

Choreographing the rhythms of encounter in Singapore's maid agencies

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This paper builds on Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis in order to extend our understanding of geographies of encounter in everyday social life. Focusing on the encounters that take place at maid agencies that match migrant domestic workers with local employers in Singapore, we develop the conceptual construct of choreography to show how bodies in spaces of encounter are rhythmically ordered to move through space in particular ways at specific speeds and times. The concept is also useful in studying encounters between migrants and citizens not just as serendipitous events but as purposively designed. Foregrounding the tangled relationalities that exist between maid agents, domestic workers, and employers, we show how employers' interactions with the materialities of the migration industry – such as the spatial arrangement of the maid agency and the biodata used in the selection of workers – set particular diagrammatic rhythms into motion, prefiguring corporeal migrant–local encounters before they begin. We depict migrant women's punctuated rhythms of moving and waiting, revealing how the eurythmia of the maid agency both conceals and is dependent on the arrhythmia of their bodies. Finally, by emphasising that choreography requires both design and performance, we investigate how migrant women are able to overturn the ordering of rhythms through improvisational moments. Attending to the practices of the maid agency allows us to reveal how relations of power between migrants and locals are reproduced within contexts of temporary labour migration.

KEYWORDS

Asia, encounter geographies, migrant domestic workers, migration industry, rhythmanalysis, temporary labour migration

1 | INTRODUCTION

An important vein of geographical scholarship on “throwntogetherness” in the spaces of urban life (Massey, 2005) has drawn attention to the nature of unexpected encounters in the city. While research on urban encounters has acknowledged the potential of cities in fostering an attunement to conviviality, scholars have also pushed back on uncritically romantic notions of cities to show that encounters may also reproduce prejudice under the guise of public tolerance. Focusing on how affectively charged encounters between different bodies have the potential to reconfigure or ossify stratification, hierarchies of power, and the operations of prejudice and racism (Ahmed, 2004), this growing body of work foregrounds the significance of spaces of encounter. For example, visibly non-white bodies on the bus in Darwin, Australia become sites of stress and moral condemnation (Lobo, 2014); wearing the veil in Malmo, Sweden reconstitutes spaces as locations of

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everyday physical and symbolic violence (Listerborn, 2015); and affectual chains emanating from a confrontation in a market square in Berlin show how boiling points of emotion become “articulations of microphysics of power” (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2015, p. 488). Much of the literature has focused on spatial encounters between those who are in and out of place as a “specific genre of contact” (Wilson, 2017, p. 452) that is fleeting but deeply felt, producing flashpoints of rupture, surprise, and difference. Collectively, this literature indicates that the conceptual value of encounter lies in its provisionality, where encounters are finely balanced between the potential of becoming manifestations of hatred or glimpses of hope.

While acknowledging the importance of studying encounters as serendipitous events of relation, we also call for greater attention to encounters that are structured by other forms of temporal ordering. This paper extends work in this direction by considering encounters that are ordered moments of time in space, distinctive interactions that are produced by choreography rather than happenstance. We situate our work in what is commonly known as maid agencies in Singapore, small shop-fronts of placement agencies specialising in the deployment of migrant domestic workers. Located in shopping malls and the suburban heartlands, these agencies play host to day-to-day encounters between migrant domestic workers, local employers, and migration brokers. They are generally akin to small shops, are open to the public, and usually look like simple reception offices, with brokers seated behind long counters waiting to help any would-be employer who might walk in. Employers visit these agencies to enlist maid agents to find domestic workers for them and are often found conversing with agents about their requirements and needs. Migrant domestic workers are also present in the shop; newcomers wait for their paperwork to be complete before leaving for their new places of work, while transfer workers between contracts are ready to be interviewed. Based on our observations at these maid agencies, we draw on the conceptual construct of choreography in order to make sense of the encounters that take place at this specific site, foregrounding the simultaneously ordered and improvisational nature of the dynamic rhythms and relations that coalesce between workers, employers, and agents.

