Neoliberal Ethics:  
Capitalism as Moral Relations  
(or How we try to be Good)

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Abstract

This ethnography has two broad arguments. First, scholarship on migrant maids often emphasise maids themselves or the state. By following migrant Filipino maids in Malaysia, this ethnography draws linkages between the state to employer to activists to agency businesses. Emphasis on the brokers and translations involved and how migrant maids are heterogeneously understood, enables us to read these practices as an assemblage: emergent and fragmented. Second, moral ambiguity rules at every interstice of the maid industry. I demonstrate how whether about Nation and Race, Modernity and Motherood, Labour relations, or Ethics itself, ambiguity is inspires neoliberal interventions in various forms to purify the space.

Combining the two above points, this ethnography hopes to reveal the emergence of a capitalism and morality intertwined, or how we try to be good.
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Each chapter charts out an ambiguity I explore:

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1.

Ethnography/Me

This is my ethnography. It is about Filipino maids in Malaysia. It is about maid agencies. It is about maid employers. It is about activists. It is about business. It is about looking at the world through Anthropology. It is about Nation and Migration. It is about Class and Modernity. It is about Race and Gender. It is about Morals and Ethics. It is about Love and Capitalism. Sometimes it is kind. Sometimes it is angry. Most of the time it is somewhere in between. It is also me.

"Don’t sleep here! There are dangerous animals at night", I hear with my broken Burmese. From the inside of my tent, I see a short muscular man hurriedly approach. He makes large downward sweeping motions with his arms, then places his hands by the sides of his mouth, indicating the tusks of a wild boar.

Under the cover of darkness, I pack up my tent. And on an unmapped (by Google) dirt track sandwiched between the Shan state mountains and Moebyel Lake, I chase after the red brake lights of his motorcycle on my bicycle.

We sit cross legged in his house. "You are Malaysian! I thought you were from a different Myanmar tribe. I am of the Shan tribe." He breaks into laughter, then excitedly stands up. "Wait! I'll get my friend. He worked in Malaysia for 6 years. He is of the Kayah tribe."
Switching from Burmese to Malay makes communication a relief, but the stories I hear from him are not. He tells me about brutality from soldiers, ostracism of ethnic tribes by the central Burmese government, chronic poverty and so on. Perhaps most heartbreakingly, was that for the people who do make it out of Myanmar to Malaysia -- the people straddling the blurry boundaries of “refugee” and “economic migrant” -- what they experience in Malaysia is not so different from what they flee.

These were stories I encountered over and over during my 8 month bicycle trip across Asia in 2015. The brutality of the Malaysian migrant experience is woven into the fabric of life in the most rural communities of Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. The incredible hospitality I received stood in stark contrast to what my country had given them. Ashamed of the injustice and in awe of their kindness, I vowed to carry these stories home with me.

This is also me. According to my CareCleaner’s biography. This is a narrative based on my journal in 2015. I have also used this for job applications, for written proposals, for meeting researchers, for meeting activists, for explaining to friends, for interviews, for grants, and now for this ethnography. I try to use it a little differently here; not to convince you of who I am and what this ethnography is, but to question who I am and what this ethnography is. What does this story tell you: that I am adventurous? That I am justice-oriented? That I have some DEEP connection to this topic? It also tells you that I am NOT one of the poor victims. It also tells you that I dramatise myself as a moral agent capable of action. It also tells you that I want you to believe that I am GOOD.

This ethnography is about how we try to be GOOD.
Day 1: 1st July 2019

On my way to work, I walk through Desa Hartamas; a neighbourhood that -- until recently -- never captured much of my attention. When a sizeable portion of the low-income neighbourhood Segambut was dug up to build the affluent skyscrapers of Mont Kiara, a series of low-income housing projects was left untethered, crammed in between Mont Kiara and Desa Hartamas.

Desa Hartamas is a commercial area of two- and three-story terraces arranged in grid-like formation. It is a rapidly transforming space, now occupied by a patchwork of seedy brothels, hipster coffeeshops, old hardware stores, classy Korean restaurants, outdoor hawkers and tapak makan [outdoor Malay eatery]. Shops are built back-to-back, creating alternating large streets of shopfronts and narrow backalleys.

Peering down these alternating streets makes visible the social and spatial separation between the neighbourhood’s citizens and migrants. As I walk: Burmese workers scaling fish in the alley | Chic glass-front ricebowl restaurants by the road | Indonesians construction workers smoking cigarettes on break in the alley | A Toyota Alphard dropping a man off at the new hotel by the road.

I wrote this on my first day. The original metaphor I drew out of this spatial arrangement was how the booming economy represented by glitzy shop fronts are reproduced by invisible backalleys of migrant labour. But such a metaphor merely continues to render migrants as empty LABOUR to a faceless CAPITALIST machine. This ethnography is about how I realised that everyday life is far more confusing than that.
Introduction: Leech

In addition to Malaysia's 30 million citizens, there are an estimated two million legal and four million illegal migrants. The use of "migrant" in Malaysia is not to be confused with expatriates (often referring to White people in white collar jobs) nor *pendatang* (a politically incendiary term referring to the Malaysian-Chinese as "visitors"). "Migrants" here specifically refer to the bodies working in "low-skill" sectors, such as construction, security guards, plantation, and domestic work. They come primarily from the countrysides of surrounding South and Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines, Myanmar, etc.

Economically, Malaysia is known as one of the "Tiger Cubs" -- the second wave of industrialising Asian countries following the Asian Tigers. Government economic statistics tell us how the poverty rate has dramatically fallen from 49% in 1970 to 0.4% in 2016, household median income has multiplied six times\(^1\), all while the Gini coefficient has decreased (Department of Statistics 2016). It is undeniable that the state has done incredibly well for its citizens.

Such statistics tells us a remarkable story of increasing wellbeing, but as with any story, it is important to also ask: who benefits from this story and who is missing from it? One of the objectives of this ethnography is to fill in narratives not told by these statistics. Statistics do not tell us about the hodgepodge of migrant labourers that form a sort of new invisible -- invisible at least to my upper-class citizen eyes -- underclass. I suggest that new immigration policies and boundaries of citizenship allow the state to exclude many in Malaysia who do in fact live in poverty and precarity.

The separation between migrants and citizens in government policies and economic statistics is a cohesive pattern that encompasses everyday life too. In the public spaces where these two social worlds most visibly brush against each other -- in kopitiams, mamaks etc -- you may notice that a past time of many urbanites waiting for their food is a sort of "Guess the Ethnicity." It is a pasttime that I myself participated in growing up and continue to practice today. Much like how one would discuss the weather

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\(^1\) Adjusted for inflation: RM819 to RM5,228; Gini from 0.513 to 0.399
in the United States, K.L.-lites comment on the facial features, skin colour, language skills, fashion of migrants. She looks Indonesian. Oh but she doesn't speak Malay well. Maybe... Burmese? Do they hire Burmese at hawkers now? Yes, but she looks too dark. Yes but perhaps some of them from the south are darker. Bodies become coloured not just by the pigment of their skin, but by the associated hierarchies of possible migrant identities.

These demarcated spaces of citizens and migrants are most violently intruded upon in the spaces that migrant maids operate. Here, socially invisible bodies become so physically visible they are impossible to ignore. They intrude into the imagined sanitised, civilised spaces of Malaysian employers, and make apparent the tensions present in the relations we share with migrants. Employers become cognisant of their desperate need for maids to reproduce their everyday lives. One's individual relationship with their maid becomes a sort of mirror through which Malaysians control and express their anxieties of about being modern and moral.

**Speculating on my motives and your motives**

This ethnography is near and dear to me for three reasons: (1) my opening vignette describes my first encounter with guest workers to Malaysia. My 18-year-old self had not really seen them until I left home; perhaps their invisibility in Malaysia is no accident. The practices I write about have far reaching cascading and transnational effects implicating many across Southeast Asia. Mostly, it was just little me being shocked by the world. If I get excited about noticing things that seem obvious, it is because this shock continues to structure my feelings. (2) My parents don’t always get along. Sometimes I notice the dynamics of motherhood and domestic reproduction — the unseen work of producing people. This structures my feelings. (3) In Malaysia, narratives of global fluidity, economic progress, and regimes of flexible citizenship veil those immigrant workers who form the foundations of our “economic miracle”, but live in poverty and precarity.
I believe it should be near and dear to you for three additional reasons: (1) Logics of productivity-based citizenship are increasingly common globally, albeit in different forms. For example, the European idealism of refugee status has become increasingly guarded by immigration policies. Chinese rural and urban forms of tiered citizenry have expropriated rural knowledge to urban industries, while excluding even those rural populations who migrate to the city from benefiting. Increasing global inequality and climate change only serve to increase migration while simultaneously are generated and exacerbated by current practices of migration. (2) Notions of global universality frame our worldviews in both positive and negative ways. The model of "ethical" development and business here complicates prevailing beliefs of being "inclusive". I demonstrate how "inclusivity" is both a means of solidarity and a means of conquer. The lines are -- sorry for the anthropological cliché -- contextual, blurry, and awfully unsatisfying. (3) The growing attention to migration is commonly implicitly framed as increasing fluidity: attention to migration often focus on motives and outcomes in home and host country, while the politics and practicalities of the in-betweens are neglected. Working in an industry that operates within this in-between space, I pay close attention to the multiplicity of interlocutors who contribute to producing migrants and their experiences. By emphasising the "middlemen" in migration, I simultaneously question the singularity and hegemony of the "state" in determining outcomes, while also revealing opportunities for transformation. Attention away from a monolithic "state" towards the micro-politics of interlocutors also expands our focus to understanding how gender, class, race, and age all affect migration experiences. I think the sociological binary of structure and agency is better understood here as a web/chain of relation. Each node expresses different interests and worldviews, but they do not lie dormant as mere "fragments". Rather, through intense labours of social translation, these nodes malleably attempt to fit around and into each other, forming assemblages that produce this specific practice of migration.

Methods
I draw upon three main sources of data: participant observation, interviews, discourse from CareCleaner and the ILO. First, I spent thirteen weeks performing participant observation with a Malaysian maid recruitment agency called CareCleaner. During this time, I packaged, interviewed, and marketed for over 25 Filipino women to be maids in Malaysia. My ethnographic work with CareCleaner also took me to the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) conference in Bangkok, to policy meetings in the Philippines embassy, and to discussions with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) staff in Malaysia. I also made a short trip to the Philippines to meet with the other various interlocutors (training centres, regional agencies) who manage the social and legal process of recruiting Filipino women to work in Malaysia.

One difficult challenge in performing participant-observation at home was my ability to identify points of interest. Trying to scrutinise a place I grew up in, the flow of cultural practices felt too common-sensical. A lot of labourious mental gymnastics was necessary to continually disassociate myself from the context and defamiliarise the practices I was engaged in.

Second, outside of my work role at CareCleaner, I independently interviewed 12 Malaysian employers about their ideologies surrounding maids. These employers were found through a combination of snowball sampling and family/friend networks. It should be noted that all employers interviewed were based in Kuala Lumpur and -- by nature of being able to employ a maid -- mostly middle- and upper-class. To better understand the varieties of relationships with maids, I spread my interviews to engage not only with the primary employer (often mothers of households), but also fathers and children.

Third, I draw upon CareCleaner's online marketing material, internal documents on interview procedures, training syllabi, employer guides for managing a maid, and ILO brochures for maids. These texts do not reflect the exact practices occurring, but are useful for thinking about the logics through which management practices are understood, resisted, and defended.

**On Words**
In one of my first classes at Swarthmore, my professor told me that Anthropology in academia is a conversation. Anthropologists take up the role of the shaman/priest/teacher/computer, decoding and clarifying the "unfamiliar" into "familiar" to each other. In our ritual introductions, we conjure up "reflexivity" and "positionality" like protective wards against Reviewers. These wards are often left done and dusted in the introduction, allowing the rest of the conversation to forge ahead in safety.

This ethnography hopes to perform a deeper, more integrated engagement with my positionality. I integrate my identity through some stylistic choices. It may not read like much academic writing. A few considerations I have: (1) The Subject of this Ethnography (2) Academic style (3) Subjects and Objects (4) My winning personality

(1) The style of this ethnography is also the substance of this ethnography. Part of this commentary is on the promises of high modernity and its objective abstractions of planning and control. Unlike Scott (1998), I do not centralise high modernity in “the state”, but rather aim to demonstrate how these patterns of thinking and living are present in all of the actors we will encounter in this ethnography. Including myself. Proclamations about what is GOOD is everywhere in this ethnography. In modern styles of academic writing, every sentence is both descriptive and normative. This style hopes to put its commentary into practice.

(2) What we utter is affected by how we utter. Spending most of my fieldwork trying to scrutinise what everyone means, I think my words here should be held up for scrutiny too. I think academic style can be misleading about the objectivity of its utterances. Maybe you are a pro at discerning academic writing, but I am not. I am often fooled by academic style. As my ethnography’s opener discusses, this ethnography is a story. I try my very very best to tell a truthful story, but it is also just one story about what happened that I tell to myself. It is easy to forget that. Sometimes even I do too when writing parts of this ethnography. So, I try my best to make my storytelling obvious.

I have read arguments about how the mark of subjectivity does not undermine the value of narrative, but rather enhances it. I don’t know if I would claim that for this ethnography. It mostly seems
like a way of stating how much more truthful your (subjective) utterances are. I would however say that I try to drive this ethnography through vignettes interspersed with explications. I hope to build a visceral world through evocative language, enabling a sort of experiential and intuitive knowledge. Sometimes, this is a better way of conveying my findings.

(3) One of my struggles in writing this ethnography is figuring out my audience. As a Malaysian who has been active in this space for a few years now, but writing as a student at a U.S. institution, the question becomes: who's conversation am I participating in? Who is marked as the “unfamiliar”? I still struggle a lot with what all this academia is meant to do. My interest in this topic began as my engagement with Malaysian politics, and this ethnography — one small part of this process — is meant to contribute to this political conversation. I did not want this ethnographic project is to be "extractive" nor "abstract", rising above the world I participate in. But the truth is, these words and sheets of paper are simply not suited to be integrated into the flow of local action. I try my best to remember that ethnography is not limited to these papers; it is also my participation in the world.

(4) Sometimes I get too angry in this ethnography. Sometimes I cut others too much slack. You might disagree with me at parts (hopefully you still like me). Most of this is probably pretty boring for you. Most of this has been pretty boring for me. We might as well try to enjoy it. Maybe if I make you laugh, you might like me more. Hopefully that makes you think that I am one of the GOOD people.

Emotion is in this ethnography. Emotion drove my fieldwork and it continues to drive the writing of this ethnography. You might notice that my personality is obvious in the field notes I include. Emotions are both an important detail about what is happening and a reminder that I am part of the emotions part of the field site. Oftentimes, “this complex emotional landscape of fieldwork is lost after fieldwork when the ideal of detachment takes over” (Shreshta 2010, 51). The field sites that this ethnography reflects on is a morally and emotionally charged space. The field site is also not an isolated thing set far away. So I try to resist compartmentalising my personality and emotions in pretty vignettes. They spill across fonts across the space of the page across from me to you and you onto me.
(5) Bonus: Also, sometimes I write things in all caps. They are meant as a joke, but also not really.

**Terminology**

By this point I would expect to have already offended some sensibilities about use of the word "maid" and "foreign workers". I am aware of the desire to move away from these terminologies by MODERNS and PROGRESSIVES. However, one of the objectives of this ethnography is to question to what extent new discursive sensibilities transform relationships, and to what extent it disguises the state of affairs under new "ethical" terms.

I will continue to use "maid" and "foreign workers" to evoke that very discomfort, for the situation of maids and foreign workers in Malaysia is a very uncomfortable one. I mean exactly what I mean when I say “maids” and “foreign workers”, and that is also what most non-activists in Malaysia mean. This is the same for when I describe how I “source” for workers, or “market” them on Facebook groups. It is also simply how we talked about workers at CareCleaner. If I use the sanitised language of “review” and “recommend” in place of “source” and “market” here, they are no less political word choices. These exaggerations I am making are all kind of a joke, but also not really.

**Actors**

Here’s a list of actors I refer to for reference. You will get to know them better overtime:

**Agents:** Anybody who recruits migrant workers. Huge variation in who they are and how they source. They could be migrants themselves, they could be middlemen between training centres and official agencies, they could be a factory owner who picks up an extra migrant or two for you. Their names are normally passed informally through personal networks on Facebook and Whatsapp. Used to be illegal, but has recently been made legal.
Agencies: The government approved agent for recruiting migrant workers. Huge variation in who they are and how they source. They could be migrants themselves, they could be middlemen between training centres and other agencies, they could be a factory owner who picks up an extra migrant or two for you. They are legal.

