



Integration-transnationalism nexus in the  
context of enforced transience: Managing  
racial harmony and temporary labour  
migration in Singapore

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## Abstract

Migration scholarship tends to conceptualize integration as a pathway to permanence and transnationalism as a post-resettlement project, overlooking temporary migration regimes in which access to permanence is precluded. This research examines the dynamics of integration and transnationalism in Singapore's temporary labour migration framework, in which migrants are socially pressured to integrate while simultaneously being legally restricted from family reunification and permanent residency. Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions, this article reveals how Singapore employs discourses of social integration to govern its temporary migrant workers while enforcing strategies of spatio-temporal segregation. Under these arrangements, migrants must navigate the duality of social integration and transnationalism, resulting in what I call 'temporary integration' and 'involuntary transnationalism'. These findings point to the inadequacies of current analytical frameworks on integration-transnationalism research and call for greater scholarly attention on the relationships between integration and transnationalism under conditions of enforced transience.

**Keywords:** Singapore, migrant workers, temporary labour migration, social integration, spatio-temporal segregation, involuntary transnationalism

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## Introduction

On the fateful night of 8 December 2013, 33-year-old migrant construction worker Sakhivel Kumarvelu was killed in an accident in Singapore's colonial precinct of Little India after being denied boarding on a migrant-only shuttle bus. Angered by the tragic death of their fellow countryman and the broader injustice that plagued Singapore's highly privatized migration industry, a furious mob of around 400 migrant construction workers marched through the streets of Little India—smashing, overturning, and burning police cars in what is now officially termed 'the Little India riot', Singapore's first public order incidence since the 1964 racial riots (Kaur, Tan, and Dutta, 2016). In response, the Singapore state ramped up work to enforce much stricter control on migrants while paradoxically resorting to discourses of integration. On the one hand, Singapore legislated the 2015 Foreign Employee Dormitory Act to draw migrants away from the city, requiring them to live in purpose-built dormitories that operate as separate, "self-contained townships" in the city's outskirts. On the other hand, the state introduced various initiatives purportedly to expedite migrants' "integra[tion] into [Singaporean] community better" (Singapore Police Force, 2014) despite consistently blocking their formal access to permanent settlement, family reunification, and citizenship (Bal, 2022). This article explores what it means for migrants to simultaneously integrate and segregate, and how their enforced transience and indefinite foothold in the city-state further complicate their social relations with others in Singapore and their transnational ties with those at home. Here I define integration loosely as an evolving two-way process of mutual acceptance and collectivity (Erdal and Oeppen, 2013) and transnationalism as ways of being and belonging that link together multiple locations beyond nation-state borders (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004).

There is rich and expanding work on the integration-transnationalism matrix. However, scholars have largely turned their empirical and theoretical lens to permanent forms of migration in western liberal democracies where migrants take up residence and become gradually embedded in their localities while also reconstructing certain forms of social belonging transnationally. In effect, integration is often conceptualized as a pathway toward permanence and full membership, and transnationalism as a post-resettlement project. This overlooks temporary forms of migration in Asia in which access to permanent residency is legally precluded, yet in which certain forms of integration and transnationalism unfold under the very conditions that are designed to thwart them. This article aims to close these empirical and theoretical gaps by turning an analytical lens to Singapore, a newly industrialized postcolonial city-state in Southeast Asia whose functioning is exceedingly predicated on the continuous and *long-term* supply of *temporary* migrant labour (Yeoh and Lam, 2022; Castles, 2004). Treating the state construction of temporariness as legally transient yet factually long-term, I explain why, despite blocking migrants' access to permanence and politico-legal integration, the Singapore state has produced increasingly integrationist discourses to govern its growing temporary migrant population. In doing so, I offer insights into how the concept of integration—which has been developed as a policy instrument (Ager and Strang, 2008) and an analytical tool (Pennix and Garcés-Masareñas, 2016) in western contexts but has now gained currency in other parts of the world—is understood, adapted, and pursued by a non-western state in their specific politico-historical contexts. I pick up the call raised by Grzymala-Kozłowska and Phillimore (2018) and Hadj-Abdou (2019) to locate critical integration analyses within the context of transnationalizing cities (Vertovec, 1999).

This article draws on empirical material from sixteen in-depth interviews and two group discussions (n=26) performed from June to July 2024 in Singapore. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the key concepts of integration and transnationalism before I explain how temporary migrant labour is incorporated into Singapore's unique socio-historical contexts. In the subsequent sections, I will present two sets of arguments. First, the Singapore state simultaneously employs strategies of integration and segregation to construct desirable migrant subjectivities and lessen the perceived 'social ills' associated with its highly temporary migration regime. This partial and 'temporary' integration is a necessary ingredient that allows the state to reap the benefits of temporary low-paid migrant labour while concurrently evading the assumed threats of its structural dependence on temporary migrant labour to its multicultural harmony. Second, while migrants are socially pressured to integrate and legally forced to remain embedded in transnational social fields, their pathways to legal-political integration are blocked and their ability to reconstruct transnational practices is often structurally constrained. This produces processes of integration and transnationalism that are riddled with a sense of uncertainty and involuntariness. While invariably feeling stuck, however, migrants are not always passive agents. Circumnavigating the rules and restrictions of the work permit system, some migrants prove their deservingness and exert their often invisibilized existence by caring for the city through various volunteering activities. I conclude the article by reiterating the need to train our analytical lens on temporary migration regimes for more comprehensive theorizing of the relationships between integration and transnationalism under conditions of enforced temporariness.