The paper advances the research on encounters in three ways. First, it departs from the more common geographical focus on migrant encounters in globalising cities in European, Australian, and North American contexts, and instead grounds notions of encounter in an Asian metropolis that operates a carefully controlled migration-labour regime based on transient labour (that is, short-term labour contracts with little prospect of long-term residency and settlement). This provides an opportunity to address the paucity of work on Asian contexts, notwithstanding Ye's (2015) exemplary work on non-Western norms of civility that govern migrant–local encounters. By situating the study in the globalising city-state of Singapore, the paper draws attention to migrant–local encounters in cities characterised by highly asymmetrical power relations between citizens and migrant others, and where varying senses of temporality are associated with differently positioned bodies.

Second, most academic work has focused on urban encounters in public spaces. Scholars have examined public spaces such as cafes (Jones et al., 2015), buses (Lobo, 2014; Wilson, 2011), public squares (Doughty & Lagerqvist, 2016), playgrounds (Wilson, 2013a), and street corners (Elsheshtawy, 2013). Another node of interest focuses on “micropublics,” which Amin defines as spaces where “prosaic negotiations are compulsory” (2002, p. 969). However, this paper proposes that the shifts in alterity and rupture inherent in moments of encounter go beyond spaces conventionally perceived as public and/or (micro)public. Commercial quasi-publics such as maid agencies bring together in heightened flashpoints the vibrant clash of self and other peculiar to regimes dependent on admitting temporary labour migrants. Because migrant domestic workers are often sequestered in private homes, their participation in the life of the (micro)public is generally limited. Deliberately seeking out interstitial spaces such as maid agencies, where migrant women are engaged in intense moments of encounter with brokers and potential employers, is thus important in order to recognise how these encounters reproduce and challenge existing relations of power.

Third, the paper points to the value of applying the notion of encounter to understanding the potentiality of change in habitual, repetitive practices in day-to-day life. By examining the replicated practices of the migration industry through the lens of encounters, we deliberately make unfamiliar the well-worn and widely accepted arrangements of bodies, materialities, and mobilities in the maid agency. Instead of recognising “atonal infractions” in the symphony of conviviality (Nayak, 2017), we start from the presumption that the symphony (or, as we suggest, to better reflect the corporeal relationality of encounter, the dance) itself is ordered, written, and conducted by social actors. We argue that harmonic rhythmic lines – what Lefebvre calls a “bouquet” of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) – are in actuality produced by ordering forces to conceal or incorporate moments of improvisation. By shifting the work on encounters to maid agencies in Singapore, we suggest that encounters can be ordered and marshalled, and that serendipity is not a necessary precondition for the moment of encounter, especially if we take seriously the definition of encounters as “distinctive event[s] of relation” (Wilson, 2017, p. 452).

To achieve these ends, we draw on Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis in developing the idea of choreography as a conceptual construct rather than a descriptive metaphor. Instead of reading choreography in the "place ballet" of encounter (Seamon, 1979) – that is, as a consequence of the enactment of routinised everyday practices – this paper recognises the choreography of encounter as both design and performance. Encounters in maid agencies are where the production of dualisms and difference is made deliberate through material arrangements of space and domestic workers' bodies. Yet the performance of choreography, carried out as a dance of bodies engaged in a "corporeal micro-politics" (McCormack, 2008), varies from moment to moment. As temporary orderings (Edensor & Holloway, 2008), the performance of encounters is never perfectly replicable, prone always to minor and major divergences, improvisations, and shifts in mood, affect, and tempo. By taking as a starting point the choreography of encounter as ordered and performed, we ask how existing relations of power are reproduced or disrupted.