Activists: Labour, Gender, or Migration activists, such as women shelters, legal aides, socially conscious teens, ILO staff etc.

Employers: Often middle/upper-class Malaysians. The most common stated reason maids are hired are to take care of children in young families or elderly parents.

Maids: Migrant maids come from a variety of backgrounds and countries. But do share the common position of having to manage the social perception of them as migrant women and as maids.

CareCleaner: CareCleaner is an ethical recruitment agency started in 2016. It began fully operating in 2019. It is co-owned and run by three young women in their late 20s: Vanessa, Jenny and Sara. Like myself, they are all graduates from overseas universities. I got to know them through mutual friends who knew of my interest in the migration and labour rights space. I reached out in January 2019 and worked as an intern for them during my fieldwork from March 2019 to September 2019. It is my primary field site and the primary identifier that structured my relationships with other actors during this time.

Literature Review, Theoretical Foundation, and Contributions to the Conversation

There is little substantial work on maids in Malaysia, I primarily draw upon Chin’s *In Service and Servitude* and Anderson’s *Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid?*. Other work on migrant domestic workers, such as Nicole Constable’s *Maid to order in Hong Kong* (1997) and Rhacel Parreñas’ *Servants of Globalisation* (2015) primarily focus on maid experiences at home and host country. This contributes to the literature by
filling that in-between space — the brokers who enable the "translation" of filipino women into legible commodities. Furthermore, I extend these critiques of “the state’s” migration policies by embedding these governing ideologies into individuals all along the chain of brokers.

My theoretical approach is largely informed by Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. The ambiguity of “dirt” and the desire for purification is a key concept in this ethnography. Douglas notes how pollution is always a moral matter. Purification is a recurring theme in how actors try to be GOOD. This ethnography traces how we organise our physical, social and moral worlds through the industry of migrant maids (pun intended).

David Mosse's *Brokers and Translators*, Tsing’s *Mushrooms at the End of the Word*, and also her *Friction* strongly inform my topic and approach. If Appadurai points out our imaginations of global fluidity, Tsing asks us to think of the relationship between global/local, universal/particular, and abstract/practice as frictions. Moving past "deconstruction", Mosse’s *Brokers and Translators* and Tsing’s *Mushrooms at the End of the Word* both offer a way to think about divergent interests and ideologies as assemblages.

Anthropology of Capitalism also profoundly shapes how I understand the logics in this ethnography. Aihwa Ong's “neoliberalism” and "graduated sovereignty” inform my approach to statecraft and its relationship to capital.

**Themes/Chapter Overviews**

I hope that this tunnel-visioned glimpse into the network of relationships that form the Malaysian maid industry captures your fascination as it did mine. This narrative touches on several key themes.

1. **Neoliberal State Development**

In the midst of the 1MDB controversy of 2018, Prime Minister Najib Razak issued a new legislation that allowed the direct hiring of foreign workers. Direct hiring means that any worker can be immigrated by
anyone without an agency. The rationale behind this move was to assuage political discontent following what Al Jazeera has dubbed "The world's biggest heist" where over USD$4.5 billion of public funds was stolen.

While many people I spoke to tended to fixate on this as a singular event -- a moment driven by the irrational political desperation of one man -- in actuality, it fit like a glove into a broader cohesive Malaysian history of race and labour. The dreams of rapid economic growth into a "first world" country are built upon hidden migrant labour. Both legal and illegal migrants labour and pay taxes while being excluded from most public services. They live precariously with little inalienable rights, their "citizenship" is contingent on the productive needs of the nation.

The removal of middlemen misappropriates ideologies that (in theory) seek to reintroduce social relations into economic transaction (e.g. farm to table), but instead mobilises it to extend neoliberal logic. While the state has claimed to remove the "exploitative middlemen" (and they are rightly exploitative), it has now created a new crisis where migrant recruitment is completely deregulated. A new "wild west" is created, where men on trucks scouring rural Philippines combine with untraceable agents on Whatsapp and Facebook to produce migrant maids under even more precarious and unprotected conditions. Maids now come in under dubious circumstances.

Chapter 2 provides the bulk of the historical context leading up to this moment. I write a small Malaysian history of race and labour, tracing the emergence of “race” as a category for organising labour. I trace these categories through colonial and postcolonial rule, describing how new political identities produced anxieties about nation and modernity. This sets up the groundwork for us to understand employer relations with maids.

2. Ambiguous Morals of Personal/Professional

Chapter 3 explores the logics of maid employment and management. The power relations between employers and maids are not as clear cut as we first imagine. Employers are both dependent and
threatened by maid. Many employers develop complex personal relationships with their workers, blurring the bounds of their contractual obligations to each other. This creates all kinds of moral ambiguities.

Chapter 4 explores the promise of “professionalisation” to clarify moral ambiguity. One of the recurring boundaries drawn between employer and maid was personal/professional. This boundary is operationalised by employers, activists, CareCleaner, and maids themselves in a multitude of ways. Many activists advocate for that domestic work shifts towards "professionalisation". However, this relies on an ideology whereby "professional" work is somehow more "pure" and represents two equal parties agreeing to contractual rights.

I attempt to re-colour and re-texturise "professional" work relationships as a very specific cultural arrangement of the relationship between workers and employers. "Professional" relationships are not "unmarked" and untethered, but must be read through its practices and objects. While it is true the "personal" relationships can reproduce hierarchies between employers and workers, new progressive "professional" relationships also create new hierarchies. One example is how many employers I spoke to used "professionalisation" as a way to draw boundaries to limit their obligations to workers.

3. Producing a Maid

In Chapter 5, I follow some of the ways in which CareCleaner and their Filipino business partners "produce" maids from women. The emphasis here is not actually on maids, but on the brokers and translations that enable women to be transformed into Maids. Maids are produced through what I call an assemblage line of sourcing, packaging, pricing, training, and delivery. In the process, women are made legible to employers.

4. Love/Capitalism

Many anthropologists have pointed out how the "ethical" and "social" in business often simply represents a capitalistic space-making in the market. Chapter 6 explores how CareCleaner makes many attempts to
vehemently create its identity in opposition to "traditional" and "old" recruitment agencies that are "only in it for the money". In the process of creating a new market niche for itself, CareCleaner absorbs social and political concern surrounding migrant rights and the nature of domestic work. Opposition and resistance is transformed into a selling point with dubious practical changes for worker and employer lives. CareCleaner envelops us in a language of care and feminism, assuring us that we can have our cake and eat it.

This is not the full story. Staff members enter the industry with complex religious, aspirational, and idealistic motivations. New empathetic relationships are built between employers and Filipino workers. There is no evil capitalist behind the veil. Instead, I wonder if this is -- just like "the neoliberal state" —an example of how our imaginations of "care" and "development" have become entangled with capitalism.

**TL;DR**

This thesis is about how neoliberal logics intertwine with moral practice. Ambiguity rules the migrant maid industry, and the neoliberal logics is used to purifying the ambiguous moral space. I do not solely point my finger at “the state”\(^2\), but rather take pains to describe and scrutinise many many actors in detail to demonstrate how this arrangement of relations is co-produced. I move from state institutions to employers, to activists, and finally to business in order demonstrate how neoliberal ethics is a recurring pattern of in this slice of everyday Malaysian life.

This ethnography is about how people operationalise neoliberal logics as an aspiration to be GOOD.

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\(^2\) Mitchell (1990; 1991) argues that “the state” as abstraction into political institutions neutralises political practices.
2.

Nation/Corporation

"PRIME Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has announced that the Government will revive the concept of Malaysia Incorporated (Malaysia Inc), in which Malaysia will be regarded as one huge corporation where the Government and private sector work to ensure the success of our cooperation."


Introduction

The metaphor of Malaysia Incorporated was first introduced by Tun Dr. Mahathir in 1983. The policy initiative was derived from Japan's model of development during the 70s and 80s, which Tun Dr. Mahathir greatly admired (Williamson 2002). Tun Dr. Mahathir describes Malaysia Incorporated as an economic arrangement "with the task of nation-building" whereby "private and public sectors see themselves as sharing the same fate and destiny as partners, shareholders, and workers within the same 'corporation', which in this case is the Nation" (Mahathir 1984, 2).

I am drawn to this metaphor for two reasons. One is the underlying logic that explicitly links statecraft with capitalist modes of production. Two is the consequential effect of practicing
statecraft in this way: what does it mean to envision the nation as a corporation? How does this frame our conceptions of development and progress? How are cultures and powers rearranged under these ambitions?

This chapter explores this underlying logic of statecraft and its contemporary effects through a brief historical overview using secondary sources. I want to convey three key ideas: (1) I explore the continuities in capitalistic developmental ideologies between colonial and post-colonial Malaysia. I suggest that they are entangled with state discipline and visions of modernity. Implicit here is a skepticism of the "post-" in “post-colonial.” (2) Then, I situate this Malaysian developmental ideology within contemporary global restructurings that create an international gendered division of labour (3) Finally, I demonstrate how immigration of female domestic workers and their "flexible citizenship" is key to achieving this modernity.

Race, Labour, and Production in the Colonial and Postcolonial

In public school in Malaysia, I was taught heroic narratives of Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysia's first prime minister) leading us to gain peaceful independence from our British colonisers. It was when we the people broke free from they the colonisers. Implicit in this narrative is the construction of two binaries: between us and them and between colonial and post-colonial. This construction of us/Them not only delineates separation (thus disguising the cooperations) between local elite and the British, but also subsumes the hodgepodge of ethnic and class groups in Malaysia into a shared Malaysian identity represented by this political elite.

Perhaps it is helpful to define our terms a little more strictly. In Malaysia, there is always much talk about the "colonial", but what exactly are we referring to? In the "post-colonial", what has changed and what has continued? What do we disguise when we reduce the "colonial" to
political governance by the British? To tell this story, we need to go back to the pre-colonial Malay states. The following political-economic history aims to convey three key points: (1) the cooperations between local, Chinese, and European capitalists (2) the use of immigration to arrange the frontiers of "local" society, and (3) the entanglements between disciplinary forms and capitalist production.

Sovereignty in pre-colonial Malaya was established through the control over river estuaries, and by extension the surrounding peasant-cultivated lands. These negeris (provinces/states) "establish[ed] authority over the peoples upriver... state boundaries tended to be vague and relatively unimportant, for what mattered was control of waterborne traffic, not land" (Steinberg 1987, 77). Pre-colonial society however, was not merely arranged along agriculture cultivation, but was already part of an extensive trade and migration network between the regional empires of Southeast Asia (Hirschman 1986).

European commercial interests arrived in Southeast Asia by the early 16th century. The port of Melaka was an especially important port along the India-China trade route. It was successively conquered by the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641, and then the British in 1795. The British gained full permanent oversight over the "Strait Settlements" of Penang, Singapore, and Melaka through treaties with the local rulers in 1786, 1819, and 1824. It is important to note that this was not "colonisation" per se; these early British mercantilists were far more interested in control over trade routes, and rarely intervened in the statecraft of the surrounding Malay states (Hirschman 1986).

Europeans entered a vibrant multi-ethnic society. Trade links with China were particularly important, and there were strong cooperations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Malay rulers. Motivated by labour shortages to fulfill trade demand, "traditional Malay elites and
Chinese interests worked together for mutual gain" (Hirschman 1986, 339). The rulers of Johor for example, "successfully encouraged Chinese entrepreneurship and settlement", even "appointing Chinese members to the advisory council of the state" (Hirschman 1986, 339). Tin mining areas along the western states were controlled by Malay Sultans who worked with Chinese entrepreneurs that brought in immigrant labour (Hirschman 1986). There were also many interethnic marriages, still obvious today between Chinese Babas and Malay Nyonyas in Penang and Melaka, and between Indian Muslims and Malays. These sharing of political rule, cooperation in economic activities, and interethnic marriages illustrate how in pre-colonial Malaysia, the boundaries of "race" -- the association of social identity with skin colour -- were far more porous than today. This is not to say that there were no conflicts between Chinese, Indonesians, Indians, and Malays, but "race" does not appear to have been a prominent category for constructing difference.

The 1870s was when British colonials moved inland from the ports, and began to actively intervene in statecraft. The push-factor was when the profitability of tin mining was identified in the mid-19th century. These Malay-Chinese controlled tin mines were extremely lucrative and competitive, which often sparked off in-fighting that led to disruptions in tin production (Hirschman 1986). This "constant fighting... encouraged colonial military intervention to prevent the disruption of European trade" (Chin 1998, 33). Through treaties with Malay rulers, the British moved inland to gain control of most of the peninsula from the 1870s to 1930s. The colonial system placed British advisors with each sultan. Sultans retained the symbolic position as protector of islam and Malay governance, while British colonial officers replaced the bendahara (chief ministers) and effectively took control of political decision making (Chin
Ultimately, "Malay dependence (especially of the elite class) was bought by pensions and recognition as the nominal rulers of the country" (Hirschman 1986, 343).

Under the guise of "protecting" traditional Malay lifestyles from increasing foreign presence, British colonials passed the Torren Land Laws that institutionalised private property. In the conceptual creation of "private property" is the simultaneous construction of "waste" -- material excess that is unruly and improper (Gidwani and Reddy 2011). "Waste" here is land that is "wild" and "unclaimed". This ideology enabled appropriation of "unused" land as "potential capital" in the form of "State land", which "offered an unparalleled oppourtunity to make land available... to settlers and to British and Chinese capitalists" (Nonini in Chin 1998, 34).

Spurred on by American and British industrial demand, Chinese and European capitalists doubled-down on an export-oriented economy (Hirschman 1986). The ideology of "development" at this time "was synonymous with the establishment and growth of an export economy geared toward supplying international demands for tin and rubber" (Chin 1998, 34). Malay waged-labour, however, was always in shortage. The lack of Malay interest in working mines and plantations was justified at the time (and even today) as a stereotype of inherent Malay laziness. However, as Hussein Alatas argues in his acclaimed *Myth of the Lazy Native*, the laziness stereotype was based on Malay refusal to work for Europeans. Malays, who had access to traditional fishing and agriculture, were making an economically rational choice (Alatas 1977). As a result, European and Chinese capitalists resorted to "importing" male labour from India and China.

Malays at the time were probably making the right choice, for the conditions of waged-labour in plantations and mines for new immigrants were terrible. Many new Chinese and Indian immigrants arrived as indentured workers who worked to pay back for their passage to Malaya.
Mortality rates were high and workers often ran away. Under the "divide-and-rule" strategy, the Indian and Chinese population were kept spatially and socially segregated from Malays. The only "welfare" institution that included all three races were schools for the elite to acclimate to the British (Hirschman 1986). The maintenance of these indentured and isolated Chinese and Indian immigrants enabled surplus accumulation for elite Chinese and European capitalists (Chin 1998). Notable in these dynamics of race, migration, and labour is the necessary marriage between mechanisms of political control and capitalist production. "Development" was centred around creating governance and infrastructure for export-driven capital accumulation, made possible through extensive importation of dislocated immigrants.

Following Japanese occupation during World War II, growing communist influence over labour unions "convinced the British that Malayan independence was the only viable route to sustaining capitalist development" (Chin 1998, 43). Merdeka (Independence), or the "Bargain of '57", was the alliance between British-educated elite men of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The "bargain" here was citizenship for all Chinese and Indians in return for Malay hegemony over state power. Given the delicate tensions surrounding political citizenship, the immigration gates officially closed in that same year to preserve the ethnic ratio of 49.8% Malay, 37.2% Chinese, and 11.1% Indian (Sultan Nazrin Shah 2016).

Pre-independence Malay rulers, British colonials, and Chinese capitalists were primarily concerned with maintaining racial boundaries to ensure political stability and steady labour. The post-independence context of citizenship, however, required new means of political governance and social arrangements to keep the engines of the economy turning. Below, I suggest that as Chinese and Indians entered within the boundaries of citizenship, new state policies shifted
exclusionary forms of citizenship upon a new set of immigrant labour in order to facilitate continued capitalist production.

The decade following independence merely continued the export-oriented developmental (accumulation) agenda. "Economic wealth remained primarily in the hands of European trading houses, and a small but growing number of Chinese conglomerates" (Chin 1998, 45). The British divide-and-rule legacy left the persisting identification of race with economic function in the proletariat classes. Chinese and Indian proletariats continued to perform waged-labour in urban centres while Malay proletariats were predominantly rural and agricultural. Under the Malay state elite's laissez-faire policies, Malay elites continued to cooperate with Chinese businessmen, generating widening inter- and intra-racial economic inequality (Jomo and Gomez 2000).