## **Situating integration-transnationalism within temporariness**

The concept of integration is often used to examine processes by which states carefully incorporate into their citizenry what they perceive to be 'too culturally distinct' (Favell, 2022) yet 'deserving' migrants (Hinger, 2020) who are 'in need' of assistance (Samuk, 2020) as they resettle in host countries (Desille, 2020). Integration involves migrants' gradual inclusion into cultural, civic-political (Kesgin, 2024; Goodman, 2010), residential (Hall, 2013; Portes and Zhou, 1993), and other structural institutions (Nilsson, Escobar, and Ahl, 2023; Snel, Engbersen, and Leerkes, 2006) to achieve parity of life chances as the citizens (Alba and Foner, 2015). However, this functional approach to integration has received growing criticisms as it portrays a fictitious image of the host society as a territorially bounded and already unambiguously integrated whole, into which migrants must 'transplant' themselves, and in which the success of their incorporation is arbitrarily measured from a position of power (Korteweg, 2017). For this reason Schinkel (2018) suggests renouncing the integration concept because of its complicity in reproducing systems of neocolonial violence by reinforcing migrants' portrayals as the problematic Other. However, other scholars underscore the analytical utility of integration and instead call on scholars to take a more critical stance—that is to treat integration as an evolving process rather than an outcome of policy measures (Erdal and Oeppen, 2013), and as an analytical tool (Pennix, 2019) to expose underlying socio-political systems that actively shape migrants' opportunity structures and construct them as inherently 'unintegratable' (Hadj-Abdou, 2019).

Building on this strand of research, Saharso (2019) draws attention to how integration unfolds under and interacts with broader processes of transnationalism, in which people continue to maintain political and emotional attachments with multiple locations across borders, through which ideas and practices are continuously circulated back and forth (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves,

2011). Scholars have made theoretical inroads to explain the relationships between integration and transnationalism. Earlier work argues that migrants' increasing identification with the host society will attenuate the strength of their transnational ties (Alba and Nee, 1997), producing what Waldinger (2015) refers to as 'societal divergence', in which migrants' withering ties with their ancestral home lead to increasing cultural dissimilarity from the context of origin. This zero-sum hypothesis has been refuted by a more recent strand of research that demonstrates various instances in which integration and transnational processes do not simply co-exist (Bloch and Hirsch, 2018; King and Christou, 2014; Itzighsohn and Saucedo, 2002), but also simultaneously reinforce each other (Levitt, 2014; Oeppen, 2013).

While these studies have deepened our understanding of the complex nexus between integration and transnationalism, their empirical focus has exclusively been on permanent forms of migration in North American and European contexts (Levitt, 2015), in which integration is often understood as a pathway to securing full membership, and transnationalism as a post-resettlement project. This ignores migratory patterns in the non-western states such as Singapore, where migrants must rely on highly circular movement to secure a long-term yet impermanent foothold on its shores (Ostertag, 2016). I argue that excluding these forms of migration from the empirical focus of integration-transnationalism research limits our understanding of how integration and transnational processes unfold in the context of enforced transience. This paper aims to close such empirical and theoretical gaps by turning its analytical spotlight on Singapore's transient labour migration which, despite its legally temporary status, often functions as a 'de facto permanent' project (Peters, 2017) that includes multiple back-and-forth mobilities over an extended period of time.

Although the bulk of integration-transnationalism research has privileged permanent and regular migration in western liberal democracies, some scholars have begun to study how, despite nonexistent access to permanence and citizenship, 'undesirable' migrants are otherwise incorporated into socio-cultural processes of the host society. Borrowing the queer vocabulary of 'coming out' and 'camouflage', Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas (2010) capture ways in which undocumented migrants carefully and continuously switch between visible and invisibilized existence to navigate a deportation regime and insert themselves in the spatio-temporal rhythms of city life through what Schweitzer (2017) calls 'acts of self-integration'. These acts of self-inclusion are not difficult to see in how undocumented migrants 'disappear' into public crowds as they perform their everyday routines, such as getting around on public transport, visiting the gym, or going to religious events (Allerton, 2020; Muliček, Osman, and Seidenglanz, 2015). In this case, public spaces function as sites of encounters that present opportunities for undocumented migrants to stake a claim on the city (Kalandides and Vaiou, 2012) and partially restore a sense of control over their lives (van Liempt and Staring, 2021). Despite their ability to blend into and use the city through urban strategies of (in)visibility (Buhr, 2018), however, undocumented migrants often become trapped in 'territorial confinement' (Waldinger, 2008) as their cross-border mobilities are drastically circumscribed, which loosens family ties with those left behind (Bendixsen, 2018; Vickstrom and Beauchemin, 2016). My paper joins this strand of research but complicates the debate on legality further by shifting its analytical focus to migrants who are legally recruited and deployed in Singapore but who are trapped in indefinite temporariness and subject to a similar deportation regime.

Deportation is central to the legal construction of temporariness. Bal (2022) observes that deportation laws in Singapore are often enforced to produce highly obedient and temporary

economic subjects by stripping migrants off their political personhood so that they can be flexibly 'used' and 'discarded' in response to the vagaries of the global market. This temporally uncertain but possible deportation then functions as a disciplinary tool to exert control on migrants (Robertson, 2014). Borrowing Cwerner's concept of 'heteronomous times' (Cwerner, 2001), which describes migrants' lack of control over their time, Baas and Yeoh (2019) demonstrate how temporary migrants are powerless not only over how long they can stay in the host country, but also over their lengthy and continuously changing work shifts which result in their eventual alienation from the general public. This often creates a sense of disjuncture both from the temporal rhythms of public life in the host country, and the different aspects of migrants' own lives (i.e. between future aspirations and lived realities) (Griffiths, 2014).