2 | THE GEOGRAPHIES OF URBAN ENCOUNTERS

Authors carefully traverse the dual-edged nature of urban encounters in their work. Are urban encounters resonant, sustained, and political, resulting in ripples of change through people's personal biographies and effecting broader social shifts around prejudice and discrimination (Wilson, 2017)? Or if they are transient, banal, momentary, an "everyday rubbing along" (Ye, 2015, p. 92) characterised by norms of urban civility rather than the conscious building of a multicultural utopia (Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012)? Wilson (2011), for example, untangles the "passing propinquities" of riding the bus to show how passengers order a positional calculus of bodies to reinforce particular regimes of hatred, but also shows how "such mobile spaces are also spaces within which such formations are called into question and the possibility for dialogue across difference is realised" (Wilson, 2011, p. 637). Other researchers draw back and examine encounters through intersectional, cross-cutting biographies rather than simply gazing through a single plane of identity, finding that a fragile ethics of care can still be nurtured (Valentine & Waite, 2012). An important counterweight to existing work on encounters in the city is Junjia Ye's research on how encounters are organised in Singapore, where, as she points out, anxieties about assimilation do not take the same shape as they do in Western contexts. *Gui ju*, an implicit code of civility, is what orders encounters between migrants and locals in Singapore, in which the end-goal is the aversion of open conflict. *Gui ju* therefore exposes "dominant orderings in space, who knows how to behave and who does not, who belongs and who does not" (Ye, 2015, p. 97).

While these studies are attuned to the serendipity of urban encounters, it is in more organised settings that relations of hope, connection, and change are emphasised. For example, befriending schemes between refugees, asylum seekers, and more-settled members of a community in Newcastle, England reveal the centrality of emotion in the constitution of citizenship and belonging (Askins, 2016). Studies on participatory art projects (Askins & Pain, 2011), an intercultural travel-work scheme (Ince, 2015), and interfaith projects (Mayblin et al., 2016) join this body of literature with varying assessments on the success of intercultural projects aiming to stimulate meaningful contact.

Laying out the contours of the literature reveals how difficult it is to map the maid agency onto existing studies of urban encounters. Some research has focused on institutional settings that reproduce particular norms and enforce specific expectations of behaviour. For example, Hemming (2011) and Wilson (2013b) write about how schools, as pedagogical sites, shape intercultural encounters among parents and students. Andersson et al. (2011) have also critically examined religious institutions as spaces of encounter to understand how these encounters shift traditional understandings about queer sexualities. Other scholarship gestures towards the role played by capitalist economies, commercial logics, and commodification in encounters within the city (Andersson et al., 2011; Ince, 2015; Wolifson, 2016). However, there remains a paucity in terms of understanding how bodies-in-encounter may be directed and organised in more explicit and tightly controlled ways. A school or church is different from a maid agency, which is a site that deliberately brings together differently raced, gendered, and nationalised bodies and positions them in hierarchical relation to one another to form an employment relationship. If encounters are a "vibrant clash" (Amin, 2002, p. 960) imbued with discomfort, vulnerability, and risk, then it is clear that maid agents engage in and produce encounters and seek to shape their outcomes in unique ways. In order to better understand this process and to bring this space into conversation with the literature on encounters, we turn to the idea of rhythms.

3 | THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF RHYTHMS

The notion of rhythm as an anchoring concept has been used to bring together ideas of both temporality and mobility, particularly when understanding the forces that order everyday spaces. A focus on rhythm reveals how the fixity and stability

of place is ceaselessly maintained through a “serial reproduction of its consistencies, through the reproduction of the changing same” (Edensor, 2010, p. 69). Consequently, a focus on rhythm steers us away from reifying places as fixed and static (Mels, 2016); instead, it sensitises us to momentary orderings rather than stable orders (Edensor & Holloway, 2008).

Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis has been deployed to understand the countervailing forces of repetition and variance in everyday social life. To the rhythmanalyst, nothing is immobile (Lefebvre, 2004). Lefebvre sets out two main rhythmic modes: clock time, a rhythm characterised by linearity, quantifiability, and specialisation (Lefebvre, 1984, 2004), and cyclic time, which follows an internal rhythm that Lefebvre compares to music and literature. The latter, Lefebvre argues, stems from the fact that we do not only live cumulative lives (Lefebvre, 1984) – instead, we also experience time-scales that are biological and renewable, founded in nature, desire, and the body (Lefebvre, 2004). These modes of time are not antagonistic, but are mutually constitutive and reciprocal: linear time and cyclical time are the “double measure” (2004, p. 74) of each other. The rhythms of the everyday therefore incorporate both repetition and variation; the body is a metronome that experiences and captures these rhythmical contradictions.