Criticisms of the state erupted following the May 1969 elections and subsequent "May 13th" riots. These race riots severely threatened the legitimacy of the cohesive Malaysian nation-state. In response, the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) introduced The New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 with the dual complementary aims of "eradicat[ing] poverty... for all Malaysians" and "restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to... eliminate the identification of race with economic function" (Government of Malaysia 1971, 1). The elimination of the identification of race with economic function intended to rearrange the internal heterogeneity of “local” into a cohesive supra-ethnic Malaysian identity.

As a young nation, Malaysia's "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) is not constructed upon the unidentified fallen soldiers of the past, but rather upon a vision of a faraway collective future. Williamson reads Malaysia Inc. as a form of "economic nationalism" that "obscures the distinction between politics and economics" by "defin[ing] the Malaysian national body as something primarily economic and set in the future" (Williamson 2002, 419). This movement
creates Malaysian identity not through ethnicity, but through "a person of wealth" (Williamson, 412). A key target of the NEP was the creation of a Malay capital-owning class. The NEP aimed to increase Malay corporate ownership from 2.4% in 1970 to 30% in 1990. Ironically, central to this project of "remov[ing] ethnic identification in the economy [was] by ethnicizing nearly all facets of it" (Williamson, 407). Government ethnic policies expanded to include education, credit, house ownership, employment, and so on. Malay quotas were established for scholarships and acceptance into public universities. In the government, "80 to 90 percent of civil service jobs... were reserved for Malays" (Chin 1998, 49). In the private sector, businesses required 30% of their employees to be Malay. All of these policies were designed to disassociate Malays from rural agricultural lifestyles, and assimilate them into urban middle- and capital-owning classes.

The intentions and efficacy of the NEP's race-based affirmative action policies is a perennial topic of intense debate in Malaysia. I do not enter into those debates here. Instead, what I want to point out, is that while the NEP appears as a radical shift in statecraft ideology, there are underlying continuities from "unregulated" capitalism to "state-led" capitalism. As this history has attempted to show above, the "unregulated" capitalism of pre-independence Malaya was not a "free market", but rather a specific form of race-based political governance to ensure steady capitalist production. I argue that the new "state-led" capitalism of the NEP -- implemented to respond to concerns of growing inter- and intra-ethnic inequality -- is a transformation in the methods of governance under a new context that maintains capitalist ideologies of development. As I will describe below, immigration gates were reopened in the 1980s to fill the gap left by Malaysian working classes to ensure the continued extraction of surplus value.
Williamson suggests that following Mahathir's installation as prime minister in 1981, Mahathir, under Malaysia Inc., "shifted the state's NEP aims from promoting greater Malay involvement in the economy to strengthening state ties with a wider range of the country's business community" (2002, 408). The 1980s and 1990s saw the privatisation of state assets, such as telecommunications, electricity, highways, and the post. As part of the agenda for increasing Malay capital ownership, privatisation and sub-contracting were primarily allocated to Malay politically-connected businessmen. Malaysian political economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram argues that here, the NEP “associate[ed] improved interethnic relations almost exclusively with reduced interethnic disparities among the respective business communities and middle class.” (Jomo 2004, 19). Thus, not only generating greater ethnic resentment and suspicion, but also excluding the rest of the Malay population from NEP benefits.

Government attempted to create a supra-ethnic national identity through economic redistribution, but as Malaysian citizenship became increasingly identified with class, a fundamental contradiction arose: the working class became caught between choosing economic participation or national identity. For government, it would be political suicide to undermine the NEP's urban middle-class policies by encouraging rural Malays to be agricultural workers. The declining supply of low-waged labour threatened export-oriented industries such as palm oil, rubber, and crude oil, by extension threatening the Malaysian national project.

So in the mid-1980s, the immigration gates were once again reopened. It is telling that the immigration gates opened as unemployment peaked. Unemployment in the 1980s peaked at 8.3% in 1986 as "the youth... are not prepared to undertake [plantation and agricultural jobs] and prefer to migrate to urban areas in search of better jobs" (Ministry of Human Resources 1988, 2).
Class-based national identity created the perception of "appropriate labour" for Malaysians, made distinct from labours performed by "proletarian immigrant workers [that] put numerous Malaysians in the role of management" (Williamson 2002, 413).

Today, immigrant labour is still employed in export industries, such as palm oil plantations, microchip factories, and farms. They also make up a large part of the construction sector and, of course, domestic work. These labours are marked not only by racial demarcation (such as during pre-independence Malaya), but now also include more extensive forms of discipline, such as citizenship, visas, and the enforcement to arrest and deport. The logic often employed for technologies of documentation is to provide greater protections for immigrants, but this logic is similar to colonial administrators hoping to protect and preserve "traditional" Malay ways of life; the effect is a means of exclusion.

The ideology of "modernisation" in development has continued albeit under new expanded formulations of "modernity" — from industrialisation to the symbolic forms such as appropriate households (Chin 1998) and the incorporation of women into waged-labour. Chin argues that migrant domestic workers are essential to Malaysia's 'modernity' project. She centralises individual aspirations for 'modernity' within state constructions of consent that define modernity via consumption (1998). One example is pointed out by Aihwa Ong who suggests the Malaysian government produced a new "reformed islam" to suit middle-class productive sensibilities and generate further integration into the global economy (1999, 227).

Chin's argument about the how “modernity” is produced is largely top-down. My only note is that we should be wary of reproducing “modernity” as a break from the past. We do that by drawing how “historical” practices converge to produce new “modern” practices. Chin herself
notes how, in the case of Chinese employment of maids, amahs and mui tsai are a key explanatory factor for the use of maids over daycare centres (1998).

My own interviews with employers often revealed similar narratives of fashioning middle-class identity through domestic workers. Domestic workers were not only pragmatic necessities for women to work full-time jobs, but distance was also created against 'traditional' housewife roles. This is discussed in chapter 3.

This historical narrative highlights three key points: (1) The continued cooperations between Malay, Chinese, and European capitalists. Many scholars of postcolonialism (Stoler 1989, 2013; Appiah 1991; Rao 2013; Spencer 1997) argue that it is crucial to examine the internal social distinctions of colonial authority, and point out how the categorical boundary between "colonial" and "post-colonial" is misleading. It is in this spirit that I have centered class and race in our analysis of "colonisation". During pre-independence Malaya, Malay rulers sold political power to Europeans in exchange for pensions and protections, while Malay-Chinese owned tin mines imported labour to feed European demand. The story of independence I was taught in school acts as a national project for local elites to disassociate from this history of class and race.

(2) The use of immigrant labour to maintain the frontiers of "local" society. The rationale of biologically inherent Malay Laziness meant that capitalists never needed to confront the differentials between working in subsistence agriculture and working in waged-labour. It not only pushed capitalists to import indentured and disempowered labour from India and China, but also justified exclusionary land laws to "protect" and "preserve" the inferior Malay race from foreigners. These preservations of Malay subsistence lifestyle prevented Malays from growing competing cash crops.
Post-independence provided political citizenship to Chinese and Indians, which necessitated new understandings of "local". Vision 2020 posits our national identity in a shared future, when Malaysia will be "a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one ‘Bangsa Malaysia’" (Mahathir 1991). Williamson suggests that the Malaysian citizen became defined as "a person of wealth" (2002, 412). Changing norms and ideas of modern citizenry saw declining participation in “traditional” sectors such as farming. In the 1980s, immigration gates selectively reopened to temporary labour to continue capitalist production without jeopardising the Malay-Chinese-Indian ethnic balance of Malaysia.

(3) The entanglements of discipline, development, and capitalist production. Malaysians are often referred to as rakyat (subject) rather than warganegara (citizen). Rakyat is an appropriate term for thinking about the how the people who live in Malaysia have been understood by the various colonial and postcolonial state apparatuses. This historical narrative emphasises how a racialised labour force was generated through institutions of debt, state enforcement, and education. The development of the political institutions worked in parallel with the development of capitalist production.

Bearing these three features in mind, we leave Malaysia to lightly touch on the contemporary international division of labour.

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3 Introduced in 1991 by Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, it calls for the nation to be a first world industrialised nation by 2020. A five minute drive from my house is a large garden by the highway, its bushes arranged to spell "Wawasan 2020"; a daily reminder for all us commuters.

Overcoming our racialised past is part of our shared future. The first of the 9 challenges set up in Vision 2020 is to be "territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ [Malaysian race; emphasis added]" (Mahathir 1991).
International Division of Labour

Oishi (2005) suggests that the global restructuring of the business and labour is pushing more and more women to migrate for work abroad. She suggests four transformations that facilitate this: increasing middle-class women in the workforce demands migrant caregivers, increasing work pressures and overtime requiring the outsourcing of domestic work, the 'new rich' in developing countries who demand domestic workers, ageing populations with poor welfare, and the global sex industry.

Oishi identifies that the international division of labour by gender is not just a matter of THIRD WORLD WOMEN working in the factories of industrialised countries. In fact, temporary migration within the THIRD WORLD was far more significant for the global economy. Rather than attempt to write a big Theory about why labour is gendered, I will focus on the Philippines. Oishi’s case study of the Philippines begins with the devastation from wars against Spain and the United States. American colonial policy dislocated those in the rural subsistence economy for export agricultural production, and many farmers began emmigrating to work in plantations in the Hawaii and California. Informal emmigration continued through independence in 1946 until it was institutionalised by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1974. The intention was to reduce domestic unemploymen and improve the balance of payments by creating official channels for remittances. Filipino emmigration became increasingly feminised in the 1980s, doubling from 18.0 to 36.3% between 1980 and 1987 (Oishi 2005, 64). Abuse cases abroad led to increasing gendered interventions in emmigration under the Aquino and Ramos administrations. Under President Ramos, migration became perceived as “something it should try to ‘manage’ rather than control” (2005, 68).
More recently under President Arroyo, migrant women became painted as “Overseas Filipino Investors” to emphasise their economic contributions (2005, 68). Encinas-Franco argues that this celebration of Filipino workers as *bagong bayani* (new hero) acts to downplay the Filipino state’s role as a labour exporter. In chapter 5, I discuss how sacrificial motherhood is a key theme for women going abroad. Decisions to emmigrate are not only individualised, but also feminised through state policy and notions of motherhood.

In these "dislocations" under capitalism, rather than stripping away identity like in a Marxian factory, the Malaysian and Filipino states exploit gendered and racial identities to institutionalise and re-inscribe disciplinary power through employment relations. By utilising frameworks of race, nationality, and gender, actors operating through neoliberal state development are able to more tightly discipline and regulate the bodies of labour for “efficiency”. Neoliberal here refers to Aihwa Ong’s “neoliberalism — with a small n… as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and non ideological problems that need technical solutions” (2006, 3).

**Flexible Citizenship / Graduated Sovereignty**

Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* (1944) identifies the social dislocations generated by capitalism's appropriations (1944). In this vein, many social scientists have identified the increasing frequency of dislocation and the increasing "flexibility" of capitalism over time (Ho 2009; Madanipour 2018; Ferguson 2005).

Ong's *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) looks at the Chinese Diaspora in the U.S. and Southeast Asia. “Flexible citizenship” is a new mode of experiencing citizenship guided by economic rather than political allegiance. Facilitated by accrual of "a range of symbolic capitals
that will facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, ad cultural acceptance across geographical sites" (Ong, 8), Ong suggests that for "those most able to benefit from their participation in global capitalism... flexibility, migration, and relocations... have become practices to strive for rather than stability" (Ong, 19). The underside of this coin is “graduated sovereignty”, which she explores more in *neoliberalism as exception* (2006).

Immigration of new labour from surrounding countries to Malaysia is tightly controlled. The metaphor of nation as corporation fits neatly into Ong’s arguments about “graduated sovereignty” (1999, 2006), whereby “emerging countries… are compelled to be flexible in their conception of sovereignty [in order to be] relevant to global markets” (2006, 76). This graduated sovereignty is not the withdrawal of the state in response to global forces, but rather a “neoliberal rationality [that] treat[s] populations in relation to global market forces” (2006, 76). In order to maximise economic performance, labour is managed through a graduated sovereignty. Unlike Chinese diaspora, foreign workers in Malaysia do not profit from increasing flexibility. Instead they are constantly excluded through flexible citizenship.

**Conclusion**

I hope to have provided the context for why Prime Minister Najib Razak’s move to introduce direct hiring fits into this broader cohesive Malaysian history of race and labour. Economic and political development in Malaysia has always been deeply tied to the construction of race to generate labour for production. Contemporary immigration follows this logic albeit with the additional mechanisms of citizenship. Citizenship rights is often used as an inclusive term, but in actuality enables the Malaysian state to utilise graduated sovereignty to exclude and demarcate obligations to provide rights.
Deregulation has produced a new "wild west" of migrant maid recruitment. Migrant maids enter under even more precarious and unprotected conditions. At this "wild west" frontier, legality and illegality blur to work in cooperation. For brokers, the greatest profits are found in these spaces of greatest uncertainty. In chapter 5, I follow one particular chain of ethical brokers that produce migrant domestic workers. But in order to explore their logics, I must first explore the concerns of their customers, more specifically the ambiguous morals of maid management experienced by employers.
3.

Threat/Dependence

I meet Donario at a mamak. Donario is a 25 year old videographer who had recently graduated from a prestigious U.S. university. He grew up with a single working mum, and was raised by a Filipino maid, Mariajose, until he was 14 years old. He had reconnected with Mariajose in the last 4 years, and just returned from a week-long visit to her in the Philippines. He calls Mariajose his second mother while she calls Donario her anak (son).

C: Do you ever anticipate or see a time in your life where there would be someone like Mariajose come in again [as a maid]?

D: I guess it depends on a lot, and I really can't say no. I guess what I can say is that I still feel... like I don't know how to wrap my head around it... I would feel strange bringing in a maid. Partly its that unease of, you know, social standings. I don't know whether it's true or not. But like, I still feel like there's still that weird power dynamic where... I would feel strange even if I say "Oh you're part of the family". But then at the same time, it's like a job opportunity for them.
Maybe part of the unease that I feel is well... it just sounds like a nice way of saying modern day slavery. Despite going through all my childhood experiences, and knowing that's not what it necessarily means, I still have that connotation in my head.

C: Right. But it's tricky. I think it's a really easy narrative to say, "It's modern slavery. It's commodification, we buy them we throw them away when we're done." But... just like a story like yours... which, I mean, I have spoken to a lot of people who have different flavors of the same story, but basically it's... it's hard. It's much more complicated than that, right? You wouldn't call Mariajose your modern day slave, right?

D: No, but you're right. There is a discrepancy between my own personal experience and the fact that, I still in my head have that stereotypical connotation. Its all very much embedded in my thinking although my experience is totally opposite. [pauses in thought]

I think part of it is also like how one of us can go, "Oh was it difficult? Being young and being away from home for so long, so far?" And I think for me having that expectation of Mariajose coming up with some sort of, [mimicking her] "Oh, yeah... It's so difficult..."

C: Like a sob story?

D: Yeah. Which I am sure is for many people, but I think for me having that expectation maybe speaks more about myself. That I have this connotation ingrained in my head that... "Oh, it's this sob story. It's exploitative". Whereas
for her, it's just, that's just how things are. And that's just life, and she saw an
opportunity and she went for it. And it wasn't always perfect, but it's fine.

Introduction: Context and Representation

I grew up with a maid at home, and describing what that means to audiences here in the United States is always a precarious conversation. Inevitably, someone squints their eyes, and nervously points out, "Isn't that kind of like slavery?". To many families in the U.S., maid employment seems like an antiquated practice of servitude. Either Malaysia is some backwards ("cultured" for our progressive friends /s) feudal land, or I am a "crazy rich asian" living in some lavish tropical manor, serfs scuttling to offer me my hibiscus tea as I roar up the driveway in my white Land Rover.

To be fair -- as Donario himself remarks -- even in Malaysia, the migrant maid industry is occasionally framed as a form of modern-day slavery. There are many practices that are horribly destructive: debt-bondage, withholding of passport, withholding of phone, physical abuse, rape, and so on. But there are also many employment situations in which these do not hold true: many employers develop complex personal relationships with their workers, and blur the bounds of their contractual obligations to each other. Employers fund scholarships for their maid's children, vacation together, provide loans, pay for healthcare, share meals and so on. A recurring ideal -- asserted by both employers and maids -- is to be "treated as family". As anthropology of family and exchange tells us, being "treated as family" is, of course, not without its exploitations (Anderson 2016; Scheper-Hughes 2007), but it is also not without its beauty.

The objective here is not to confirm or deny comparisons with slavery; doing so not only denies/flattens the historical specificity of the slave trade, but also narrows our understandings of
migrant maidhood in Malaysia. It would be both an intellectual and representational disservice of me to paint these practices in the blacks-and-whites of SLAVERY. Instead, as Geertz (1972, 1973) suggests good ethnography should do, I attempt to describe the internal cultural logics of employer-worker relations and practices, and pay respect to the ways my interlocutors dissect and make sense of this world.