Other scholars have also drawn attention to the 'transtemporal' (Coe, 2013) dimension of temporary migration regimes in which migrants must reorder and perform their parental duties across borders and different time zones due to nonexistent access to family reunification. While some can recreate their temporal rhythms using mobile phones to sustain their sense of emotional connectedness with those left at home (Triandafyllidou, 2022; Acedera and Yeoh, 2019), others may experience 'temporal ruptures' (Griffiths, 2014), a deep sense of disconnectedness caused by multiple and overlapping temporal experiences that are too sudden to handle. My paper borrows these analytical frameworks to understand how temporalities shape temporary migrants' integration and transnationalism. In this paper, I move beyond the functional aspects of integration since Singapore's temporary migrant workers are already 'integrated' in a structural sense (i.e. incorporated into the labour market, housing, and other structural institutions albeit temporarily). Instead, I respond to Erdal and Oeppen's suggestion (2013) to conceptualize integration more broadly as an ongoing process of social inclusion that fosters a sense of collectivity. In doing so, my paper also responds to the call raised by Saharso (2019), Levitt (2015), and Vertovec (1999) on the need to do more empirical work in order to understand how and why some migrants tend to remain transnational than others.

## Data

I collected both secondary and primary data for this study. My secondary data were drawn from publicly available sources including policy documents, government reports, NGO publications, and newspaper articles, allowing me to understand the broader institutional context that shapes Singapore's model of migrant integration. Meanwhile, I used semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and field observations to assemble primary material for this study. I recruited a total of twenty-six participants representing diverse stakeholders. Of twenty-six participants, I interviewed three NGO workers and ten migrants in two separate group discussions. Since three of these ten participants were also integration 'ambassadors', I decided to interview them individually to understand the state-led integration program and their perceptions of their own roles. Through these three integration ambassadors, I also recruited thirteen other participants and interviewed them individually. My migrant participants in this study represent varying occupational roles and employment durations within the construction and shipbuilding sectors (collectively referred to as 'construction workers'). This allows me to understand the variation in the shape and strength of their integration and transnationalism. All of my migrant participants are male since Singapore's construction and shipbuilding sectors are exclusively male.

The interviews and group discussions allow migrants to select and narrate fragments of their lived experiences in order of significance to them (Morawska, 2018), helping me understand

their subjective worldviews and interpretations of their integration and transnational experiences. This method also helps me sharpen and redirect my scholarly inquiry by exploring temporally and spatially produced meanings based on the lived accounts shared by my participants, which may otherwise be lost to quantitative methods (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018). In addition, I also interviewed non-migrant stakeholders (n=4) who represent those who simultaneously support, question, and subvert state-led paradoxical strategies of spatial segregation and social 'integration'. These interviews allowed me to explore the tensions, simultaneities, and contradictions that are inherent in how temporary migrants integrate into Singapore and relate to their home countries. To enrich my empirical material, I carried out field observations in various sites where migrants are more likely to encounter both local citizens and other migrants, including public transport, public parks, houses of worship, and the colonial precinct of Little India. While fully aware that turning attention to the co-ethnic enclave of Little India may replicate ethnic bias in integration research (Dahinden, 2016; Glick-Schiller, Çağlar, and Gulbrandsen, 2006), I join King (2018) on the need to consider local contexts—in this case Singapore—where all-male migrants from South Asian countries tend to cluster around Little India as a result of multiple social and physical exclusions (Loong, 2018). To lessen the risk of ethnic bias, I respond to Marchetti's (2017) call to turn an analytical spotlight on social networks and observe how and when ethnic identity becomes a significant organizing factor in interpersonal relationships between migrants and citizens, as well as among migrants themselves (Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018). While I conducted my field observations during Sundays, when most migrants enjoy their weekly rest, I also observed various public locations to understand what Cwerner calls 'temporal alienation' (Cwerner, 2001)—that is, how migrants' lengthy work shifts result in their temporary detachment from social life and invisibilize their existence in public spaces. Lastly, I used thematic analysis to capture the various themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected.

## **Singapore's 'multiracialism': Uneven and racialized incorporation of migrant labour**

Race has been an important organizing identity in Singapore since its pre-independence era. In 1822, the British colonial government introduced the Singapore Jackson Plan, partitioning the population into racially differentiated neighborhoods as part of its divide-and-rule politics (Tan, 2016). Since independence, the postcolonial government has continued to use race as a key instrument of nation-building (Rocha and Yeoh, 2019) by appropriating the racial framework of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) to fulfill its own vision of multiculturalism (officially called 'multiracialism') (Chacko, 2017) which, aside from ensuring parity of rights, is mainly about preserving the demographic proportions of its founding races of CMIO (Goh, 2009). This 'racial balance' is perceived as foundational to Singapore's national harmony and 'survival' (Ortiga, 2015), and it is maintained by deliberately calibrating the country's racial composition to ensure that the ethnic Chinese continue to make up roughly three-fourths of the total population (Frost, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that since independence, the demographic ratios of Singapore's founding races have remained remarkably stable (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2023).

In recent years, however, Singapore has faced considerable demographic challenges that threaten to topple its racial balance. While life expectancy has risen to 83 years (SDS, 2024), birth rates have plummeted, especially among ethnic Chinese and Indian (ICA, 2024). In



response, the government aims to increase its population to 6.9 million by 2030 (Cheam, 2016), many of whom would be new citizens who are initially lured in as 'high-skilled' migrants and 'sourced' from race-specific countries, notably India (Chacko, 2017) and mainland China (Ang, 2022), in a purposeful attempt to make up for Singapore's own rapidly shrinking Indian and Chinese populations, but also equally important, to use these 'foreign talents' to cement the country's grip as a "key node in the network of global cities" (Prime Minister's Office, 2013). While the steady inflow of Indian and Chinese talents provides a ready pool of potential citizens to sustain Singapore's racial balance, it simultaneously induces anxieties among ethnic Malay, who have historically been minoritized and marginalized (Suratman, 2011). In retrospect, the Minister of State reassures that the demographic proportion of ethnic Malay has been maintained (Chang, 2013), and that the profiles of would-be citizens and pace of permanent immigration are "carefully calibrated to preserve Singapore's racial balance" (MHA, 2020a).