Lefebvre sketches out three types of rhythms: polyrhythmia, where rhythms are both multiple and unique; eurythmia, where “rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal ... everydayness”; and arrhythmia, where rhythms are “discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state” (2004, p. 16). Scholars have extrapolated on these rhythmic modes mainly by examining creative or leisurely pursuits such as coach tours (Edensor & Holloway, 2008), rock climbing (Rickly, 2017), walking (Edensor, 2010), and street performances (Simpson, 2008). Highlighting the emergence of the incidental and the unexpected, they note how the admixture of bodily rhythms of fatigue, the weather, and affect all play key roles in determining the tempo and speed of particular bundles of rhythms. Notably, Marcu (2017) deviates from this scholarship by relating these rhythmic states to the temporary mobility experiences of young Eastern Europeans. By drawing together broader structures of power with the finer grain of day-to-day life, she makes the point that rhythms, intimately experienced through the mobile body, are conditioned by the labour market.

An attentiveness to rhythms suggests that habitual daily life is not merely the consequence of routine; in fact, it is an effortful reproduction organised by particular forces. Through a process of what Lefebvre calls “dressage,” he argues that “humans break themselves in ... like animals ... one breaks in another human being by making them repeat a certain act, a certain gesture or movement” (2004, p. 39). Dressage is what teaches us how to walk, move, and gesture, giving shape to our minute bodily mobilities. This repressive and juridical nature of power as depicted in Lefebvre has been criticised (Simpson, 2008). Indeed, scholars argue that dressage – the automated repetition of particular gestures to the extent that it becomes habituated – can give rise to expertise, improvisation, skill, and moments of euphoria (Edensor, 2012).

Applying the idea of dressage to the ways in which brokers moderate and modulate the bodies of migrant women and employers is inadequate. It implies an absolute assertion of will that does not reflect the ruptures and variations that surface in the day-to-day reproduction of life within the space of the agency shopfront.¹ On the other hand, simply analysing the rhythms of the agency space according to a Lefebvrian framework – similar to how street performances and coach tours have been understood – foregrounds serendipity, potentiality, and coincidence in ways that fail to fully consider the conditioning effects of the migration brokers and, more broadly, the migration industry. Consequently, instead of Lefebvre's poetic but abstract “garland” of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004), or a disembodied musical symphony (Nayak, 2017), we propose the concept of *choreography* to make sense of encounters at the maid agency.

The notion of choreography evokes the idea of bodies ordered to move through space in particular ways at particular speeds and times. It suggests time, rhythm, space, force, tempo, and bodily motion. It highlights a relation of power: the choreographer makes the dance for other bodies to carry out.² Beyond bodies, it also focuses attention on emotion and affect by conceptualising the flow of movement as “generative spacetimes sensed as gatherings of intensity in the shapes of worldly arrangements” (McCormack, 2014, p. 204). Yet choreography is not only designed; it cannot exist in potentiality; it must also be performed. It is made possible by sets of bodies occupying and producing different constellations of relationalities, energies, and moods at any given time. As McCormack (2008) reflects, dance involves a “process of subtle negotiation of relations between bodies” (p. 1826). In performance, perfect replicability is impossible; dancers may follow a series of steps, but they may also choose to improvise, modulate, and redirect their energies from moment to moment. Nor do dancers perform in isolation; they do so always in inter-corporeal relation with each other, minutely attuned to each other's moods and movements. Any performance contains an element of the risk of failure: the migration industry may harness bodies in specific ways, but they cannot, with absolute predictability, dictate the outcomes of encounters. In this way, the conceptual construct of choreography mirrors the logic of encounter as the emergence of the eventual from the habitual. This hearkens to Simpson's call to pay attention to “rhythm not as an object, but an emergent relation” (Simpson, 2008, p. 824). In the next section, we introduce the contours of Singapore's labour migration regime before approaching the encounters that occur at maid agencies through the lens of choreography.