My role here is not to "decode" employer-maid relations into functionalist logics of power, and cry out: INJUSTICE. To me, Anthropology's obsession with POWER\(^4\) often feels like a new form of ethnocentrism, where "any meaningful attempt to understand and interpret another culture is abolished" (Johnson 2007, 801). We lose so much if every reading is reduced to power. But neither does "paying respect" to my interlocutors' meaning-making mean moral relativism nor absence of power; rather "paying respect" here is -- as Abu-Lughod (2002) asks us to do -- to move past a "rhetoric of salvation" (2002, 788), and navigate ethics through this specific historic circumstance that I now share with my interlocutors.

All my interviewees were reflective, actively "decoded" their own experiences, and were cognisant of the indeterminate shifting morals and structures of employer-maid relations. Our conversations were often collaborative attempts to help each other make moral sense of the world. For example, in the passage above, we can see Donario shift through a variety of ambiguous moral frames: maids as family \(\rightarrow\) maids as modern day slaves \(\rightarrow\) maids as employees (receiving job opportunities) \(\rightarrow\) an introspection of his stereotype of Mariajose being a pitiful character.

One of the recurring battlegrounds for negotiating the appropriate employer-maid relationship was between "personal" and "professional". Employers used both these terms as

\[4\] A caricature, but: POWER that only comes in one singular form, and MUST be equal/absent between all parties otherwise it is OPPRESSION.
ways to create appropriate boundaries between themselves and their maids. Maids selectively played upon both these ideologies to attain better situations. The ethical recruitment agency I worked for, CareCleaner, was also a strong advocate for "professionalisation" in theory, but in practice and in conversations with employers and maids, understood the personalised nature of maid employment. On the other hand, most INGOS and local NGOs, such as the ILO and World Bank advocated for rights-based professionalisation. Professionalisation appears as a neutral relationship, transcendent/objective/abstract above the dirty world of "old fashioned" and "traditional" ways of managing maids.

This chapter aims to wholeheartedly and empathetically represent the nature of employer-maid relations, and how both identities co-create each other. I discuss how class and motherhood are intertwined with maid employment, before moving into how gifting, surveillance, and dependence produces the patterns of employer-maid relationships we see today. The idea is to move beyond an angry functionalist account of power and resistance, and provide a more ambiguous narrative of this ecosystem. We are perhaps better placed to think about professionalisation and its illusions of moral clarity if we first understand the moral logics of employer-maid relations.

Speaking about maids

In this chapter, I primarily draw upon the 12 recorded interviews I had with employer families. I found participants through my own family and social network; through a combination of direct Whatsapp messaging, facebook posts, and snowball sampling. Experience with maids were informed by gendered and seniority in the family, so I spread my interviews to separately interview fathers, mothers, and children in the household. Economically, the families I
Threat/Dependence

interviewed were ranged from lower-middle to upper-class. Although -- as I will discuss below -- employment of a maid itself operates as a symbolic marker of the middle-class attainment.

Speaking about maids always seemed like a cathartic experience, especially for mothers, who are often given sole charge of maid management. Venting about agencies and maids was a sort of gossip. Gossip was both a means of relating, but also a means of determining the moral ambiguities of maid management. My conversations with employers about maids often turned into a sort of arena for assessing and displaying one's moral credentials. Many interviewees simultaneously tested my politics as they asserted their morals. Soon Eung, a mother in her 60s performs her moral practice through financial gifts. It is important that her morals are enhanced by taking pity upon someone else's maid:

SE: So even like this, my aunties maid's birthday, so I told my auntie, "You wrap her an angpow. Maybe RM200." [SE sits back and declares] She's happy.

C: Yeah

SE: Maybe I am too lax [laughs] Why can't I? It is just my nature. I cannot... I cannot mistreat anybody. I feel the guilt would kill me.

Trust did not appear a difficult problem. I was a young adult seeking advice from the expertises of Malaysian motherhood, and many mothers wanted to prepare me for the rigours of maid management. Furthermore, it was often assumed that I shared many of the logics of maid management; and in truth, I probably do. Many key concerns were familiar to what I grew up listening to from friends, relatives, and my own mother. Maid employment and management ties together all of our families into a sort of shared lifestyle and worldview: similar push factors to
employ a maid, similar interactions with recruitment agencies, similar lifestyles enabled through migrant maid labours. Thus, while trust through assumed shared identity was easy, the opposite immediately became difficult: the interpretive work of disentangling myself from my own assumed logics. A clear example of how this affected my research was my internalised taboo of not asking to speak directly to an employer's maid. It feels too deep a violation of privacy, that it never crossed my mind as a possible course of action, until looking back today. For good or for bad, assumptions such as that directed the course of my research, the people I spoke to, the questions I asked, and the questions I did not ask.

While I did not directly speak to any of my employer interviewees' maids, I did have substantial interactions with Filipino maids independently and with CareCleaner. This chapter also draws upon a smaller sample of interviews and conversations I had with Filipino maids. Only three interviews have audio records, while my many other conversations are noted through my field notes.

Class and Modernity

As argued in chapter 2, the supra-ethnic Malaysian national identity is built upon disassociating from a racialised traditional colonial past and building upon a forwards vision of middle-class modernity. Unlike Anderson's unknown soldiers' tombs of the past (1983), Malaysian nationality is embedded in a -- yet to be attained -- shared future of first-world modernity (Wiliamson 2002). Chin, the most prominent anthropologist on migrant maidhood in Malaysia, argues, "the service and servitude of foreign female domestic workers result from, and contribute to, the modernity project of nurturing the continued growth of the Malaysian middle classes, and legitimising the form of the middle-class nuclear family... as the foundation of and for a modern multiethnic
Threat/Dependence

polity" (1998, 16). In the maid-employing home, the intertwining of modernity and middle-classhood produces all kinds of paradoxes and tensions. Chapter 2 laid out this argument for the intertwining of national identity, class, and modernity through historical overview of migration and government policies. To extend the argument, this section demonstrates these entanglements through the discourse and practices in employer-maid relations.

The only interviewee who pointed out maids as a symbolic marker of class was Donario. Tellingly, Donario was the only interviewee who was not economically middle- or upper-class; he was a sort of inside-outsider in this respect. Discussing why he calls Mariajose his "second mother" rather than his "maid":

**D:** Especially when I talked to other people about it, I think I always kind of have to [use "second mother" or "sister" instead of "maid"]. ["Maid"] has that sense of... some sort of superiority or something.

**C:** Superiority over the maid or superiority in terms of your status?

**D:** Just status in general, sort of like societal status. And then couple with that, it often comes with this sense of trying to like justify it, and maybe downplay it.

**C:** Right.

**D:** I think for me part of it is because my mom was white, so people always assume EXPAT. They assume we're from a wealthy family. Then I always feel like... like no, my mom worked three jobs. The reason we had a maid is because she didn't have enough time, and it wasn't easy and all that. So part of it is my own insecurity that made me think of it like that.
Donario tinkered with perceptions of his class by changing Mariajose's role from his "maid" into his "second mother". The basic reading we can make is that having a maid implies a middle-class position. But look a little closer, and Donario did not deny having help, but circumvented class meanings by framing Mariajose as a "second mother". This tells us it is not just having help per se that determines middle-classhood, but -- as Chin (1998) argues -- having the correct kind of nuclear family structure. Having a "second mother" does not fit into the modern nuclear family described by Chin in Chapter 2, and more closely identifies with the "traditional" family forms that included relatives, "amahs", or "mui tsais".

None of the upper-class employers I spoke to suggested maid employment as a marker of economic class, and neither did I prod them about it. However, class is experienced not only by wealth, but by a lifestyle (cultural capital) of modernity. Almost all employers, on their own initiative, vocalised their distinction and implied their superior rank through their "modern" lifestyles. One telling conversation I had was with Soon Eung:

**C:** Now that your kids no longer live at home, why do you still need a maid?

**SE:** You know, I have been a working woman all my life... I need her so I can work. Otherwise, who's going to be at home? If the postman comes... need to sign, you need someone. If I have friends who want to drop things off, you need someone. Cleaning is also important, you know? You look at me, I can't get on the floor and scrub. Our bodies aren't built like theirs.

Two sorts of womanhood are produced here. The aspiration for a "modern" egalitarian Malaysian workforce is only made possible through the substitution of maids into "traditional" womanhood.
The contradiction is explained away by the construction of innate difference. Soon Eung asserts, "Our bodies aren't built like theirs". Using "our", Soon Eung includes me in the superior species of middle-class moderns. She locates the difference between us and them in the body. The body here is not necessarily racialised, but rather one that is marked by industrious primitivity versus intellectual modernity.

Motherhood

As women left "traditional" domestic spaces in search of "modern" workplaces, they still retained mothering responsibilities. For all mother employers I interviewed, they claimed parenting (and to a lesser extent cooking) in motherhood while playing down housecleaning. While mothers were no longer expected to perform house duties, they were "elevated" to a managerial role over maids. In all my interviewee's households, mothers took on maid management. Samuel, a father in his late 40s, lays out the gendered process of recruitment:

C: Are you heavily involved in the hiring and managing? Who takes up that role in your family?

S: The way I approach it -- and not necessarily how my family approach it -- is that the technical side of it, so administration, paperwork, financials I handled, but the selection has to leave to the women of the house. Whether they like the person. That selection process is up to them. I don't pay a huge role... usually I go with their gut feel. It was weird. Weird meaning... not something that my wife wanted to do. But I insisted on it, because they should select who they feel, because they are going to work with the person.
C: Right. So you say, the women of the house would choose, because they're the ones who stay at home?

S: Yeah they interact. They have that intuition I believe, to be able to see or read between the lines.

Samuel's recruitment process reflects the public/private separation of men and women. As a man, Samuel took on the administrative and financial role, while insisting -- against her wishes -- that his wife, Jo, choose the maid. The rationale was based on gendered roles in the household ("they are going to work with the person") as well as an innate female "intuition" to understand other women (the maids).

One way to read this is the delegation of BURDEN upon women of the household, however, many women I spoke to giggled at the prospect of men managing maids. Mei Loong, a mother of three in her 50s, blurs, "You think its so easy meh? [laughs] I don't think he can survive". Home management was the realm of expertise and a duty worn with a sense of pride by women. In this way, maids enabled a "modern" motherhood.

As the women most present in the household, maids were simultaneously a threat to motherhood. Although maids were said to be "part of the family", measures were always taken to demarcate true motherhood. Mei Loong passionately remarked to me, "Of course I don't let the maids discipline the kids! Parenting is for the parents, the maids are just there to clean. You see some of the young kids who think the maid is their mother. I don't even let the maids do things for my kids. I am very careful to make sure they are not spoilt". Mothers only took on managerial roles in the realms of cleaning, and to a lesser extent cooking, while parenting was still a strictly hands-on practice. The maid's threat to motherhood is vocalised by Mei Loong, who points --
with some condescension -- towards those absent mothers whose children turn to maids. Maids are also threatening by "spoiling" children; which works against the desired parenting practices. Thus, Mei Loong limits the types of work her maids can do for her children, demarcating parenting roles far away from her maids.

**Gift**

I discuss the standard contract of a migrant maid in chapter 3, but the relationship and obligations between employers and maids extend far beyond contractual terms. The significance of the contract lies in its power to move through bureaucratic space, *not* in structuring employer-maid relations. In these next three sections: Gift, Surveillance, and Dependence, I outline the practices that structure employer-maid relations.

Gifting is a key mechanism for building both trust and subservience. There is substantial literature on gift exchange. A classic is *The Gift* by French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. Mauss describes the gift economy as operating on completely different grounds than the commercial market economy. Mauss' gift economy is one where objects and their histories tie people together into relationships; he writes, "even when abandoned by the giver, it still forms a part of him. Through it he has a hold over the recipient" (1925, 9). Mauss' gift economy is pretty much defined in opposition to how the market economy has been theorised. Marx describes capitalist commercial markets as engaging in commodity fetishism, where the "money form of the world of commodities... conceals... the social relations between individual producers" (1867, 324). The possibility of untethered exchange embodied in objects requires the flattening of all distinctions of humans and labours.
The literature on gift exchange performs tremendous political work in making descriptive and normative statements about how relations between people can be like. However, it is precisely this opposition to CAPITALISM that also narrows our understanding of human relations. Graeber -- in his excellent Debt: The First 5,000 Years -- points out, "almost all this literature concentrates on the exchange of gifts, assuming that whenever one gives a gift, this act incurs a debt, and the recipient must eventually reciprocate in kind. Much as in the case of the great religions, the logic of the marketplace has insinuated itself even into the thinking of those who are most explicitly opposed to it" (2011, 90). Graeber argues that reciprocity or one-up-manship of gifting only applies to individuals of similar status, whereas in relationships with clear distinctions, "hierarchy operates by a principle that is the very opposite of reciprocity" (2011, 110). You give a small child a piece of candy, and they will ask you for more. You donate to Swarthmore college, and they will send you emails expecting more. I will suggest below that gifting in employer-maid relations operates on this sort of hierarchical moral custom, rather than upon the obligations of reciprocity.

Experienced employers found that over time, treating maids well was key to a long term stable relationship. Gifting was justified as a moral necessity ("the right thing to do"), but also an intentional means of achieving loyalty and subservience. One example was Mai:

**M:** She's very honest in the sense that she's very loyal. Because also partly she knows that I treat her extremely well. She doesn't have to spend anything.

Everything I buy for her. Right from cosmetics to hair. Everything [laughs].

**C:** [laughs] You even buy makeup for her, isit?
M: And each year, she has a piece of gold for me. For 27 years. She has 27 pieces of gold from me so... I think because that she knows that I treat her well, so in return, I find that she sort of reciprocates. She reciprocates.

C: Does she ask you for these things?

M: Never. One thing about her, she never asked me for money. She never asks. It's just that I feel grateful that she has rendered me this service. And I always say she deserves it so I give it to her. And one thing good is... she is grateful for what I do for her. [coughs] Even now, her father is wearing pampers, so every month I donate money for the pampers. So, because of all this, she feels very grateful. She will never do anything which she feels that is improper, and no one can pinch her.

For Mai, gifting was both an expression of moral duty (gratitude) and an obligation for loyalty. While Mai does use the language of reciprocity, it is not the same type that Mauss theorises. The return gift that Rupee, Mai's maid, offers is one that cannot be categorically compared to 27 gold pieces, and neither is there any expectation of a return of equivalent or greater value. Gifting however is still intended to produce a relationship through mutual gratitude/indebtedness. The greatest transgression ("that is improper") Mai can think of is not anything to do with technicalities of maid labour (housecleaning, cooking etc), but to be "pinched" by another employer. Thus, the ultimate betrayal is the end of a relationship; not because it denies reciprocation, but because by serving another employer, Rupee would deny the hierarchal relation.
In addition, gifts are always indeterminate. The gifter takes a risk on the recipient to acknowledge gift meaning, and reciprocate accordingly. Meaning is contested, and thus we see employers emphasise the necessity of continually reproducing/reasserting the meanings of their gifts. Yvette, a divorced wealthy investment banker in her 50s, was conscious to run a particularly tight ship in establishing the dynamics of her home:

Y: You know, you need them, they are indispensable, but sometimes the concept should be that, its a two way, you know? I'm also trying to help you here, I want you to understand that you come out for a reason. The employer is also helping to make sure you have a better life when you go home. That's my view. They come out because they need the money to feed the family. You just have to keep on telling them, "That's your objective, okay?"

Yvette was assertive in how she wanted to frame the meanings of working for her. To Yvette, employment is not a contractual exchange but a gift to her maid. It enables her maids to achieve their duties of motherhood. Part of a gift being a gift is operating upon a shared framework of meaning. One way to read this is that Yvette needed to iterate her meanings, to teach her maid to appreciate, and in consequence, reciprocate. However, when I followed this line of questioning:

C: Do you think [your maids] see it the same way?

Y: I actually don't know. I actually don't know whether they see it the same way, because... like the last maid, the Indonesian maid that, you know, the one that
was very good, that come here 10 years. We gave her a lot of stuff, and money for her to go back purely because she's so good.

C: Yeah.

Y: You know? RM10,000 [USD$2500] doesn't matter. Just give, because to them is a lot of money. But that's why I was telling this. I said, "Your future [pauses] is also your kids future, because you are trying to help your kids for education." I don't know whether they understand, you know? To be honest, because the intellectual level is different.