Singapore's continuing pursuit of racial balance has resulted in a two-pronged approach to managing immigration. This produces what Yeoh (2006) calls 'bifurcated labour', a highly stratified process of incorporation in which migrants' race, skill, gender, and income level are conflated to determine their entitlements (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas, 2020). In this regard, high-skilled migrants of predominantly Indian and Chinese origin are lured to settle permanently and ease Singapore's path toward a global business hub, whereas 'low-skilled', racialized Others are cast aside as a particular category of migrants that are constructed at the point of admission as unworthy of permanence (Robertson, 2014). Despite that, Singapore continues to hire large numbers of temporary migrants for the economic necessity of their cheap and flexibilized labour while averting the social consequences of their existence on Singapore's racial harmony. Today temporary migrant workers account for roughly 20 percent of Singapore's total population, of whom nearly half a million are employed in the construction and shipbuilding sectors (MOM, 2024a). They are hired from very specific, government-approved countries and deployed in racially differentiated and highly gendered sectors, with all-male workforce of mainly Bangladeshi and Indian origin powering the construction and shipbuilding sectors, and all-female workforce of mostly Indonesian, Philippine, and Myanmar descent providing services in the domestic sector (MOM, 2024b).

The Singapore government enforces separate labour laws to regulate its bifurcated migrant labour. While high-skilled migrants come under the Employment Act (EA), the country's main labour law that equally covers citizens, temporary migrant workers are singled out and specifically governed by the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA), which contains far fewer entitlements and imposes a form of biopolitical control by prohibiting migrants to marry, commit 'immoral behavior', become pregnant, or bring their dependents into Singapore (EFMA, n.d., p.19). As such, temporary labour migration in Singapore is a highly individualized undertaking that entails family separation and requires migrants to reconstruct and perform their family duties across borders. Under the current work permit system, migrants are posited as discardable labour without any right to permanent residency. They are employed on time-bound contracts that rigidly chain their legal status to the employers, who can terminate their employment unilaterally (MOM, 2024c). This combines immigration-related precariousness with various forms of labour precarity (Baey and Yeoh, 2018), entrapping migrants within 'the confines of legality' (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2010) as they wade through the shrinking spaces of legality that have ironically come to serve as a source of precariousness rather than protection (Franck and Anderson, 2019). Migrant rights activists contend that the Little India riot in 2013 is more than simply a spontaneous expression of anger at the tragic death of migrants' fellow

countryman. Rather, it signifies migrants' collective plights and struggles against the widespread injustice and broader structural violence undergirded by Singapore's highly temporary migration regime that is further reinforced by high-handed employers (Benner, 2013).

## Spatio-temporal strategies of urban segregation

Rejecting allegations of systemic injustice, the Singapore government ascribed the riot to public drunkenness (MOM, 2014) to justify a tightened control on migrant bodies. This includes legislating the 2015 Liquor Control Act, which facilitates a nation-wide ban on the supply and consumption of alcohol from 10.30pm to 7am, with much stringent enforcement in 'liquor-control zones' of Little India and Geylang, where public drinking is banned from Saturday to Monday (MHA, 2015). In addition, the state begins deploying large numbers of auxiliary police to surveil and prevent crowding by displacing migrant gatherings that occur in Little India's void decks into spaces where they come under the direct gaze of around 200 police cameras (MHA, 2020b). The riot was used to legitimize the scaling up of surveillance far beyond the specific location in which it occurred—to police an entire area of South Asian heritage whose previously obscure physical boundaries have now become clearly demarcated (see Figure 1 below) and made manifest by the proliferation of liquor-control and no-fighting signs that mark these spaces as exceptionally problematic and dangerous (Loong, 2018).

**Fig. 1: Map showing liquor control zone of Little India**



Source: (Singapore Police Force, n.d.)

Aside from further tightening control on Little India, Singapore ramped up work to draw migrant crowds away from the city by building nine recreation centers on the island's outskirts (see Figure 2 below). These recreation centers are constructed to resemble and operate as alternatives to the Little India—providing one-stop, 'self-contained' socializing venues in which amenities like Wi-Fi, telecommunication shops, convenience stores, beverages outlets, game

courts, barber shops, multi-purpose halls, gym equipment, remittance services, and medical centers are provided (MOM, 2024d). Recreation centers are predicated on the logic of transience; given migrants' transient foothold in the city, their needs are not rigidly fixed to any specific location. Rather, all amenities catering to them are 'detachable' in principle and thus can be moved about and away—to reduce 'encroachment' on public spaces in the city which have increasingly been seen as extensions of Singaporeans' constricted domestic spheres as a result of the country's tiny land area and cramped housing (Goh, 2019).

**Fig 2. Map showing migrant dormitories and recreation centres**



Source: Created on Google Maps based on data from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM, 2024e; MOM, 2024f)

Recreation centers often operate as an 'enclavement measure' to enforce norm and order (Turner, 2010). While they provide 'contact zones' of co-national belonging and support where migrants can socialize and enjoy leisure activities outside the confines of their dorms, recreational centers simultaneously contain migrant crowds within 'spaces of surveillance' (Marquez, 2012) where the state exercises the powers of its regulatory frameworks to produce obedient migrant subjects. In addition, largely sited away from the city, recreation centers reinforce boundary work by rendering all-male migrant construction workers largely invisible and separate—not only from local citizens but also from all-female migrant domestic workers who are likely to congregate around various prime sites in the city center. Managing the upkeep of Migrant Workers' Centre Recreational Club, the first recreation center in Singapore, Kumar (48) shared:

