrant workers allow Singapore to manage its pressing economic demands (Migrant Policy Institute 2012). It is the performativity of this sub-group that this paper explores. This South Asian migrant diaspora, while economically necessary, materially acknowledged, and protected under the law, are arguably in a situation of social invisibility and are pushed to the ‘shadowlands.’ These shadowland positions result from their particularised sociocultural circumstances and historicity. They are marginalised communities in the host city, and from the lens of Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci, it is possible to recognise that their habitus and practices exclude them from hierarchical relevance in terms of the position in the field that they occupy as specific sociocultural agents. As Pierre Bourdieu attests, habitus and practices as second nature and as “embodied history” are on display in corporeal existence, and become imbued and “internalised as second nature” (Bourdieu 1990, 56). This creates self-perpetuating confidence in the majority who are the host country’s citizens about their own legitimacy, value, and position. The group perceived as subaltern is relegated to a state of invisibility (Robbins 2000, 29-31). In this circumstance, the citizens of the host country have normalised through their habitus their own distinction in the field of the city. The migrant worker does not possess the same distinction, and hence becomes subordinate within the city. The migrant from a Gramscian position lacks hegemony as the manual labour they engage in reduces their hierarchal value (Gramsci 1971, 12-14). Migrant

habitus when imbricated with the embodied practices from manual labour cannot create space for the exhibition of hegemonic agency.

Habitus, Economic Migrants, and Host-Citizens

Habitus immediately sets the South Asian migrant apart and makes him alien from the English speaking, multi-cultural, and poly-faith Singaporean population. The Singaporean socio-cultural composition is constituent of a population of majority Chinese, with Malays, Indians of all ethnic sub groups, and those of other ethnicities making up the minority of the social landscape. Thus, the South Indian migrant is part of a sociocultural landscape that is Chinese dominant, and the religious affinity to Christianity and Buddhism defines this Chinese or what can be termed 'Sinophone' group. Even when measured against the community termed 'Indian,' the religious orientation is predisposed towards Hinduism, with a minority group being Muslim or Christian. As such, the South Asian migrant is an individual who occupies the margins in terms of ethnic as well as religious orientation within the host country.

The Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) classification that is employed to identify communities in Singapore creates further displacement for the South Asian migrant. This is a classification that was inherited from the British colonialist, and the postcolonial Singaporean government retained these racialised classifications to build the macro-structure of multiculturalism that was created as a national narrative for citizens. Thus, citizens and permanent residents are given protections that stem from a racialised recognition that feeds into policies that balance the needs for these communities and groups (Turnbull 2009).

As such, the Singapore pledge, authored in 1966 by S. Rajaratnam, abjured difference, while ironically employing the lexicon of racialisation, in order to instrument a social compact for the new nation: "We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united nation, regardless of race, language or religion to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation" (Rajaratnam 1987, 16-24). The pledge served as an oral narrative of the nation and it codified the nation's aspiration for multicultural unity, while the subtext generated was problematised and ambivalent.

Cultural historian William Peterson postulates that the post-colonial Singapore government had no homogenous cultural history or memory, with which to unite its populace, except English imperialism (Peterson 2001, 12). With no common habitus (Bourdieu 1984, xxix) to coalesce the population, the Singaporean government arguably adopted a strategy that can be understood through the postulations of Anderson and Butler. As Benedict Anderson argues, the nation is "an

imagined political community” that needs to be constantly narrated through structures that are familiar and resonate with individuals (2006, 229). This echoes Butlerian notions of figuring “social life in certain imaginary ways” (Butler 2004, 28). As Judith Butler argues, the life we live as society is constructed through acts of imagination, and states are in a position to create powerful tropes with which to create a constructed coherence (Peterson 2001, 11-17). This is crucial to the way that the Singapore narrative ideologically functions to exclude subaltern migrants.

The Singapore government’s propagandised epistemology intimated unity from what John Murray Gibbon would conceive as ‘mosaic’ diversity (Gibbon 1938, 5-20), which in turn would encourage the emergence of an essentialist Singaporean national culture, ethos, and paradigm. Paradoxical to Edward Said’s admonition of the dangers of the interlocutory relationship between the state and culture (1994, xiii), the master-narrative of Singaporean multiculturalism purported aspirations to communal peace vis-a-via multiculturalism. Of course, this was to be achieved via the conduit of national policy.