Hold your gasps for a moment. I know she said maids are dumb, but let's think about why or what that means. First, despite her persistence, Yvette acknowledges the ambiguity and uncontrollability of gifts and meanings. The ambiguity is also insurmountable, located in their different "intellectual level". Yes, it carries connotations of all the terrible -isms, but it also carries connotations of biological nature; nature that cannot be changed. If Yvette believes this, then reciprocity cannot be demanded back. Why then, does Yvette bother in gifting or iterating meanings at all? Second, Yvette tells us about her last Indonesian maid. The gifts and money given were a parting gift. For all intents and purposes, the relationship is over; there is no expectation of reciprocity. Third, Yvette reveals to us that she iterates the value of her gift, not to make her maids appreciate and reciprocate, but almost as this moral duty to care for her maids' children even as she knows she will fail.

Is this all just some moral posturing to me? What should we make of how gifts structure employer-maid relations? If we read gift exchange as reciprocity, we can argue that employers

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5 For context, this is slightly more than a 6 month bonus on typical maid salaries.
utilise gifts as a form of conquer; overwhelming maids with unrepayable gifts to demand eternal debt-obligation in return. On the other hand, can a kinder reading be applied? One that breaks through the neoliberal conceptions of bounded individual identities? If gifts tie humans together, co-producing entangled identities, is it too much of a stretch to suggest that it is the employers who cannot deny gifting? As anthropologists, we cannot solely read "treated as family" as an elaborate ploy to disguise INJUSTICE. In fact, employers are upfront about how gifting operates to form loyal bonds; it is the shared commonsensical moral logic of these relationships. Unlike in the U.S., there is no myth of equal personhood; inequality and power are not disguised, but central in demanding moral responsibility from employers. As Yvette highlights, "Everyone's got a role to play. That is her role. But you still have to kinda respect that role."

Surveillance
Foucault illustrates how surveillance produces discipline through categorisation and rank (1975). A long line of anthropologists have described the role of surveillance in factory production. Collins points out how Walmart's "workplace control" builds upon "deliberate understaffing... [store] layouts [that] facilitate continuous surveillance" (2009, 106), while management practices such as the "plus-one policy" demand continuous increased production or reduced cost (2009, 107). Visibility is not purely about seeing, but about measures of accountability.

In employer-maid relations, if gifting was the carrot, surveillance was the stick. Surveillance here, however, does not operate upon productivity, but upon appropriate demeanor and character. Employers saw surveillance as especially important during the early stages of employment, as part of proper "training" and "integration" for the maid. Wong Kit, a father of two children in his late 30s, stopped work for the first two months of his first maid employment.
WK: So we got our first maid when we got our first son.

C: Yeah.

WK: We need a helper; both of us are working. So we got our son, we got our maid to help out lah. So... but first maid, we are not sure of the protocol for Filipinos. So the first day we are not sure of the trustworthiness. So... of course, I stopped work to make sure that we have a keep an eye on the maid for the first time.

The matter of factness is established by the "of course". It is also not unreasonable given that he is hiring a stranger to be around his young children. Surveillance, however, extends outside working hours and into the types of relationships his maid forms.

WK: The second maid, who is about say 38 I think 38, also came in and then work for us for about a year. She wanted to go out on her free day, but back then there wasn't a clear place for us to place her.

C: yeah, you don't know-

WK: -where she will go. And she said, "Don't agree". When we asked her, "Where does she go?" She said she just explore. That caused a bit of a worry. And actually on her rest day, she actually [slows down to emphasise] wanders out without informing us.
Contractually, Filipino maids must take one day off a week. In practice, employers often pay overtime to keep their maids in 24/7. Wong Kit was not particularly happy to let his maid out, going out required the condition of her being in a place that he approved of, such as the agency office, church, or meeting other maids in the houses of his friends. Surveillance applies even during days off. Wong Kit's worry is located in the untraceability of his maid. There is no accountability if she "just explores" and "wanders". What are the concerns of wandering? I returned to the question of the dangerous outside:

**C:** Throughout the conversation, you talk a little bit about your concerns about where they go and all this. Generally what uh... what are the things you are worried about?

**WK:** Yeah. Yeah yeah. Sometimes they can go work in bar. Or like, go and mix with like boyfriend, girlfriend. Then bring boyfriend home.

**C:** Yeah,

**WK:** You heard of that?

**C:** Yeah, got a lot of stories.

**WK:** My friend, got a maid forty plus three kids in Philippines... worked for her for a good, like six to eight years lah. Towards the tail end she bring boyfriends back home.

**C:** Yeah. Then outlah?

**WK:** Outlah. Straightaway out. So yeah... Indian boyfriend...
Surveillance was obsessed with disciplining maids into appropriate behaviours and activities. Bars and boyfriends were particularly dangerous themes that were recounted to me by many employers. The outside was always marked as dangerous for maids. The most common stories centered around meeting Bangladeshi or Indian construction workers through the house gates. Like with Wong Kit's recounting, these stories were always about other employers, but their circulation exemplifies the shared anxieties of employers about the boundaries of their control; the house gate being the physical border between moral inside and immoral outside.

Cameras were a technology operationalised by some employers. Camera-using employers were candid about the use of cameras in watching their maids. However, none actually regularly watched their maids, with the exception of serious events such as theft. In my conversations with maids, however, cameras were a huge source of anxiety. One informant tells me, "Even if I have nothing to do, I have to stand around and look busy all the time". Others were concerned with the violation of privacy, especially for cameras in their own bedrooms. The camera implies a gaze, much like in Foucault's (1975) panopticon, disciplining maids into self-enforcing appropriate behavior.

What does all this tell us about employer-maid relations? That the subject of surveillance is appropriate morals, rather than productivity tells us something about what maids are to employers. Surveillance was not about extracting more labour; maids are not mere bodies of labour for producing wealth. Neither is surveillance an ego trip for employers, many left maids to their own devices over time as their anxieties softened. Instead, surveillance was often justified under the grounds of protecting their maid from the dangerous outside. If maids are "treated like family", they are seen as young daughters who have to be protected from their own judgements.
Dependence

I meet Mai in a coffee bean downstairs from her workplace. Mai is a single woman in her late 60s who lives with her brother. She is one of the few employers who has hired maids since the 1980s. Her current maid is Rupee, who has been with her for 27 years.

M: So when I first got her, because at that time I was younger, so sometimes when she does things wrong, I still will scold her. So there was still some friction between she and me. That was about... I would say, 20 years ago, whereas now I'm older, I mellow.

C: Yeah.

M: So in fact, she's the one who talks back to me now.

C: Yeah.

M: [Tone turns serious] Yeah. So I asked myself whether I want to accept it or not. If I want to accept it, I have to [she emphasises] live with it. I have to live with it. So because and the reason why I live with it is, because I accept the fact that once someone is too familiar in the workplace, this is bound to happen.

C: Right

M: There's one expression is: familiarity breeds contempt. So now... now I'm the maid, and she is the employer, you get what I mean? She speaks louder than I do now.
A sort of role reversal has happened in Mai’s eyes. As Rupee spends more time with Mai, the boundaries are pushed, blurring and changing shape. The relationship is not necessarily oppositional, but rather as Mai points out, "the workplace" erodes as Mai and Rupee's personal lives merge. Why then, does Mai continue to employ Rupee?

Gift and surveillance practices arise out of anxious dependence. I describe it as "anxious dependence", because like a teenage crush, it is simultaneously care and fear. Employer relationships with maids are structured by an appreciation for them as much as a fear of losing them. For legal reasons, if Mai fires Rupee, Rupee is no longer allowed to work in Malaysia again. Mai tells me that she continues to employ Rupee for this reason. At the same time, she has grown frail and confesses to me, "I know that if I don't have a maid to do the work, if I slip and fall down, my money will also be used to paying the hospital bill". Maids -- especially those like Rupee who have worked for long -- were aware of their indispensability for employers to retain lifestyles.

25 year old young professional Benjamin tells me a story that illustrates employer anxious dependence. Benjamin's grandmother and parents live in a large house in Klang, a nearby town. They employ two maids, one primarily tasked with cleaning, the other to take care of his grandmother. He admits his grandmother is difficult to deal with, and can be mean to those around her. Recently, his grandmother had a fall, and his maid rushed over to pick her up. However -- and Benjamin angrily recounts to me -- his maid's method of picking up his grandmother was wrong, and hurt his grandmother further. He suspects it was intentional, and wants to fire her. The hiccup, however, is that his maid is "crazy", and is able to communicate with his ancestor ghosts who wander the house. His maid has a good relationship with the ghosts she sees, but it also makes her prone to spurts of crazy possession.
Maids are imbued with what Turner describes as "powers of the weak", where those in a structurally inferior position also bear "permanently or transiently sacred attributes" (1969, 109). In Benjamin's case, his structural power to enact punishment is buffered by his maid's otherworldly connection to his ancestors. Her erratic misbehaviour also manifests itself as outside of her control (she is "crazy"), making blame difficult to place on her.

Not all maids see ghosts, but they hold special powers in other ways we think ordinary. One example discussed is having a special connection to an employer's child. Mariajose, after leaving Donario's family, worked for a French family in Malaysia. Although she was not keen, her French employers begged her to move to France with them, because their child refused to move without her. Acting as a sort of "anti-structure", the maid cuts through the intended family hierarchy. It is why parents are so anxious to demarcate parenting outside the realm of maid's work. Maid simultaneously produces need/fear or anxious dependence, which in turn also structures the gifting and surveillance practices that generate employer-maid relations.

**Conclusion: Morals, Ambiguity, and Professionalisation**

The Malaysian families I interviewed had lives that were entangled with migrant maids. Some of the dependence was economic: Wong Kit’s family, for example, needed a maid to take care of the children while both parents worked; Soon Eung and Yvette were also working mothers in dual-income households; Donario was raised by a maid, because his mum had to work three jobs. However, as discussed, working means a lot more than finances. It is a means of attaining the appropriate middle-class modern nuclear families.

It is key to understand how "traditional", "personal" forms of employer-maid relations are not without ethics. In fact, as noted throughout, the language of morality is heavily embedded in
how employers spoke of appropriate treatment of maids. Gifting and surveillance provide two sides of the same coin; they are the sites where morals are performed and maintained. My conversations with employers also always reflected ambiguity and questioning. When I ask, "What are the appropriate standards for maid management?", almost all employers use the cliche of "to be treated like human" or flat out tell me "I don't know". "I don't know" is not pessimistic disillusionment about morality, but rather it is generative as employers carefully thread the bounds of right and wrong in their own contexts. Ambiguity is central to any moral practice and any human relation. The discourse of professionalisation loses much that can be learnt if it erases these ethical practices and moral lessons.

There is, of course, plenty of dangers in ambiguity, and the consequences of bad decisions often fall heaviest on migrant maids. The question is whether professionalisation provides the moral clarity it claims. Or perhaps, what types of justices/injustices does it disguise and legitimise? What happens when employer-maid relations are framed by transactional responsibilities? The next chapter moves from current employer practices to the imagined future; this helps us assess the transformations under professionalisation advocated for maids by employers, maids, and organisations such as CareCleaner, the ILO, and local NGOs. I suggest that the discourse of professionalisation circulates powerfully, because of its suggestions of neutrality/objectivity/modernity. It builds upon middle-class neoliberal capitalist assumptions about the nature of individuals, relations, and labour. I will show how professionalisation is not objective; it is a culturally specific form of arranging labour. Therefore, if the aim is equity, then we must be aware of the new hierarchies and technologies of power that blossom under these new cultural arrangements.

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6 When I ask what “being human” means, the answer is also normally "I don't know"
4.

Professionalisation/
Purification

26 year old Mayanka tells me a story of when she was 5. It is common practice for maids to eat at separate times, in separate rooms, with separate silverware. Mayanka was always confused by this, and one day asked her mum why eating arrangements were as so. Her mum tells her that it is just the way things are. Unconvinced, Mayanka took her plate and silverware to the back kitchen where her maid was, and said, "Here, you can use my plate. After all, you are part of the family". Mayanka tells this story to me knowingly, and at this point giggles as she anticipates my surprise. Her maid revolts and tells her, "Ugh no, I don't want to use your things. You are all so dirty."

Introduction

What are the moral logics we carry when we attempt to extend equality to others? Up until this conversation with Mayanka, I had taken professionalisation as given. In the world I live in, of course growing recognition of maid work as profession is a positive sign of equality. Many Marxist feminists (think: Hochschild 1989; Dalla Costa 1975; Kenerici 1975) emphasise the
social-constructedness of skill and work. This means that hierarchies of skills are value claims made by powerful members of society at the expense of the margins (normally non-male, non-white). The value of skill thus has more to do with who is doing the work rather than what technical work is being done. In this vein, CareCleaner's model asks precisely, "Why shouldn't domestic workers be treated like white collar workers?"

Professionalisation carries great moral force in the discourse of maids in Malaysia. Bridget Anderson’s expansive *Worker, helper, auntie, maid?*, the most recent comprehensive publication on Malaysian maids, notices how the “traditional” personal model of “treating domestic workers as “part of the family” is often viewed as problematic by both labour and migrants’ rights activists” (2016, 43). Many Filipino maids themselves were enthusiastic about Professionalisation. I got to know a group of maids who had independently organised professionalisation classes for themselves every Sunday: developing courses and certification for skills in elderly care, sport massages, infant care, photography, driving and so on. Furthermore, despite their shared status as migrants in Malaysia, Filipino maids came from a wide variety of backgrounds, including many from archetypal “professional” backgrounds such as teachers, accountants, and nurses. These Filipino maids in particular saw professionalisation as a recognition of their identities.

This discourse is shared as a universal ideal, but the spaces of its articulation and transmission are fragmented, fluid, and multiple in meaning. In *Friction*, Tsing likens universal ideals to wheels. "A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere" (2005, 5). The roads that wheels spin on facilitate movement, just as they limit the pathways of travel. The wheels of discourse cannot move without friction. Instead, where the rubber meets the road, heat is generated, tire rubber softens, filling into the uneven
crevices of asphalt just as it eros the asphalt road smoother. Thus, "friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing." (2005, 6). "Friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (2005, 5).

My last chapter charted out some of the ambiguous moral logics of maid management. This chapter reads the moral promise of professionalisation as an attempt to purify these ambiguous moral logics of maid management. I read purification in two ways: (1) through Mary Douglas' (1966) *Purity and Danger*, which investigates the differences between clean and unclean. "Dirt" for Douglas is matter out of place. Purification here is thus the attempt to categorise, make sense, and demarcate “Maids” as a distinct social role in the order of the world. Importantly, Mayanka’s anecdote above illustrates how notions of dirt are operationalised not solely by employers/state/business, but also maids themselves. Douglas points out, “pollution has indeed much to do with morals” (1966, 160). Given the threat of ambiguous morals, what are the logics of drawing boundaries for different actors? When do they claim difference and when do they claim similarity? (2) If boundaries are strategically erected by all parties, what is at stake? Douglas’ explains the designation of dirt and its renewal as pure within a system, but does not pose systems against one another. To think about this space, I weave this Douglas-ian desire for purity alongside Tsing’s *Friction* (2005). Tsing’s *Friction* demonstrates how universal ideals are useful for building alliances across different positions and interests. However, when ideals translate into practice, new arrangements of power are generated. Mayanka’s anecdote above reveals how moral premises of equality can conflict with maid logics in unexpected ways.

This chapter reads the discourse and practices of the ILO, CareCleaner, and Filipino maids to understand their situated understandings of professionalisation. The purifying promises
of Professionalisation's neutrality/objectivity/modernity enables its powerful circulation, but ambiguities reemerge when viewed through practice. Having established the failed clarity of professionalisation, I attempt to think about professional relations as a cultural specific form of arranging labour. I hope to defamiliarise our notions of professionalisation to outline how it builds upon middle-class neoliberal capitalist assumptions about the nature of individuals, relations, and labour. The illusions of a fluid/modular/stable professional worker is generative for recruiting shared mass movement, but we cannot only follow these ethical pathways blindly with a map. We must look at the ground we tread, for that is where we might discover new hierarchies and technologies of power that are not represented by the abstract map.

Wheels

During my fieldwork, the many claims made about Professionalisation seemed to be produced and transmitted with ease. It seemed like an afterthought. Employers casually mentioned, “Filipinos are more professional than Indonesians”; One of the CareCleaner ads announces, “We are professionalising the industry”; Filipino maids would say “This job should be professionalised”.