"Officially, the Singapore government doesn't want them (male and female migrants) to gather. You and I know what [can] happen. They're human beings, right? We don't want another population because as a [work permit] foreign worker, you can't get married. You

can't do that here. What you can do is, hear no evil, see no evil, talk no evil, life goes on." - Kumar (48)

The Little India riot also renewed public attention on migrant housing which, in 2009, became a national debate after the plan to convert an unused school building in the city into a migrant dormitory "cause[d] some unhappiness or discomfort among Singaporeans" (MOM, 2009). In response to the riot, Singapore legislated the Foreign Employee Dormitories Act in 2015 to relocate construction workers into "self-contained" dormitories with all facilities "set aside for living and gathering" in order to "reduce their need to travel far" into the city (MOM, 2014). Constructed away from the city, each of these 58 privately owned and run 'mega-dormitories' houses up to 35,000 migrant construction workers (MOM, 2024e) of predominantly Bangladeshi and Indian origin. They are equipped with all facilities required to function as 'self-contained' remote townships (TS Group, 2024) aiming to lessen Singaporeans' psychological discomforts of physical nearness and embodied interactions with migrant workers. This was confirmed during an interview with Kumar (48), a member of the Dormitory Association Singapore Limited (DASL), which builds and oversees most of the migrant mega-dormitories in Singapore:

"Most of the dorms are in the outskirts, not near housing estates. There's racial tension about migrant workers living in the city, in housing estate areas. Some people don't like that. So I'll build a dormitory in Tuas, outskirts and everything. I won't build a dormitory in the middle of Little India even if there's land." - Kumar (48)

This social segregation is further compounded by work-related precarity. Earning a basic daily wage of SGD 18, newly arrived migrants are compelled to undertake overtime work and spend longer hours at work in order to assemble financial resources and repay their migration debts, which can amount to SGD 15,000. Empirical evidence from this study shows that as 'general workers', migrants receive a basic monthly income of around SGD 450 for five days of work from 8am to 5pm, of which about SGD 200-300 is spent on food and personal bills, while the remainder is spent toward paying loans and providing for their left-behind families. To make extra earnings and sustain themselves in Singapore, many work overtime, including on weekends, for which their wages are doubled. My participants share that migrants are generally trapped in this situation for two years until their loans are paid off, after which they can begin to accumulate some portions of their monthly wages to enroll in educational courses. From these upskilling programs, they acquire the skills necessary not only for gaining better pay but also for securing a longer but impermanent foothold in the city since 'higher-skilled' construction workers can extend their stay from 14 to 26 years (MOM, 2024g). As a newly arrived migrant, Imran (23) recounts how he is structurally forced to suspend his personal and career life as he works toward paying off his debts, leaving his future temporally unclear:

"I have to manage my money, time, and everything. Sometimes I get \$700, sometimes more. I keep at least \$50 for the MRT and bus. Every month I set aside \$400 to pay for my bank loans. With this money it's not possible to arrange to pay for everything, and that's why during nighttime I do an outside job. This is illegal but I have no option. They give me \$50-\$60 per night. My situation is so difficult now. In the future maybe I will have a better option. It's still a dream. I don't know about the future. Just wait and see." - Imran (23)

For Imran, the necessity of doing illegalized, part-time work has resulted in further temporal detachment that segregates him from the temporal rhythms of not only well-to-do Singaporeans, but also fellow migrant construction workers who have 'resumed' their lives after completing the

first two years in which they are forced to put their career and personal life on hold. Another participant, Shabir (32) adds, “In the beginning, I didn’t go out so much for around 2 years because I would need at least \$10 for transport. I had to repay my loans, so I saved up and didn’t go out so much.” This demonstrates how Shabir’s indebtedness and low pay circumscribe his mobilities and entrap him in the social and physical peripheries of the city. Additionally, migrants often remain out of sight since they operate in parallel but disconnected timespace from locals. Living in a far-flung dormitory, Hasan (25) laments how “5 hours are lost from my life every day” as he commutes back and forth to work, leaving his dormitory “while the city still sleeps” and returning “when it is already dark”. Commenting on Hasan’s story, Abdur (32) contends that “there are rules and regulations between us (migrants and locals)” that keep migrants partitioned from Singaporeans, since “we can’t go to the locals’ house because we don’t know them, and they can’t come to see how we work without permission.” Therefore, such overlapping forms of temporal and spatial exclusions have largely erased migrants’ existence from public view.

**Fig. 3: Image showing lorry ferrying migrant construction workers in Singapore**



Image source: Author.

Migrants’ invisibility is further reinforced by their general absence from public transport since “we need to follow the company lorry because, how do [we] buy the bus [ticket]? We can’t afford it” (Sikder, 35). Living on the city’s outskirts away from the public transport system, migrants commute on company-hired lorries (see Figure 3) that are free of charge and provide easy rides directly connecting their dormitories to worksites and recreation centers. On weekends, shuttle bus services are provided at concession rates, linking their dormitories with recreation centers and bus terminals that are designated specifically for migrants in Little India. Occasionally using the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) to run errands, Hasan (25) recounts how the notable lack of migrant presence on the train makes him readily visible. He adds that “the spots and stains on [my]

clothes" immediately mark his difference and remind him of his foreignness—unlike "Singaporeans [on the train, who are] in good outfits because they are able to buy [them]." In conclusion, migrants' life and labour are temporally organized around and spatially limited to their dormitories, worksites, Little India, and recreation centers—all linked and bounded by company lorries and shuttle buses that serve to simultaneously facilitate and circumscribe migrants' mobilities and remove them from direct public view. This leaves very little room for urban encounters with local citizens.