Economic Migrants and Otherisation

However, the above discussed factors render the South East Asian migrant socio-culturally marginalised and impotent within the Singapore sociocultural landscape. There is instrumented and institutionalised Otherisation. There is the exclusion of all those who do not fit into the formularised and packaged identity markers that government and the polity use as indicators of their positional relevance within spatio-temporal conditions in modern Singapore. The South Asian migrant falls within the ambit of labour protection laws and the matrix of manpower and employment legislation. However, in terms of socio-cultural visibility and voice, the hypothesis of this paper is that the migrant is mute and silent. The worker’s body is silenced, and seemingly the corporeal presence of that particular person is ignored. Singaporean multiculturalism and its mosaic become prohibitive to the participation of those deemed subaltern by their economic circumstances and perceptions about detriments of their birth lottery.

The argument of this paper is that given the racialised nature of Singaporean public discourse and thinking what occurs is a conferring of ‘irreversibility’ in Singaporean society’s ‘reading of reality’ (Guillaumin 1995,30). The tendency to crystallise people and practices into seemingly essentialist categories contributes to a high degree of racial identification of people with the nature of the home country (Poon 2009,73). In this instance, the South Asian Migrant from Bangladesh is ostensibly seen to be deterministically defined by the reality of life in a home country that is still vastly agrarian and subjected to environmental vagaries of living in a river delta that is affected by El Niño and La Niña

(Van Schendel 2009,7-10). Seemingly, the South Asian migrant is rendered subaltern by their home country's economics and geography, and the fact that the home economy relies on remittances from migrants to empower its own development. This paper theorises that these factors reduce the South Asian migrant effectively to a non-entity within the sociocultural taxonomy of power and wealth in Singaporean society

Where migrant labour is concerned, the machinery of government legislation that provides right to employment, labels migrants in the blue-collar sector as 'foreigner workers' as opposed to 'foreign talent,' which is the referential term for those with more sophisticated skills and educational capital, as attested to by the 13 April 2012 summation by the Singaporean Migrant Policy Institute. This hierarchical classification further 'Otherises' the South Asian migrant, and relegates the South Asian migrant and their corporeality to the margins where freedom to express agency is concerned.

In addition to the above, the South Asian migrant is rendered mute by hyper-reality and its magnification of the stereotype of the South Asian as a subaltern from a home country in perpetual need of international aid, humanitarian relief and/or development aid. The incessant media imaging that shows the crisis of the river delta and the displacement of peoples in the home country due to geographical brutalities (Van Schendel 2009, 1-30) inures rather than gains the sympathy of Singaporean society. The overriding imaging that is offered is of the South Asian as victim with reduced agency. As such, this enhances the predilection to consider the South Asian migrant as the Outsider and the reified Other. As Georg Lukas argues about reification: "the universality of the commodity form is responsible both objectively and subjectively for the abstraction of the human labour incorporated in commodities" (1974, 86-88). As such, the South Asian migrant is objectified and reduced from possessing and meaningfully inhabiting hegemonic space in the city.

Space, Occupation, and Economic Migrants

Within this context, there is a delineation of urban space within the city to create acceptable 'zones of occupation' where the South Asian migrant diaspora in Singapore are given state-legitimised locales for domicile and congregation. Ostensibly, these spaces are the areas for self-actualization and self-definition. In select zones of the island, barrack-style dormitories are created to house migrant workers. These facilities are run by private contractors, and while the conditions are legally compliant, the facilities are spartan and utilitarian. The South Asian migrant is zoned out of sight in sites away from the nexus of power. The South Asian migrant who is muted is also on a scale made invisible, reduced, and rendered shadowy by their removal from the public places of the Singaporean's day-to-day existence. The movement from these work dormitories to the places of

power of citizens is controlled and regulated. Parametered access, employer mandated curfews and limited days off per month further circumscribe the spaces and the temporality of the interaction between the citizen and the migrant. This amounts to a subtle codifying of what can be termed a Gramscian ongoing-hegemonic struggle between races and genders for visibility, space and control (Gramsci 1971, 12-13, 181).