Given how commonsensical Professionalisation seemed, I was surprised by how much I struggled to conceptualise and write about Professionalisation. The ILO's call for "extending labour protection to domestic workers – recognizing domestic work as work [emphasis added] – is an important step in creating more equal and cohesive societies” (Anderson 2016, 84) describes Professionalisation as a clear concept. On the surface, the ILO, CareCleaner, employers, and maids are all in agreement about recognising domestic work as work. However, reading Professionalisation not as an idea/concept, but as a practice reveals its fluid and
fragmented meanings. It is hard for me to write about, because not only does everyone appear to have a different understanding of “work”, but the contexts in which Professionalisation is operationalised vary vastly.

To demonstrate this, I lay out three example uses of Professionalisation alongside one another: the employment contract (as a labour relation), service (as a disposition), and title (as an identity). By analysing the practices of Professionalisation, I hope to reveal what Professionalisation means in each context, and therefore to clarify what Professionalisation does for actors involved.

(1) Contract

One object that Professionalisation points to is the employment contracts and laws. The first thing you should notice about the Filipino maid employment contract is that there is no single official contract, or rather, that there are many official contracts. To comply with all authorities, the employer and maid must sign and submit a contract by the Philippine Overseas Employment
Administration (POEA) and the labour department of the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs (JTK). At CareCleaner, an additional agency service contract is required. The contract considered most comprehensive / of the highest standard almost unilaterally — by employers, activists, agencies, and maids — is issued by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. It is the only contract that stipulates work hours (“continuous rest of at least 8 hours per day”), days off (1 day a week; 15 paid vacation), and minimum salary (pegged to Ringgit equivalent of USD$400). In addition, “Termination without just cause” can be carried out by domestic workers, but not employers. It also insists that passports must be held by the worker. This contract is not legally enforced or valid in Malaysian court.

In comparison to the POEA contract, the JTK contract is less specific but covers some other facets of living under employment. Included is for maids to “be courteous, polite and respectful” and for employers to “pay due regard to the sensitivity of religious beliefs of the Domestic Worker”. Unlike the POEA contract, there is no minimum salary, no work hour regulations, and the section on rest simply says “The Domestic Worker shall be allowed adequate rest”. Immediate termination can be carried out by both employers and maids under just cause. “Just cause” for Employers include “disobeying… reasonable order of the Employer” and any violation of the “Duties and Responsibilities of the Domestic Worker” [see image above], which includes seeking employment elsewhere. “Just cause” is far more limited for maids. Maids may only terminate their contract if they “fear for [their] life”, are “subjected to abuse”, or are not paid. This contract can be legally enforced in Malaysia. Broadly-speaking, the Malaysian JTK contract is designed to protect Malaysian employers whereas the Filipino POEA contract is designed to protect Filipino maids.

Both employment contracts make reference to Malaysia’s labour laws, referring additional unstated conditions to the laws of the host country. Under the Malaysian Employment Act\(^8\), Malaysia has relatively strict and protective labour laws. Unfortunately, “Domestic Servants” are omitted from most essential parts of the Employment Act, including maternity protection (part IX), work hours and rest days (part XII), termination and benefits (part XIIA). This leaves the JTK contract and the POEA contract to serve as the guidelines for these issues. Part XI on Domestic Servants only has one note in it: it allows both employer and maid to terminate their contract without cause as long there is a 14 day notice.

Why have I laid out these contracts and laws? First, is to point out that there are multiple contracts with vastly different and sometimes contradictory terms. Each are only recognised by their respective governing body; there is no cohesive standard. Second, is to provide a sense of what exactly do these contracts mean by domestic work. The POEA contract makes no specifications about what domestic work is at all, but emphasises the conditions of employment (meaning pay, rest days, work hours, provisions by employers). Under “Duties and Responsibilities of the Domestic Worker” [see above], the JTK contract does not outline what domestic work is in terms of specific duties, but in terms of appropriate behaviour, such as to “perform diligently, faithfully and sincerely all household duties assigned by the Employer” and “observe proper attire and shall be courteous, polite and respectful”. The JTK contract does point out that “The Employer shall not require the Domestic Worker to… be engaged in any activities other than that related to household duties”. The closest definition I know to “household duties” is on the Ministry of Home Affair’s website on Foreign Domestic Helpers, where a condition of employment is to “make sure that the FDH is assigned to domestic chores (not including car

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\(^8\) Employment Act 1955: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/48055/66265/E55mys01.htm#p1
wash). This may seem tenuous, but during my fieldwork, this important — I hereby dub — Car Wash Clause was often interpreted by activists and CareCleaner as a means to draw the boundaries of household duties spatially. The car is not in the house, so it is not a household chore. This spatial logic made possible placing gardening and pet care work outside of household duties. This long answer goes to say, reading the contract to figure out what domestic work is requires some creative translations. These contracts tell us that either domestic work is largely considered common sense and/or that it is flexible/unstructured.

Considering (1) contracts are multiple, contradictory, and enforced differently, and (2) domestic work is flexibly defined in these contracts, what does Professionalisation look like? What does recognizing domestic work as work mean when applied to laws? Does it mean more specific details about duties? Does it mean more protections? Does it mean work should be defined more or less expansively? Furthermore, when Professionalisation is called for through labour contract/laws, it begs the question: through which contract, enforced by who, and in what way?

Federici’s “Wages against Housework” (1975) argues that if we recognise domestic work as work, we can demand pay for it. In turn, if unpaid work is accounted for, it would make capitalism unprofitable, thus upending gender and labour relations. However, in the case of migrant maids in Malaysia, paid domestic work is firmly entrenched in capitalist production. It enables greater participation in capitalist employment relations. Furthermore, as discussions about race, gender, and class in Chapter 2 and 3 illustrate, pay does not subvert these inequalities but works together to reproduce them.

In Anderson’s (2016) Worker, helper, auntie, maid?, she interprets contracts “as chiefly a mechanism that limits the possibilities of changing employer rather than a guarantor of
She also rightly identifies the slippage between personal and professional ("fictive kin" and "contract" for her). However, Anderson reads fictive kin as threatening in the Malaysian context, where "the humanity and sociality [of maids]... serves to further disempower workers, and they are easily ensnared in relations of personal dependency on employers" (2016, 53). She views the slippage as something that can be — and should be — overcome by clearer guidelines, suggesting that "slippage is facilitated by the ambivalent legal position of domestic work in employment and immigration law regimes" (2016, 56). Implied is that contracts are a way out of slippage, and more specificity and more protections in contracts and laws can clarify the ambiguity of domestic work, and therefore finally recognise it as work\(^9\).

The possibility of this is doubted by a Scott-ian understanding of labour as "mētis", because "actual work processes depend more heavily on informal understandings and improvisations than upon formal work rules" (Scott 1998, 310). If, as Anderson notes, the most degrading part of domestic work is "the practices through which employers structure their employees’ work in order to differentiate and inferiorize them" (Romero in Anderson 2016, 46). Then ironically, is the JTK contract’s emphasis on vague appropriate behaviours actually greater recognition of as domestic work’s emotional labour (which is the more demanding labour according to many Filipino maids)? On the other hand, if we do this with greater specificity and rules, then is recognising this emotional labour actually the commercialisation of human feeling (Hochschild 1983)? It seems that depending on who you agree with, the emotional labour of

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\(^9\) Tellingly, the "Professional" relationship is understood through "contract" for Anderson at the ILO

\(^{10}\) Important to note is that as an ILO publication, its style and transmission necessitates clear ethical recommendations. Anderson’s views may differ elsewhere, but this is what is expressed here.
Filipino maids will still be impossible to specifically account for and/or remain ambiguous (as in JTK) and/or made totally specific and necessary to be alienating.

Am I thinking about Professionalising contracts unfairly? You might say, “Yes, there are questions about what it looks like, but that doesn’t mean we throw it out wholesale as problematic. The whole point is to figure it out”. First, I would reiterate that my skepticism is not about figuring out the specifics of legality, but whether discursive specificity can solve ambiguous moral practices. Second, even if we accepted that better, clearer, and absolute definitions are possible, how these definitions are utilised are essential to thinking about moral action. Contracts are not just what they say, but what they do. If we look at contracts as an aesthetic/language/rationality/relation. It is better understood and utilised by employers. Ironically, employers often used the worker-centred hard guidelines of the POEA to demarcate their obligations to workers:

Semingly contradicting an earlier statement about “being part of the family”, at one point Yvette points out, “If she asks me for money because of her family, I always say no. You have to train them to take care of themselves. I just follow the guideline, make sure that I feed her, give her her room, and pay her every month.”

It becomes a way of selectively purifying the inevitable transgressions of their relationship. Maids, on the other hand, were less able to use the contract as a way to outline their obligations. Some maids did not even know they had a contract. And while many Filipino maids I spoke to had some rough understanding of their rights, it is not uncommon for employers to reason with Filipino maids in ways that subvert the contract. Against the terms of the POEA contract,
Filipino maids are routinely convinced to give up their handphones and passports for “safekeeping”. This weaker relationship with contracts is also exacerbated by how maid training surrounding contracts is done. This is a complicated issue that I discuss in further detail in my next chapter.

The point is that Professionalisation is not unambiguous and neutral, because contracts are not unambiguous nor neutral; in terms of what the contracts state nor how they are operated. The truth is that these contracts do not really strongly inform labour relations between worker and employer. The primary purpose of these contracts are to circulate as a symbolic paperwork. As my last chapter shows, employers rarely resorted to contracts to resolve specific moments of moral ambiguity. My experience talking to employers and maids from CareCleaner also tells me that nobody actually keeps up to date with the contracts nor remembers or understands them.

I wholeheartedly agree with the many activists who advocate for stricter regulations. My question is with how Professionalisation is framed. Can moral clarity really be provided by listing more specific terms, with more details, across more parts of life under employment in a contract? Contracts themselves do little to actually inform nor enforce a “pure” or “standard” action, and their very circulation and articulation rely on differently positioned actors who have different relationships with contracts. By reading contracts in practice, I hope to point out how Professionalisation through contracts may not be the silver bullet we hope for.

(2) Service

For employers and CareCleaner, Professionalisation also refers to a standard of service. Professionalisation here is concerned with agency’s customer service and how maids perform their work. The Professionalism of an agency is also tied to the Professionalism of its maids.
Chapter 5 and 6 already dedicate ample details to how CareCleaner purifies themselves against the wild west of maid agents by enacting Professionalism (and Ethics) through recruitment, training, and marketing practices. So in this section, I will only lightly touch upon training to tell us what it means to be a professional maid.

My notes on training here are based on a few days I spent with our Filipino training partner, Equality Training Centre (ETC), in the Philippines. All Filipino maids are required to undergo training in order to receive the paperwork to work abroad. There are however, thousands of maid training centres in the Philippines. Training is a checklist item for many Filipino maids while it is commonly a way for agents to extract more fees. There is an online pre-orientation training (read: pre-training training) and an in-person orientation training. David, the trainer I know best at ETC tells me that “The pre-orientation training is a government scam. It is impossible for domestic workers to access online or understand. It is useless and most of the time, we just fill it in for them”. ETC is completely free for maids, and as far as I can tell, and provides real and rigorous training.

Training a standard of service is enabling for maids, because it helps prepare them for the rigours of employment in a foreign country. Filipino maids are made up of women with a variety of skills, who speak a variety of languages, coming from a variety of regions. Training encompasses house skills such as how to use a vacuum cleaner or a rice cooker; what is appropriate dress; how to speak; how to manage your relationship with your employer; what the typical duties might look like. Training enables Filipino women to produce themselves as maids. Professionalism as a standard of service means employers can think less about where maids come from; maids enter as modular replaceable workers. This enables employers to avoid some
of the ambiguities of what it means to have a women from a very different background in your private home. At least, in theory.

While Professionalisation in this sense enables the formation of employment relationships between employers and maids, it does not necessarily mean that employers can really think less about where maids come from, nor does it mean Filipino women all come out as modular units of labour. Chapter 3 already covers enough ground on employer ambiguities of maid management. Below I discuss some of the training practices:

31st July 2019

5pm — It is the end of a long day in the classroom, and we role-play some difficult scenarios. Jane, the trainer, acts as the employer, while students take turns acting as maids. We run through scenarios such as: what happens when your employers child calls you ‘mum’?; you are not receiving enough sleep; you have cleaned the floor, but your employer does not believe you have; your employer asks you to work on your day off.

Jane: Cherry will you come with me today to clean my sister’s house?

Cherry: No Ma’am.

Jane: What do you mean no? I am your employer.

Cherry: Ma’am the contract says that —

Jane: [snapping out of her role] Don’t contract this and that [everyone laughs].

You need to be professional, not demanding.
Unlike the contract, Professionalisation in this sense is not about abiding by formal rules, nor is it a “standard” that can be easily identified. Professionalism is not about listing out the details of your contract. This is no surprise to anyone at the training centre; everyone laughed when reference to the contract was made. It is a whole way of being.

A poster in the classroom lists the 4 A’s of Professionalism: Ability, Action, Appearance, and Attitude.

[Centre director Alia jumps in]

Alia: Don’t say no. Say: “I want to help, but...”

Sara looks at me and giggles, “Chern, it sounds like relationship advice”. I giggle too.

One reading of the training example above suggests that training serves to discipline maids in a way that disempowers them. Clearly, being professional here means you cannot be demanding. It trains workers to ignore the contract and submit to employer authority. Professionalisation in this way alienates maids not only from their labour, but from their every facet of being. “Don’t say no”. Training is socialisation into a SUBMISSIVE SUBJECTIVITY.

Another reading is that this is a very pragmatic form of Professionalisation. Listing out your contract details will get you nowhere in an employer’s home. Conflict must be managed as a relationship, not as a transgression of contractual obligations. Sara was right. It is relationship advice. Furthermore, these are the narratives of conflict alleviation we pass among ourselves, is there something so SUBSERVIENT in navigating unequal relations with appropriate savvy?
Professionalisation promises a clear standard of service that it cannot fulfil. In practice, the 4As need to be charted out in all its relational ambiguity.

Jane: Mary will you come with me today to my sisters house? I need you to work today.

Mary: Yes Ma’am.

Jane: Mary... no! By law you cannot work in other homes and you must take your one day off per week.

Mary: [shyly] But I want the overtime pay. [everyone laughs]

Cherry: Me too me too!

(3) Recognition

My last example follows FIMA, a group of roughly 500 Filipino maids who had independently organised weekly skill-building and professionalisation classes. For a small fee of RM80 (USD$20) per year, maids would get access to a plethora of classes such as, photography, sport massage, nursing, Malay language and so on.

21st July 2019

4pm — For one day, it felt like an inversion of normal migrant life. In the colonial Royal Selangor clubhouse overlooking Dataran Merdeka (independence square), the FIMA maids were dressed in elaborate gowns for their annual pageant. An enthusiastic MC chattered upfront, local staff served food, and little corporate sponsors banners were placed all around the ballroom. FIMA normally operated
out of an elementary school in a low-middle income neighbourhood every Sunday, but today, they had taken the centre of the city.

I attended with Romahlyn, a friend’s maid that I had gotten to know. As the pageant participants walked and made their introductions, Romahlyn would occasionally point out, “She’s good” or “She will be top 3”. I couldn’t tell the difference, there was so much that I could not see.

When Leo, the founder of FIMA, came to greet us, I asked about the roughly 500 attendees. Leo lists, “FIMA student, instructors, friends like CareCleaner, mobile business, remittance business”, then he winks at me, “that table: immigration officers and the police from Dang Wangi”. There was so much that I could not see. This did not happen in one day. Sometimes it’s hard to tell who is really in charge.

Generally speaking, when maids talked about their desires or grievances, maids used “Professionalisation” far less than activists, preferring “having a good employer” or “to be treated like human”. At FIMA, Professionalisation was heavily used; it was repeated almost like a mantra. The main ways I noticed how Professionalisation was used by FIMA maids was as a form of personal development, self-identification, and as a means to make claims for a higher salary.

Conclusion

Professionalisation purifies by flattening and homogenising the ground it claims. It helps purify and demarcate the personal/professional boundaries between employers and workers. It helps
labour and migrant activists purify the ambiguous morals of how maids should be treated. It helps CareCleaner purify itself against other agencies and agents. It helps purify who maids are and what they should and should not do. Professionalisation/purification helps maids elevate themselves for recognition and pay. The term itself recruits participants of many different positions and interests, enabling them to find common tongue and alliances.

So what if there are a multiplicity of meanings and practices to Professionalisation? My goals here are two-fold: (1) to emphasise that while Professionalisation appears objective/neutral in circulation, it is not at all in the diverse ways it can be put into action. The patterns of erosion produced during the friction of two objects reflects the strength of each object. When these fragmented meanings of Professionalisation encounter each other, the meanings of some objects and practices — whether contract, standard of service, or self-identification — are more likely than others to stick. (2) Since Professionalisation does not equalise relationships, I make part descriptions part speculations on how power operates under these new transformations. There is no transcendence out of social relations. Power is unescapable, so we might as well try to trace it, and figure out how to be GOOD from there.