## Governing 'temporary integration'

While the Little India riot served as a catalyst for multiple constructions of non-belonging that further marginalized migrant workers to the physical and social peripheries of the city, it simultaneously engendered a public discourse on integration. The riot is interpreted as a potent symbol of a disintegrated Singapore, for which there is a need to "educate [migrants] on Singapore's laws, culture, and acceptable social behavior" so that they can "integrate into our [Singaporean] community better" and shy away from "activities that will disrupt peace and harmony" (SPF, 2014). To fulfill its vision of an integrated Singapore, the government launched a peer-to-peer network called Foreign Worker Ambassadors Program (FWAP) in 2014, in which over 5,000 migrant worker 'ambassadors' have been recruited and deployed across migrant dormitories to induct their newly-arrived countrymen on Singapore's "traffic rules, local laws, [and] employment-related matters" (MOM, 2018) to help "smoothen [their] integration" and "assimilate into our society" (MWC, n.d.). Being seen as already 'integrated', these ambassadors are used as an extended hand of the state to produce desirable migrant subjectivities and "ensure a harmonious relationship within the [broader] community" (SPF, 2015).

The ambassadors program reproduces what Furnivall (2010, p.15) calls the Dutch *kapiten* system, a colonial administrative practice in which the state distributes some of its power to racialized local leaders to enforce control and order. In this program, the Singapore government recruits migrant construction workers from various racial backgrounds (MWC, 2023) and assigns them to leadership positions in their respective dormitories, where they serve as informal local leaders who maintain order and intermediate between the state and their racialized groups. Within their dormitories, ambassadors' profiles are clearly displayed on the "Ambassadors' Walls" (MOM, 2017) to indicate where co-ethnic migrants can seek help in times of grief, but more importantly, to remind migrants to self-regulate as they remain under the watchful gaze of the state even within the supposedly private spaces of their dormitory rooms.

Ambassadors embody the qualities that the Singapore state aims to inculcate in newly-arrived migrant construction workers. Co-managing the ambassadors' program with the Ministry of Manpower, Kumar (48) reveals that an ideal ambassador:

"...[is] somebody who actually takes the time and effort to understand Singapore and their fellow countrymen, and then help them adjust accordingly. If I am a new Bangla worker, I will listen to a Bangla worker who has been here for some time. And my word carries a lot of weight as an ambassador as I've been here for 6, 8, 10 years. I will tell you the do's and don'ts. I will tell you don't spit, drink, rape a woman, smoke, jaywalk, do drugs or stupid things like that...the ambassadors are like grassroots leaders. They help you become part of [Singapore], integrate"- Kumar (48)

Conceptualized as already 'integrated', ambassadors serve as social intermediaries who use their knowledge of local regulations and cultural sensitivities to co-produce law-abiding migrant subjects who, despite their limited access to the city, should be able to blend into its machineries without causing frictions and disturbances (i.e. jaywalking, smoking, spitting are strictly prohibited in Singapore). This focus on maintaining public order is also highlighted by Shabir (32), a migrant ambassador, who is "taught how to control crowds and do public speaking [in my native language.]" Knowing the ins and outs of the city, Shabir advises new migrants "...to behave in public places, like [you] can't litter anywhere...some seats in the MRT are reserved for pregnant ladies, old people...don't gamble because your money is hard-earned...and you can't drink alcohol after 11pm." To further govern migrant bodies, the state extends public spheres far into migrants' privacy by deeming dormitory premises as legally public in order to impose the regulatory powers of the Liquor Control Act of 2015 (FEDA, 2015, p.39). In this regard, migrant ambassadors perform mutual surveillance by reporting any 'suspicious' and unruly behaviors, such as drinking outside designated hours (Teng, 2016), within the ambit of their dormitory blocks (SPF, 2023).

Migrants are often drawn to the ambassadors' program for the perks and benefits that allow them to gain a stronger foothold in the city. Being seen as 'good' and 'law-abiding' migrants, ambassadors are routinely provided with free access to Singapore's most famous facilities and public attractions that are otherwise largely inaccessible—not only because they lie beyond migrants' purchasing power but also because migrants are banned from using various facilities in the city (Yeoh and Lam, 2022). Working in the construction sector for 20 years, Sikder (35) reveals how serving as an ambassador for 10 years has enabled him to exert his presence in spaces from which he and other migrant construction workers have been structurally invisibilized. He continues:

"We're working people. We don't have money, so we can't go to Universal Studios. To enter Universal Studios, you need to pay \$100, right? Bird Park, Universal Studios, River Cruise, Flower Dome, John's Island. Many places. How many migrant workers have ever been there, *mah*? Never. Because *ah*, we count our salary. This one for my mother, this one [for] my wife, this one for my children, and this one for me. Sometimes *ah*, they [facilities] don't allow migrant workers to enter. But [as an ambassador] we can enter. I can go there for free." - Sikder (35)

Migrant ambassadors' wayfaring in and out of the city's privileged spaces constitutes an act of dwelling, through which they gradually develop familiarity and accumulate knowledge about the workings of the city and its resources. This 'spatial expertise' (Buhr, 2018) allows them to navigate the city and use its resources for their maximum benefit, but more importantly, to be involved in the city's spatial and temporal production of meanings (Allerton, 2020) and find their own ways of belonging (Woods and Kong, 2020).

These ambassadors gain access to various 'contact zones' (Goh and Lee, 2022) where they can "communicate with local people and local students" (Sikder, 35), enabling them to forge new connections and develop friendships across the citizen-migrant divide. Many come to 'the front stage' (Goffman, 1959) and gain visibility, often appearing in and co-organizing state-sponsored events. For instance, some of my ambassador participants gave talks alongside citizens at the 2024 Racial Harmony Day, which was the first to be held specifically for migrant workers. Organized annually to celebrate 'racial harmony' in remembrance of Singapore's 1964 race riots, the event aims to "...build a more harmonious society, a more harmonious place for our migrant

workers to work in," says the Ministry of Manpower (Devaraj, 2024). In the previous years, similar events were organized to facilitate citizen-migrant interactions under various themes fashioned with a sense of collectivity, such as "Befriend our Migrant Friends" and "Joining Hands, Building Bonds" (MOM, 2023; MOM, 2022). In this regard, migrant involvement and visibility are necessary—not only to give them a fleeting sense of acceptance and belonging to tamp down their anger at the structural exclusion that found expression in the Little India riot, but also to reinforce Singapore's own image as a welcoming, 'multi-racially' harmonious global city.