In this instance, where the opportunity presents itself, the migrant tendency to congregate with others with the same perceived habitus, draws the South Asian migrant to places in Little India, Singapore. This was once a traditional enclave created for the Indian community as part of colonial divide-and-rule policies. Historically, such policies prevented collusion between the different racial groups through a process of almost segregated living, where different community subgroups were encouraged to reside in areas like Geylang for the Malays, Chinatown for the Chinese and the Serangoon area for the Indians (Turnbull 2009). This area in Serangoon known also as Little India still retains this historical essentialism in terms of its racial composition. However, currently there is the conflation of other ethnicities living within this dense urban topography. Housing Development Board (HDB) public housing has been built in this area, as part of the strategy to maximise space for accommodation in land-scarce Singapore. However, it is in, among, and within this community that the South Asian migrant seeks a place, as ostensibly Little India still appears less alienating than other spaces in the city. This paper argues that these conditions create a nexus where migrant performativity derives importance.

The invisible diaspora, in both formal and informal circumstances, overtly and covertly, consciously and subconsciously, creates performance in order to assert their own position within, and in spite of, the hegemonic parametering of the relational space for migrants and citizens.

Societally, the migrant is marginalised in speech, and in terms of visibility is denied the space for the expression of self. This paper theorises that the South Asian migrant community employs the body gesturally, wherever possible, in defiance of impediments to self-actualisation that occur on a day-to-day basis, coding that the “subaltern can speak” (Spivak 1988, 271-313). Weekend congregation occurs in civic spaces in the Little India locale, and these take on the air of spontaneous festival as large numbers assemble to connect with brethren, and to form communal networks that are denied space in the work-day world. In defiance of the citizens of the host country and their gaze, the south Asian migrant unconsciously acts to claim space in a Gramscian hegemonic struggle (Gramsci 1971, 181) that flies in the face of the well-ordered arrangements of normative behaviour favoured by the state conditioned citizenry. In defiance of a surveillance culture wherein behaviour is curtailed to normative standards of propriety, acclimatised through strict rules on loitering,

assembly, and littering, the amassment of the South Asian migrant is marked by an energetic display of disregard. Where the diasporic community gathers, there is noise and a palpable presence that leaves behind debris. Pedestrian pathways and parks and civic green in the locale, become crowded as South Asian men in gestures of brotherly affection, hold hands displaying rural habitus, in opposition to the more staid behavioural practices of the Singaporean. These occurrences on a weekly basis have gained the gaze of the non-migrant community within the locale, and have an audience vis-a-vis the national press and the Internet. There is an invitation to look and to spectate. This amounts to the performative corporeal declaration of existence in defiance of the conditions of cloaking, masking, and the removal from the public view that the South Asian migrant is subject to. The yardstick of economic success that the global city adheres to makes this one of a variety of opportunities to contest the reification and the objectification of the migrant self. Those without hegemony and cultural capital as Bourdieu would deem it, engage in contestation on the margins, in order to broadcast the legitimacy of the self (Robbins 2000, 32-35).

Embodied and Corporeal Performativity by Economic Migrants: 'Happenings' and 'Events'

The performative phenomenon identified above would be pedestrian and synchronic if viewed in isolation. However, the spectrum of responses that has resulted between the performing body of the migrant, and the gaze of the host audience, is noteworthy. The constellation of responses include sympathetic affect from Singapore based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who variously have sought to create discourse with migrants in order to create some borderline assimilation. These include small attempts to hold Augusto Boal inspired forum performances for migrants by migrants that express the challenges of economic migration and socio-cultural displacement. Baz Kershaw reminds that Forum Theatre in theory and practice, "encourages as many spect-actors as possible to intervene directly on stage as part of the investigation of an oppressive social situation." In this form, there is the spect-actor who intervenes, the joker who moderates and frames the action, the performative action consists mostly of the intervention, and the subsequent talk-back with the spect-actor is devoted to framing and evaluation of what the intervening spect-actors are attempting to embody (Kershaw 1992, 13-41). This enterprise, however, proved to have limited reach, as the effect was restricted to those already involved in and committed to social activism. Hence, this does not discount the on-going occurrences of migrant performativity in public spaces.

Fundamentally, the larger Singaporean host audience invited, as it were, to spectate, is not homogenous. On a spectrum, there is the gaze of officialdom of town councils and law enforcement that has been fueled by the impulses of surveillance, and the migrant is thus prone to more

suspicion. There is also what appears to be the unblinking gaze of the generalist-viewer, the average Singaporean, and this gaze hints at the detached and unaffected audience who is feared in formal theatrical situations, and which Helen Freshwater explores in her book *Theatre and Audience* (2009, 43-47). When the same hypothesis is applied to the performative observation of the migrant, the scrutiny of the migrant by the citizen-audience takes place with a disengaged and disaffected stare, and this affords the migrant little sympathy or understanding. As such, the variation of responses, and particularly the majority indifference as elucidated above, results in the promulgation of subterranean tensions and resentments.