The truth is I truly don’t know how I feel about Professionalisation. It really depends on what we mean by Professionalisation. Theoretically, it is recognising what has previously been naturalised to Filipino women — inherent tendencies for cooking, patience, jovialness, cleaning — to be accounted for as work. However, its translation into practice embeds it back into relations of power and does not solve moral ambiguity.

The only real claim I can confidently contribute is that Professionalisation is not as neutral as it seems. As it makes certain works legible, it makes many others unrecognised. It enables the demarcation of obligations to be enforced by contract (state enforcement). Yet, the
supposed neutrality of Professionalisation is not necessarily bad. It enables alliances across different interest groups. It provides discursive force for new claims to be made.

Chapter 2 drew a historical overview of migrant maids and the increasingly uncertain “wild west” of maid hiring in Malaysia. Chapter 3 brings that uncertainty into the home, as experienced by employers. The uncertainty surrounding maids for employers in not simply about the channels of hire, but also touch on appropriate family roles and moral treatment. This chapter hopes to have destabilised notions of Professionalisation. Professionalisation’s assumed neutrality provides . However reading Professionalisation as a practice reveals that it does not transcend relations, and draws attention to the continued relations of power. Read together, chapter 3 and 4 point out that neither “personal” “traditional” employer-maid relations nor “professional” “modern” employer-maid relations are silver bullet solutions. Now, we are finally well placed to enter the heart of my fieldwork in chapter 5 and chapter 6: CareCleaner’s assemblage line in the migrant maid industry
5.

Production/Translation

We go out to dinner after a day of training. As we talk about the star students Joan and Marie, Alia tells me, “We decided to hire Joan as a trainer. You know, she used to be a school teacher. Marie is good too, but we can't hire her because she acts too much like a domestic worker.

Introduction

The language of production permeates much understanding about the maid industry. Employers ask, "do you source/import from Indonesia?"; CareCleaner talks of processing workers through immigration logistics and repackaging women into professionals; Training centres and accountability measures are justified under the grounds of quality control etc. Language does not necessarily mean that these operations happen in practice. However the language we use does provide clues regarding the underlying assumptions and symbolic associations we make. There could be so many other ways language could frame these processes (e.g. immigrate, headhunt).

What does "production" mean? And what do we gain by reading the world in this way? (1) It implies separate spaces of "production" and "consumption" (2) If we consider materials and services being “produced”, then there is a specific moment in its life trajectory that we assign it "value" (Appadurai 1986); at its moment of exchange (3) The relationship between specific
inputs and specific outputs suggests calculation is important. How do we measure production? How is efficiency construed (4) Production also makes me think of byproducts and waste. It leads us to wonder: what is waste in this process? What happens to this waste?

This chapter uses the framework of “production” as a tool to think about the practices that go creating this ecosystem of agencies, employers, and maids. The emphasis is not necessarily on how “maids” are made, but rather to highlight all the brokerage involved in translating between worlds. A wealth of research has already pointed the lens at maids; I want to point mine at the brokers (pun not intended).

Production

Many scholars of statecraft and capitalism (Graeber 2018; Marx 1867; Foucault 1975; Foucault 1976) remind us that production refers not only to material goods, but also to subjectivity and relations. If we imagine the movement of Filipino women from the Philippines to Malaysia as an assembly line (and such metaphors are often used in the everyday language of CareCleaner and other members of the industry), Filipino mothers, daughters, school teachers, nurses etc. are the "raw inputs" that are transformed into Filipino maids.

This chapter primarily draws upon my experience interacting with the actors along this assembly line. Maids are produced through their interactions with ideas, paperwork, agencies, employers, and each other. The skill of working in the maid industry is an all-encompassing performance of identity. I use Eyferth's notion of skill as "distributed cognition" — distributed cognition is the idea takes the fundamental unit of analysis not as the individual, but as the relations between individual, social world, and material artefacts (2009). The "skill" that makes one a maid is not only embodied, but also reproduced through the arrangement and interactions
with the social and material world. He summarises, "skills are social relations" (2009, 44). In feminist vein, Eyferth recognises the social-constructedness of skills; and in James Scott-ian vein, skill is expropriated into the technical literary knowledge of expertise and managers; Eyferth recognises the everyday life and worldviews that inform "skilling". If skills are social relations, it also means that "skill is distributed in ways that reflect the distribution of power" (44) across axes of gender, age, class, and race. Hence, the production of maids occurs not only in training centres, but along the entire "assembly line" and with fragmented, non-intended, ambiguous outcomes. Production is not certain nor additive. Thus, it is essential that we also take note of how maids are also produced through ideas, paperwork, agencies, employers, each other etc. Knowing this, I propose we read the “assembly line” as an “assemblage line”.

The line is a useful metaphor, because it informs us of the chain of brokers that maids move through. Following the metaphor of the assemblage line: This chapter is broken down into 5 parts: SOURCING, PACKAGING, PRICING, TRAINING, DELIVERY. These are all kind of a joke, but also not really.

The three things to note as we move through the assemblage line: (1) Translations and misunderstandings between brokers and their attempts to make sense of each other (2) How the assemblage line is constructed as “ethical” and “professionalism” (3) Moral dilemmas under the constraints of existing legal, social, economic structures.

**SOURCING**
Sourcing begins with Facebook. We run ads on Facebook, targeting women of the appropriate age (21-45) who are in various Overseas Foreign Worker (OFW) groups. These ads are directed specifically at workers. We promise them good employers, upskilling, and no agency fees.

Facebook posts were not the only means of recruitment. Overtime, a growing portion of our applications were referrals. Staff were optimistic about the assumed increased quality and commitment of referrals. Since maid quality was primarily measured through contract completion, the logic was that if maids trust us, they are more likely to stick out the process. There was little thought spared to what referral means.

*A few days after my interview with Cheryl, I noticed a new application from Jade that listed Cheryl as a referral. It made me happy. I took on Jade’s application, and I texted Cheryl:*

*Chern: Hi Cheryl, I saw a new application from Jade. Thanks! Is she your friend?*

*Cheryl: Yes sir, she is my neighbour.*

*Chern: Oh haha. Thanks for referring her to us.*

*Cheryl: No sir, I am not referring. I don’t do that.*

*Chern: What do you mean?*

*Cheryl: No no, I am not an agent. She is just my friend.*

These types of conversations allude to a whole ecosystem of middlemen practices that I could hardly see from the CareCleaner office. In the unregulated agency industry, licensed agents often work in tandem with independent brokers on the ground etc. Uncertainty rules the space. I was tasked with ensuring no debt
bondage or recruitment fees, but I had deep uncertainties about my ability to assess applicants from 30 minute phone calls.

Uncertainty works in our favour too. Workers came to us based on our hearsay and how we talk to them. At the time of my fieldwork, we had hardly placed any workers yet. However, when I asked the maids I interviewed how they chose us, they often just said that we looked trustworthy and that we were kind to them on the phone.

Or maybe applicants were just gassing me up. Jenny tells me that workers know the uncertain field of agencies, and often spread their options anyways. When I attempted to confirm this with my workers, there was no cohesive pattern. Some workers repeatedly reiterated that they trusted me and CareCleaner, and wanted to wait for employment with me. I always told my applicants that they were not bonded to CareCleaner in any way, but no one ever told me that they had applied elsewhere when asked. I guess they did not want to offend me. In a few cases, applicants updated me after they found employment elsewhere. In a few cases, when I found a job offer for them, applicants would reveal they were now bonded with another agency in debt and without a job.

The ads link to an application that asks for applicants to note their skill level / willingness to perform specific household tasks, such as childcare, cleaning, pet care, car washing, elderly care and so on. Applications were only a filtering mechanism for age. All applications that met the legal age led to interviews.
The ethical and professional model in recruitment we presented were: (1) We take no recruitment fees from our maids. (2) Rather than going through a third party recruitment agency in the Philippines, we directly source and vet all the maids we represent.

PACKAGING
The interview process was roughly 30 minutes long. The primary purpose of the interview was simply to assess their personality, assess their financial background, assess family buy-in, generate details about their skills and previous work experience, ask about their employment interests/preferences (e.g. “Do you prefer working with the elderly or children?”), and finally ask and discuss their salary expectations in relation to their experience.

I had (have) serious doubts about my ability to capture a human in 30 minutes, especially given the cultural difference over terrible internet. However, overtime I also realised workers were so vastly different. Some had never applied for a job in their life while many others knew exactly what we were looking for. The most experienced workers were adept at translating themselves to me.

Accepted applicants were categorised into folders labelled Nanny or Caregiver. The idea was that specifying their skillsets/preferences beyond “Maid” would help match them with appropriate employers. There was no formal matching mechanism beyond that. Instead, matching was done through gut feel. When employers came to us, we would discuss their situations and vouch for specific applicants that we interviewed and represented.
We always made sure to have our maid pool larger than our employer pool. Starting out, we built a database of 100 strong workers to prepare for employers. The rationale was that our business survival was ultimately dependent on having speedy professional service to employers.

20th July 2019

At the office, I bring up all the messages I have been receiving from my applicants asking for updates on their applications. WE HAVE NOT EVEN LAUNCHED FOR EMPLOYERS YET. I was worried about all the applicants waiting unemployed. Most would probably not even get hired. Sara agreed that she had been sharing the stress of this moral responsibility to applicants.

31st April 2019

Today I FaceTimed a friend. She said she spent the corona quarantine time sending out emails to 200 professors asking for research assistant positions. She only heard back from 3.

Below is one of the profiles I had written up. We had a standard process: 1 paragraph on personality, 1 or 2 paragraphs on skills/preference, 1 paragraph recommending employer they are suitable for. What we were really doing with worker profiles was translating the details of applicant lives into terms understandable to employers. When I interviewed the applicant in the profile below, I was coached to hunt for details about her personal life and translate into marketable skills. Taking care of her diabetic mother-in-law became a speciality skillset, working at a food factory became a sign of resilience, her quiet tone became patient and cooperative. This
is not to say that I am confident I knew what I was talking about at all; the point is that she was one of the first to be employed and is still working now 1 year later.
One reading of all these categorisations is that it is the commodification and appropriation of non-capitalistic modes of life. Another is that it is the full recognition of her very unique skillset produced by her dispersed cognition.

22nd July 2019

In preparation for launch, Vanessa suggests that we feature the workers we have in our database individually on Facebook posts. I bite my tongue from lashing out, and try to steer the worker features from an individual "auction" into a strategy of marketing our service and workers collectively. I try out several arguments that may appeal to her sensibilities, citing the politics of representation and objectification.

Vanessa ultimately decides that she will post the "auctions" as "worker profiles". "Worker profiles" are essentially pseudonyms with short biographies that emphasis their domestic skillsets. I feel like Vanessa is missing the point, but I do not push the issue further.

Perhaps noticing my frustration, Jenny points out that we have many many workers waiting for jobs, and the fastest way to find employment for them is through auctioning. She furthermore argues that an auction increases the bargaining power of workers, because they realise they have options. I am left frustrated, but also uncertain of my original position.

Looking back, I am not sure why auctioning generated such strong emotional disagreements with Vanessa and Jenny. I think I felt like I had been tricked. I was
obsessive about finding all the hypocrisies about being ethical. Auctions felt totally contradictory. It magically appeared as an idea when we realised we had way more applicants than we could handle. Maybe I just thought I was better. Or maybe I did find hypocrisy, and was uncomfortably pointing them out. Maybe we were all just trying to be GOOD in our own ways. Or maybe I am better.

The ethical and professional model in packaging we presented were: (1) Unlike the standard “biodata” of most agencies, at CareCleaner we wrote up “worker profiles”. The main difference was that our worker profiles got to know our maids as humans 😊. This made it more ethical and more professional. (2) Employers and maids can state their preferences and personally matched to ensure the best relationship. Greater details on the worker profiles helped employers decide on who would fit their household best.

**PRICING**

13th August 2019

1:15pm — I have a heated discussion with Jenny during lunch where I float the idea of tiering workers according to experience, and create regulations for salaries. In effect, we — as an agency — arrange a collective bargaining strategy for workers that recognises their skills.

Jenny pushes back arguing that our role is merely as "mediators and facilitators for workers and employers". She asks, "Should I stop a worker with 7 years experience if she only asks for $400 a month?". I think bitterly to myself, “When did we change from a ‘worker-centred’ agency to merely a ‘facilitator’? When did our politics turn into technical operation?” Jenny
softens and admits, “Chern, we just can't do it until we have more bargaining power in the market. I’m just trying to get these women jobs in the meantime”.

As we walk back to the office, I can’t help feeling like I have broken a boundary of trust. I don’t really care about the abstract arguments or design or representation or justice anymore. I care about Jenny. Questioning the ethics of CareCleaner’s processes was questioning whether Jenny was as GOOD as she claimed.

TRAINING

All CareCleaner maids underwent a week long training at the Equality Training Centre (ETC). Chapter 2 touched on Filipino labour emmigration while Chapter 4 already discusses the professionalisation of maids through training. This section adds to both those sections by exploring the language of sacrificial motherhood in training. One week’s training does not create an identity. The point here is to illustrate how gender and religion are part of the assemblages that are translated by training, enabling women to become maids. Unlike a Marxian factory that erases identity, this assemblage line operates precisely upon existing ideologies and culture.

The first training session I sat in on focused on motivations. David had everyone write letters to their loved ones, and took volunteers to read them out loud. The activity was highly emotional and the language charged with ideas of sacrificial motherhood. David urged everyone, “When it gets hard, and it will, remember why you are here. You are doing a sacrifice for your family. It is important to play your role”. As I point out in Chapter 2, this aligns with narratives of bagong bayani that removes political leaders as an agent of labour emmigration (Encinas-Franco 2013). These women aspired not through economic gain, but through producing their selves as sacrificial mothers.
DELIVERY

10th July

I ask, "How do you feel about Ken?"

"Ken? Looove him", Vanessa enunciates enthusiastically while still looking down at her phone.

31st July

Ken sits at the one end of the meeting table while Jonnie sits at the other end. Jenny and Jonnie are huddled discussing logistics and legal work, while Vanessa, Ken, and I make "higher-level" conversations about the nature of the industry. I ask Ken about the logics upon workers choose destination countries. Ken touches upon agency debt-bondage practices to Malaysia (workers don't want to go to Malaysia; only the poorest do), and the monitoring mechanisms he's developed to prevent "social problems" at home. Ken and Vanessa egg each other on, tumbling into an excited frenzy about the deplorable current state and their missions to "clean up" the industry.

Ken was known as the "godfather" among those in the Filipino embassy and immigration. During a time when the POEA was no longer handing out agency licenses, Ken magically helped CareCleaner get our license. He was also the head of our Filipino partner, Spirit International, who was responsible for performing the paperwork and logistics of outmigration from the Philippines.
13th August

10:15am -- We make an urgent call to Jonnie from Spirit and realise that they are making our workers pay for health screenings, transport, and stay.

14th August

Our workers Teresa and Leah are scammed during the medical. Jenny exasperates, "They [Spirit] don't understand us and we don't understand them"

What does Spirit do? The first thing is Spirit fills in a legal checkbox for us; Philippines law requires Malaysian agencies to work with a Filipino partner. Beyond that, as Jenny frustratingly concedes, the truth is we don't know. We know they complete paperwork for us but there is very little understanding of how much and how. They perform all kinds of translation work that we do not understand, such as having regional offices, helping rural women to fill in forms, direct them to medical checkups, buy flight tickets and so on.

Every maid we have brought in has ended up going through some convoluted process. Beginning from the source, internet problems hinder interviews, husbands suddenly refuse wives to work, bus breakdowns make maids miss their training dates, small misunderstanding in fees explode into huge tangles of debt requiring all kinds of logistics for us to send money to rescue them.

Conclusion
The assemblage line highlights the works of translation by various actors that go into producing maids. The assemblage line itself is full of unexpected twists, and nothing ever really goes as planned. Every maid we bring in often ends up going through some convoluted process. As these stories have shown too, translation is an ambiguous, uncertain, and incomplete process. The steps that maid recruitment moves through is not additive in a linear way. Finally, these stories also show how translations ultimately enable relations.

What is it that is so valued monetarily at the end of this particular assemblage line? For employers, the short answer is the simplification a very complicated process. Malaysian employers pay one fee to CareCleaner, and a maid shows up two months later. Professionalised agency services means employers don’t need to think about how migration works; Employers don’t need to think about where maids come from; Maids enter as modular replaceable workers. This enables employers to navigate a complicated and financially treacherous landscape of employment agents, while avoiding some of the moral ambiguities of what it means to have a maid.