Although these events may be symbolic, they provide important avenues for building social networks, through which many migrant ambassadors create narrow openings to foster more meaningful engagement beyond the state-facilitated social interactions. For instance, Abdur (32) shares how the friendships that he has developed with Singaporeans has enabled him to see the life of a Singaporean household that otherwise remains largely out of view. He recounts that, "When [I] visit a Singaporean house, or they invite [me], I feel, oh [so] this is a [Singaporean] house. This sofa is soft. I'd sit down there. Even I use a cup to drink water. You know, [as] migrant workers, we don't drink from cups. We drink water from [plastic] bottles. We don't have jugs or cups...not even plates." Many share how these connections help them tap into various volunteering networks such as beach clean-up, book drive, and blood donation initiatives, through which migrants stake their claims on belonging by proving that they are deserving residents who equally care for the city. Syed (36) demonstrates how his deep involvement with such volunteering work is routinely met with delightful surprise by locals who comment, "'Wah, migrant workers also come to help Singaporeans, ah.'" Adding to Syed, Shabir (32) discloses that "many [newly-arrived migrants] are interested to learn [about] what I do, so I advise them to join." Therefore, migrant ambassadors help insert newly-arrived migrants into various social circles in the city through the narrow openings they create in the otherwise very exclusive spaces that aim to divide and exclude them.

## Involuntary transnationality: How migrants become stuck between 'here' and 'there'

While migrant construction workers are socially pressured to 'integrate', they are simultaneously barred from ever becoming permanent residents or bringing their dependents into Singapore. As such, their migration becomes a highly individualized undertaking that invariably entails family separation, for which they must reorganize and perform family obligations across borders (Asis and Feranil, 2020). In this context, staying within transnational social fields is not a question of choice, but rather, an everyday necessity to prevent and mitigate 'ruptures' in family relations (Yeoh *et al.*, 2020).

However, migrants' ability to construct transnational family arrangements is often constrained by their work-related precarity. Under Singapore's highly privatized labour migration in which worker recruitment and deployment are left almost entirely to the market conditions (Rahman and Lee, 2005), migrants must fork out up to SGD 15,000 to pay agency fees, for which they take loans from banks, private moneylenders, or relatives (Ganesan and Tham, 2024). Such indebtedness often compels migrants to work much longer hours in order to assemble financial capital and clear their loans, resulting in a disjointed and fragmented sense of time (Cwerner, 2001) as they must contend with the everyday disruptions of work that shrink the time spent with their left-behind families. Hasan (25) reveals that despite Singapore's 8-hour workday regulation, he *needs* to work nearly 12 hours every day to stay afloat since "working 8 hours is



not enough to earn a good wage." To make decent earnings, therefore, Hasan must reduce his family time. He continues:

"If your [basic] salary is \$500 and you need to spend \$300 per month for food and personal costs, how can you survive in Singapore? You only have \$200 to give to your family, and you need to pay back the \$6000 loan that you took to go to Singapore. Now [with] this money, [will] you pay your loan or [send it to] your family? [That's why] I don't have time to call my family [since I need to work overtime]. My mother misses me very much...[she] calls me every day. [But] sometimes I don't have energy to talk to my family." - Hasan (25)

To strike a balance between paying loans, sustaining himself in Singapore, and providing for his left-behind family, Hasan is forced to work much longer shifts in the first two years of his employment. During this time, Hasan's personal life is not only 'temporarily suspended' but also suffused with a sense of contradiction; that is, his ability to remit to his family (non-mobile transnational practice) is ironically achieved by sacrificing his time with them—in which case time has become a source of anxiety, stress, and dislocation (Robertson, 2014; Cwerner, 2001).

Migrants often experience 'temporal disjuncture' as they regularly fail to realign their time with that of their family members at home due to different time zones and strict regulations that govern their life and labour in the city. Sumon (25), for instance, shares that he rarely talks to his family since he is only free after 00.30 and must get ready for work at 5 in the morning—while it is still 3am in Bangladesh and his family are still asleep—"because company lorries leave at exact timings and won't wait." In agreement with Sumon, Rahmat (25) reveals that the price of missing a company lorry is too high since it means he will not be able to show up at work—because "if I go to work, they pay me \$18. If I don't go, I don't get \$18, and they cut \$40 from my salary". This temporal misalignment is compounded by differences in weekly holidays between Singapore and Bangladesh. Hasan (25) adds that "people in Bangladesh are only free on Fridays since Fridays are their public holidays. But I work on Fridays. I normally talk to my family on Sundays, but they work on Sundays. I also work on Sundays sometimes." As a result, to maintain their emotional connectedness with those at home, many rely on multiple short calls made during breaks throughout the day, and to compensate for their long physical and virtual absence, migrants tend to work toward remitting more often.

Empirical evidence from this study shows that migrants often convince themselves of the transitional nature of their present suffering in order to gain a sense of a more certain future. Imran (23), for example, admits that "I can't join any course because I don't have money yet. But I have a plan. When I finish paying off my loans, I will do an educational course." Similarly, Sultan (36) explains that when he first arrived in Singapore, he made his hardship more tolerable by imagining a better future.