Where these tensions are not reflexively interrogated, the body's demand for acknowledgement produces 'happenings.' Borrowing the term coined by Alan Kaprow about the concept of staged episodic encounters from performance art (Kaprow 2003, xxix), this paper argues that the migrant body becomes bolder in order to create the desired affect and elicit a response.

On 14 November 2014, as reported in the Singaporean *The New Paper*, South Asian and Sub-continent Indian migrants poured onto the streets of Little India in a spontaneous unbridled display of festivity. At the occasion of Diwali, public buses down a central transport vein were blocked as South Asian migrants, alongside their Sub-continent Indian counterparts, danced in a carnivalesque manner, and momentarily occupied the state delineated spaces symbolic of the efficiency of the Singaporean state. The free flow of transport, and the reputation of the city as set apart from the rest of traffic snarled South East Asia, was momentarily challenged by this 'happening.' This 'happening' was ignored by the authorities as an aberration since it was accompanied by an air of exuberant good will.

However, on 8 December 2013, Singapore's first riot in forty years took place in the same Little India locale. The last post-independence riot over racial issues had occurred in 1969. In the 2013 instance, as reported by the Singaporean *The Straits Times*, an altercation between a bus driver and a South Asian and/or a subcontinent migrant resulted in inflammatory effects. As reported by the major newspapers in Singapore, *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper* and *Today*, within hours, there was the fatal death of a migrant under the wheels of the bus and clash between the police and four hundred migrants of various ages and from Indian and Bangladeshi origin (9 December 2013). The violence intensified as the emergency services and first responders at the scene also became the target of the anger of the rioters. The resultant damage before the riot was subdued included destruction to civic property, the burning of police cars and ambulances, injury to both migrants and first responders, and the shut down of parts of the Little India area. Archival newspaper research from Singaporean and international papers namely *The Straits Times*, *Today*, *The Guardian*, *The New*

York Times and *The Wall Street Journal*, dated from 8 to 18 December 2014, all attest to the unexpectedness of the event.

The above amounts to a happening transformed to what Slavoj Žižek would term ‘an Event.’ This paper draws upon Slavoj Žižek’s hypothesis of ‘an Event’ to adumbrate the understanding of the riot. Žižek argues “an event is at its purest and most minimal, something shocking, something out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things: something that emerges out of nowhere, without discernable causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation” (2014, 2). In such ‘an Event’ as the Little India riot, there is rupture as well as the perception that the state of affairs pre- and post-occurrence, will be at sharp odds with one another. What transformed was the frame of observation with which outward events were gazed at thenceforth, as well as the self-reflexivity with which variegated human lives were assessed.

In this instance, the confidence with which government and polity assessed the security of the state, and the confidence in both economic as well as sociocultural processes were undermined. The Singapore government convened, on 13 December 2013, the Committee of Inquiry (COI) on the little India Riots. The COI was tasked with ascertaining the causes of the riot, and making recommendations for areas of improvement including migrant worker legislation and working conditions. The COI presented its complete public report on 27 June 2014, and this is available for public access on the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs Website (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2014). As such, Žižek’s postulations about ‘an Event’ and the ensuing metamorphosis that occurs, are relevant. In this instance, what has transformed is the fundamental appraisal of the relationship between the host city and the migrant. Government, employers, citizens, and migrant workers were subject to scrutiny of their attitudes, values, views, and estimations with regards to each other. In essence, this reflexivity has resulted from the riot, an act of performativity embodied by South Asian migrants.

The dispossessed invisible migrant diaspora leaves discernable footprints, and the demands of the migrants’ corporeal and embodied presence needs to be noted. The argument of this paper is that the corporeal performativity of migrants is indicative of the potential for volatility that exists when global cities are negligent of the problems created when they host migrant workers but pay insufficient attention to the harms created by hegemonic imposition, and the resultant dispossession of the migrant. Migrant performativity, when heeded, creates inroads for more sociocultural inclusivity in global cities.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper investigates the circumstances of a specific global city, Singapore. It theorises interaction between economic migrants and the citizens of the host country within the space of the city, and interrogates the performative acts that South Asian migrants in Singapore engage in as part of embodied and corporeal responses and reactions to exclusion, marginalization and subordination.

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