This chapter has explored how maids are produced. The next explores how CareCleaner is produced.
6.

Inclusion/Conquest

4th July 2019

6:00pm — We attend a social business conference organised by YTL, a large conglomerate in Malaysia with a variety of businesses from plantations to real estate to construction. They repeatedly throw out terms such as: needing "dynamic innovators" and "community leaders" who have the "moral imagination" to create "ecosystems" for the good of “humankind”.

In the Q&A, a member of an NGO that distributes food to the homeless asks, "How can we get more funding from corporations?". The speaker answers, "NGOs have to learn to speak corporate language". He gives an example of identifying the "value creation" of food distribution. I start to wonder if this is "translation" or “indoctrination”. While all this is ongoing, I see 50% of the audience not in their seat, but in the back of the hall where the food is. They are standing around cocktail tables networking.

Afterwards in the car, we talk more about how to connect more people to join CareCleaner. We get into the motives of her work: Vanessa grew up as a
Buddhist, but experienced it primarily as a form of punishment. She tells me stories of how her parents would punish her by forcing her to count prayer beads and write mantras. Discovering Christianity became a way to disassociate herself from her family. She asserts, "I don't belong to my parents, I belong to God". Ultimately, "CareCleaner is for God's glory".

25th October 2019

On a Friday night back in school at Swarthmore, my housemate Libby tells me she has been reading a book called "The Art of Loving". She summarises, "Love is not a state, but an action. Loving is doing. [The author] moves through love in romance, love in friendship, love in family, and love in God and community."

Introduction

If "loving is doing", then what is love doing? This chapter attempts to understand "love" as practice in CareCleaner's visions of care and solidarity. I suggest that Love is (1) how CareCleaner produces itself as distinct from business, and (2) how it justifies expansion.

Below, I tell the story of how ideologies of love and ethics in CareCleaner act as forms of conquest. Love is paradoxical here: as it attempts to bring stability and structure to an incredibly uncertain industry, it remakes the ecosystem in its own vision, generating forms of patronage and obligation towards it. The objective here is not to make moral assessments about equality or patronage. An "unequal" love between parents and child, tutor and tutee, master and apprentice can both be doting or abusive. Love is powerful, for good or for bad.
This chapter is organised as such: (1) I outline the landscape of the maid industry. Drawing upon employer interviews, interactions with workers, and facebook marketplaces, I hope to generate this world as "wilderness". (2) Douglas argues, the danger "dirt" poses to social order is neutralised when it is undifferentiated, and "clearly belongs in a defined place, a rubbish heap" (1966, 198). In this vein, I ask who is the world "wild", "dirty" and uncontrollable to? And how is the diverse "wilderness" neutralised into homogenous "wasteland/rubbish heap". (3) I introduce CareCleaner into this "wasteland ecosystem"; demonstrating how CareCleaner crafts its position in relation to the wasteland. CareCleaner profits off of the blurred boundaries of legality/illegality. By building partnerships with NGOs, CareCleaner also profits off of conquering non-capitalist spaces; advocacy work act as advertising, while women's shelters pick up those "byproduct" workers who are broken/sacrificed by the industry. It is too early to say whether CareCleaner do things better in reality, but part of CareCleaner's performance of identity is a series of self-legitimating gestures of expansionary love. (4) Visions of expansion and control are pushed by fear of disorder, but propelled by ambitions of "purity" and order. Under the logic of universal LOVE, CareCleaner makes moves to not only sit atop the "pyramid scheme" of middlemen, but also cut out layers to consolidate control. (5) How does this fit into globalisation and statecraft? In response to suggestions that globalisation and economic technocracy encroaches upon sovereignty, I suggest that in Malaysia, the legitimacy of the state is built through global ambitions and integration into international capital.

Wilderness
The Wild is a useful way of framing the landscape of the maid industry. In a very quick, unsubstantiated, but ultimately illustrative activity, I went around the Swarthmore library asking students what associations they have with the wild. Here is a list:

- Serene
- Savage
- Intoxicating
- Uncontrollable
- Threshold (of rules, social relations, civilities)
- Passion

Interesting things to note are the (1) paradoxical: wildness as both peace and danger (2) The words "intoxicating" and "uncontrollable", both suggest wildness being larger than man; intoxication acts upon us, uncontrollable implies that we try but fail to control (3) this feeds into "threshold" — the idea that the "wild" is the boundary where civility and structures end.

Designation of wildness is, of course, in the eye of the beholder. I suggest that we read the landscape as wilderness here, because it helps us get into the worldview of those actors operating in this space. This is not a claim about the ultimate reality of the maid industry, but rather reflects the experience of some of the actors I got to know. Douglas points out, "taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organised. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder" (1966, xi). The "wavering certainty" has been thoroughly discussed throughout this book. Employers are anxious about agency reliability and maid performance, maids worry about exploitative agents and abusive employers, agents are
simultaneously nowhere to be seen and everywhere when you look. At this point of the ethnography, you might have noticed how pretty much everyone (including me) express anxieties about the lack of predictability or control they have over the space.

If we consider the industry as a whole, there really is no standard. I came to know factory owners who were importing maids of their own use, Indian expats hiring through home villages, employers and maids advertising jobs on Facebook groups, independent agents on Whatsapp -- furthermore, we do not know how many intermediaries there are. Ken tells me that "in many places, it is still common to have men drive on trucks going from village to village looking for labour". Evelyn (an owner of an Indonesian maid training centre) calls these men "sponsors". In Indonesia, sponsors pay families "cash bonuses" to send their daughters to agencies. The ambiguity is not merely in the variety of options, but also the concealed and convoluted processes. It often felt like no one in the industry really knew what anyone else in the industry was doing either.

The deregulation of maid agencies in Malaysia does not undermine the centrality of licensed agencies, but rather enhances their legitimacy. The "biodiversity" of the wilderness here is the flurry of middlemen recruiters: WhatsApp numbers passed about, auctioning on Facebook, Filipino maids recruiting from their own village etc. Although these actors would appear to work on the margins of legal licensed work, the blurry lines between legality and illegality actually complement rather than compete with licensed agencies such as CareCleaner.

In Friction, Tsing (2005) demonstrates how legal and illegal loggers complement each other. Illegal loggers encroach upon the “frontier” which enables the bureaucratic (laws, regulation) and material infrastructure (logging roads) to enter the frontier and tame it. CareCleaner acts as the ethical legal partner to the frontier of the maid industry. The "wilderness"
of the industry is exactly what CareCleaner profits off of, by providing stability and certainty as distinct from this wildness. CareCleaner claims to be organised within the disorganised. As the last chapter shows, CareCleaner do not control the entire assemblage line, and are savvy about allocating their risks away to unseeable agents or their partners at ETC and Spirit. CareCleaner claims to control debt bondage, but closer scrutiny of what that means is simply that we do not charge maids for CareCleaner services.

Like legal loggers, these partners on the boundary of illegality are only a stop-gap to eventually conquering the “ecosystem”. In my conversations with Vanessa about her CareCleaner’s visions, she often acknowledges the uncontrollability of the maid industry. She reasons, the maids are the beneficiaries, not the partners. The solution to protecting maids is thus to gain full accountability over over the entire “ecosystem”.

The vision can be read in two ways. One is the narrative of love offered by Vanessa, whereby increased accountability practices are possible, and ultimately result in providing safer employment for maids. The other is a narrative of conquest, where all those outside of CareCleaner are painted as the wild. As Douglas notes, "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system [emphasis added] on an inherently untidy experience" (2002, 5). But first, heterogeneous wildness must be flattened into waste.

This chart illustrates the beneficiaries of the CareCleaner system. This chart is a joke, but also not really.
Razing wildness to waste

2nd July 2019

9:15am — Shortly following the deregulation of maid hires, the Filipino embassy has invited a selection of maid agencies in peninsula Malaysia for a roundtable on how the POEA can better protect Filipino maids. The POEA rejects the notion of direct hiring, and any Filipino maid that is directly hired becomes blacklisted upon return to the Philippines.

We arrive in the meeting room 15 minutes late, but we are one of the earliest to arrive. Upon entering, we see two men and two women; they are agency owners in their late 40s to 60s. Joseph Lee, owner of Fair Tree Agency speaks first, “Well, introduce yourselves”. He then leaps straight into it, “So are we for direct hiring?”, he asks aloud. I am not sure if Vanessa is aware of the game that is being played, but she earnestly replies that we are opposed to direct hiring, because agencies should represent workers. Joseph latches onto CareCleaner’s pitch, and suggests that direct hires prevent protection of workers. He then quickly suggests that we all sit on one side of the meeting table, so that we can “attack them”.

To be clear, the motivations of the agencies around the table were quite obvious. Direct hiring was a threat to their entire business. I won’t elaborate too much on evidence for their motives because that is tangential to this ethnography. Safe to say, the language of attacking the POEA speaks for itself. There were also some — somewhat funny — strategic slip-ups.
There is also a moment when Marla asks about recruitment fees. Indian agency owner begins “We charge them so that they incentivised to commit to-” before he is cut off by all the other agents who say “No we do not charge anything at all”. Indian man reverts and starts saying he does not charge recruitment fees.

We clamour back into Jenny’s car, and conversation bursts into the criticism of the agencies. Jenny, Vanessa, and Sara seem relatively critical of the whole experience, they chastise the agencies for being overly paternalistic, old fashioned, and manipulative. Vanessa pities them saying maybe they are just so jaded from working in the space for so long. I am unsure of how I stand. Sure there are many terrible agencies, but there seems to also be many complex practicalities to agency work that for the first time I begin to wonder whether CareCleaner staff are aware of. Is ethical recruitment really as simple as the CareCleaner model suggest?

Gidwani and Reddy’s “Minor History of Capitalism” traces the ways in which understandings of “waste” transforms between potential and excess in India. “Waste” simultaneously encompasses both material (e.g. old laptops) and social (e.g. ideas, citizenship) realms (2011). Under the logic of capitalism, capitalist valuation of these “waste” commodities become potential during the “boom”, before being discarded as excess during bust. They also correctly note that in Locke’s language of efficiency, waste and excess are deeply moralised. I take this reading alongside Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* to point out how in CareCleaner, the boundaries of purity and danger are mapped upon efficiency and excess.
Within our internal dialogue, CareCleaner staff asserts ourselves in opposition to this “dirtiness”. It is not only against other forms of recruitment, but also against other licensed agencies. However, the question in my field notes stands: yes some of these agencies are terrible, but is that all there is to them? CareCleaner was not exactly unique in practice. Many “old-fashioned” agencies also claimed to perform the screening and training that CareCleaner claims is unique to them. Joseph Lee’s agency claims to personally interview every maid and provide free training. I cannot ascertain the factual “truth”, and neither am I actually interested in doing so. Instead, I ask, what is the work being done when we make these proclamations?

In CareCleaner, the wild and heterogeneous landscape of agencies become reimagined as a homogenous "exploitative" or "traditional" system; everyone else is marked IMMORAL or UNETHICAL. In this process, diverse and dangerous wildness is transformed into an inert and flattened wasteland. When wildness has been marked as waste, it is excess and expendable. In fact, it is inefficient and immoral to ignore it. This discourse invites conquest.

At the time, the Worldbank, IOM, ILO, and American embassy were extremely excited about CareCleaner (with some sums of invested too). The CareCleaner discourse were a testament to Vanessa, Jenny, and Sara's abilities to translate their work into the trendy language of "ethics" and these international organisations' language of “development”.

Inclusion/Conquest

Teoh 99
recycling Our waste

The last chapter already extensively covers the CareCleaner’s work, at least in terms of producing ethical and professional maids and itself. Following from the last section, this section simply emphasises how this idea of waste employed by CareCleaner would not hold currency if it was not pervasive.

Douglas notes: dirt is dangerous when it still has some identity that threatens order. However, "so long as identity is absent" (1966, 198), waste becomes "an apt symbol of creative formlessness" (1966, 199). To make a garden, we do not just pull out weeds, if we only pull out weeds, the soil dies. Instead, to arrange a garden, we compost weeds, and return them as a blank-canvas-soil. This creates opportunity for new desired arrangements. Cleaning is "a creative moment, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience" (Douglas 1966, 3).

The ingenious movement is the flattening of wilderness into waste, enabling CareCleaner to "create value" as if out of thin air. Perhaps we become new gods that make the world (maid industry) in our image. Waste are things that we throw away; they are unloved. CareCleaner "recycles" them through an ideology of love; conversations within the company, with employers, with activist, and with international organisations often emphasise how maid agency work is unglamourous work. Surely someone who is picking up all this rubbish is doing it out of goodwill.

Once all practices have been flattened with a moral judgement of dirty, disorganised, uncivilised, the creation of "dirt" generates the need (in this case, market) for cleaning. "Eliminating [dirt] is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment" (Douglas 1966, 2). Our marketing writes, “CareCleaner is cleaning up the industry”. The
metaphor of cleaning is uncanny about what maids really do for CareCleaner, employers, state narratives, and so on.

CareCleaner's ability to convince others of our cleaning ability (pun intended) is not generated solely from CareCleaner. This ethnography has repeatedly emphasised this vast and anxious moral landscape: whether located in the dilemmas of the state, employers, activists, or businesses. This process of wildness, waste, and potential is produced out of these entanglements of everyday practices that reproduce Malaysian life.

It is not all encompassing. I also came to know many other employers who had different notions of order. Recruitment was not made safe through CareCleaner's bureaucratic checklists and comforting assurances, but rather through personal approaches, such as Benjamin’s family who recruit from maids from their factory workers. Many others in Chapter 3 also expressed feelings about the impossibility of total control, and turned to understanding their ambiguous relations through religion or patronage.

**Visions of expansion**

*17th July 2019*

10am -- *We drive to the ILO office. Somehow our name has been passed to their staff members, and they have requested a meeting to learn from our “expertise”. As we leave, Vanessa insists that we take a photo together.*

I put expertise in italics at the time, because I did (do) not think I was an expert at anything other than talking GOOD to international organisations.
Vanessa talks about how we hope to fix the industry, where we hope to go. We go up and down "the pipeline"; up into sourcing, training, policy consulting and down into training services, accountability measures, worker insurance. Sara discusses "community initiatives", where we can open up physical spaces for maids to spend their days off doing training activities with us. It also helps alleviate employer anxieties, because employers know maids are doing something productive with us.

Moving up and down the pipeline is not necessarily bad. For example, downwards in community initiatives, many maids arrive with little social network. However, community initiatives generate not only shared physical space, but demands time (days off), surveillance through group chats, demands of relations. Activities discussed always centred around giving maids something “productive” to do with their time off. Emotional support was standardised as workshops to build psychological resilience. I could be too cynical, but it is telling that less than 20% of ETC’s graduates ever reply to their check-in messages after graduation.

Expansion is both moral and profitable. It is central to social business. Questions of funding always had to be justified through expansion. All the presentations I built had to include visions of an increasingly orderly future, where more and more maids are saved from debt at the same time as more and more money is necessary to run our operations. Capital was always invested upon a future desire/need. If Love really is infinite, the market is too I guess.
7.

Love/Capitalism

**TL;DR**

Returning to our opening chapter, how does all this discussion about love and capital fit into flexible modes of statecraft? In Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*, he argues that the commodity fiction of land, labour, and money — the erasure of social relations — enabled capitalistic production. In Polanyi’s double-movement, the dislocation generated by legal deregulation produces an instinctive reintroduction of social relations.

This ethnography offers a slightly different narrative. It demonstrates how the translations (read: not transformation) of maids into labour is produced out of anxieties about purity and moral practice. This ethnography has repeatedly emphasised how moral ambiguity and the promise of neoliberal ethics is a recurring pattern in practice as we move from Nation, Race, and Immigration (chapter 2), to Class, Modernity and Motherhood (chapter 3), to activist demands for Professional employment (chapter 4), to CareCleaner’s recruitment and training of maids (chapter 5), and CareCleaner’s self-production in the migrant maid industry (chapter 6). Ambiguity rules in the migrant maid industry, and so does the market for moral purification.

The retreat of state regulations around migration is the same logic that allows the emergence of ethical business. I do not centralise “the state” as the primary actor, because as we
move through different actors, we can see how the purification, control, and profit all intertwine. Ethics in CareCleaner’s case is situated in a private company who owes its primary allegiance to individual moral conscience, consumers, and is profoundly shaped by a very specific idea of purity. I am not suggesting that “the Malaysian state” has actively planned for this, but rather it is co-emergent in a field of ambiguity. The ultimate outcome that is CareCleaner fits neatly into the ideology of productivity-based statecraft. In this logic, individuals (businesses and consumers) take charge for the moral failure of the state, while generating an ever expanding market for moral purity.
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