"When I came to Singapore, my work location was Tuas South. Back in 2013, it was hot, and we stayed in temporary quarters, a 20-foot container. We had to share it with 8 people. How can 8 people stay in a container? At the time I made \$18, basic, [working from] 8am-5pm. I went through a lot of difficulties, but in that stage I decided I had to improve myself. After that I took a lot of courses, then I got promoted to a supervisor and my salary increased to \$25 per day." - Sultan (36)

Starting off as 'general workers', many enroll in various skilling courses in their fourth year—not only to fulfill the legal requirement to extend their maximum period of stay from 14 to 26 years (MOM, 2024g), but also to inch up the skill ladder and make more earnings to regain a sense of

control over their time. Finishing his diploma in engineering, Shabir (32) hopes to use his certificate to get a higher and fixed amount of monthly income in order to reorder his life and make it less unpredictable since “[now], I don’t know how much money I will make every month [depending on overtime work].” While upskilling is often believed to help migrants secure their grip on their jobs, Mehedi’s (34) experience disproves it. Despite having various certifications, Mehedi lost his job “because [his company] did not have any project” and returned to Bangladesh in 2015, showing how migrants remain vulnerable to the vagaries of the job market.

Having very limited safeguards against sudden loss of employment and forced repatriation, migrants are keenly conscious of their transience and disposability. For instance, recalling the experiences of his fellow countrymen, Sumon (25) trembles at the fact that “if you complain about a problem and the boss finds out, he can give you a flight ticket [and send you home] within one hour.” Consequently, migrants tend to self-censor in order to secure their employment and contend with their unfavorable work and living arrangements. Despite serving as an integration ambassador for 10 years, Sikder (35) agrees on the fragility of his job and, thus, his stay in Singapore. Since migrants’ right to stay is dependent on their employment status, the loss of their jobs entails the revocation of their permits to remain in Singapore. Sikder narrates:

“A lot of our dormitories don’t have any cooking facilities, but we can’t say anything. [I] am scared and worried that if I say something, some company bosses will be unhappy...these Singaporean bosses can send us back home anytime without any reason, and we can’t do anything. Recently a migrant worker stayed here for only 13 days. He paid agency fees, and yesterday he called me, he cried, ‘I have been here only [for] 13 days and my boss, without any reason, cut my permit and wanted to send me back.’ But we can’t do anything.” - Sikder (35)

In many instances, migrants incorporate the awareness of their fragility and transience into their migration projects. Masud (35), a construction worker who used to write and use poetry to draw attention to the plights of migrant workers, argues that “we are here to earn money. I stopped much activism when I realized the problem that is going on.” Although he has spent 16 years labouring in Singapore, Masud perceives his life in the city-state as transitory, stating that “I will finish my life here and then go back to my country...maybe [when] I am already 50 or 50 plus, [when] my son and daughter [start their undergraduate] studies, or start earning also.” Knowing that the strength of his transnational connection (i.e. remittances, return visits) is predicated on his ability to secure his job and permit to stay, Masud navigates within the state model of ‘integration’ to prove his obedience and worthiness to stay by carefully censoring himself.

Migrants who manage to stay in Singapore for longer periods tend to find themselves feeling stuck between ‘here’ and ‘there’ since they are barred from ever securing permanence in Singapore but often seen as belonging elsewhere by those at home. Working in Singapore for 18 years, Arif (38), for example, complains that ‘the first question they ask me on my first day [in Bangladesh] is ‘When are you going back [to Singapore]?’ That means I don’t belong there...nobody says don’t go back.” Arif’s long physical absence from home has made him increasingly seen as part of Singapore, but “we come here only for service...I serve here my golden time...but my future [is there], not here in Singapore,” producing a deep sense of disjuncture and alienation. Sharing a similar experience, Saiful (25) affirms, “My whole life I spent in Singapore. End of time I have to go back, no choice.” As such, while migrants are socially forced to integrate and at once legally required to remain transnational, they are often left feeling neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’ since their integration does not translate to permanence and

their transnationalism is often constrained by structural challenges, producing a kind of transnationality that is suffused with a sense of uncertainty and involuntariness.

## Conclusion

Centering on the 2013 Little India riot, this article has shown how Singapore enforces the paradoxical strategies of spatio-temporal segregation and social integration to serve the same purpose; that is to discipline and control. While the former is used to draw migrant crowds away from the city to control them more readily, the latter is designed to 'tame' unruly migrants by instilling a sense of acceptance and diversity. Integration, as the previous sections have shown, is defined and pursued in relation to public order. To be considered socially integrated by the state, migrants must 'behave' in public and blend into the workings of the city without causing friction and disorderliness. Keenly aware of their limited and impermanent foothold in the city-state, migrants continuously prove their obedience and deservingness—often through mutual surveillance and self-regulation—to lengthen their stay. Without recourse to family reunification and permanent residency, however, migrants do not have any choice but to stay embedded in transnational social fields.

This dynamic creates a paradox: migrants are *neither* fully "here," since their integration into Singaporean society remains partial and forever temporary, *nor* fully "there," as their transnational connections are frequently constrained by structural limitations—resulting in a pervasive sense of stuckness and uncertainty. Thus, rather than a marker of increased agency and blurring nation-state borders as some other scholars have suggested (Waldinger, 2015; Erdal and Oeppen, 2013; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011), migrants' transnationalism in this case signals the enduring significance of border regimes and state power. Findings from this study affirm the conceptual usefulness of integration in exposing hidden narratives (Pennix, 2019; Hadj-Abdou, 2019), while calling for greater attention on processes of transnationalism, which often occur in connection to or are interlinked with processes of integration. For more holistic theorizing of the relationship between integration and transnationalism, we need to pay greater scholarly attention to temporary labour migration regimes, which have become essential to the functioning of many Asian countries including Singapore—for which attention to the temporal dimension of integration and transnationalism should be emphasized.

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