4 | SINGAPORE'S LABOUR MIGRATION REGIME

The composition of Singapore's varied multitudes has almost always included the uneasy and contested enfold of waves of migrants into its national geobody. Now drawing on the labour of 965,200 low-waged migrant workers (Ministry of Manpower, 2018), Singapore relies heavily on migrants by operating a contract-based temporary labour migration regime that enforces the constant turnover of the “semi-skilled” or “unskilled” inhabitants of the city. The marked temporal, spatial, and social sequestration of labour migrants means that they often encounter a city that can be as thorny in its hostility (Loong, 2018; Yeoh et al., 2017) as it might be open in its cosmopolitan potential (Yeoh & Huang, 1998).

Of the nearly one million low-waged migrants working in semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs in Singapore, 246,800 are migrant domestic workers, which works out as one domestic worker for every five households in the city-state (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2017). These domestic workers come to Singapore from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar (Seow, 2015) on contracts and visas that must be renewed every two years and that impose restrictions on marriage, pregnancy, and job mobility. This creates a “revolving door” migration regime where low-waged labour migrants are precluded from permanent residency, preserving the racial geobody of the Singapore nation by excluding particular labour flows from incorporation into the global city (Yeoh, 2006). As such, Singapore's cosmopolitanism is a carefully curated, uneasily calibrated, and highly contested one (Ortiga, 2015; Yeoh, 2004).

As transient workers, the experience of migrant domestic work in Singapore is often ridden with a sense of precarity (Lewis et al., 2015). Migrant domestic workers are legally required to live in their employers' homes, may be repatriated at their employers' will, and are not covered by Singapore's Employment Act (Ministry of Manpower, 2018). This means that migrant women's working conditions – their days off, salaries, sleeping arrangements, working hours, and food, for example – are privately negotiated between employer and worker, usually with the help of an agent, rather than buttressed by labour laws.

Licensed employment agents play a significant role in the incorporation of migrant workers into the fabric of life in Singapore (Wee et al., 2018). In fact, the Singapore state has devolved many significant functions of migration governance to brokers and intermediaries (Goh et al., 2017). Not only do agents work with their counterparts in countries of origin to recruit and deploy women to families in Singapore, they also play a large role in mitigating domestic workers' access to urban social participation, such as by helping to determine their number of days off. Because migrant women's access to public space is so often barricaded by employers and agents, it is critical to grasp how temporary labour migrants' encounters with the Asian city are mediated by migration brokers (Schuermans, 2013; Yeoh, 2015).

5 | METHODOLOGY

This paper draws from 29 months of ethnographic research conducted between 2015 and 2017. Part of this research involved the observation of goings-on at the shopfront site of one of Singapore's major agencies over the course of three weeks. As Lefebvre writes, “To grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it” (2004, p. 27). The first author thus spent hours sitting in the waiting area and behind the counter of the maid agency, taking note of conversations and bodily movements. She drew waiting employers into conversation or was drawn into conversation herself, spoke to maid agents in quiet moments to commentate or reflect on on-going events, and often also went to the bathroom to find opportunities to speak to the migrant women. She was attuned both to the dreamlike lassitude – punctuated by moments of anxiety – experienced by the waiting migrant women, and the pressure-cooker stress experienced by maid agents who spent much of their time fielding complaints and diffusing tensions. Her presence, approved by the agency's director, was treated with some wariness by the maid agents, who felt the surveilling eye of their boss, and with bemusement by the migrant women, who were curious about her position there. She sought to inhabit the role of the observer – an attempt to externalise herself from the rhythms of the agency, much like Lefebvre's vantage point from the Parisian window – but was inevitably also, as an active participant in the agency space, mindful of her transforming influence on the maid agency by dint of her presence, like Lefebvre and Regulier's rhythmanalyst strolling the streets of a Mediterranean town. As a young Chinese woman, her presence, if remarked upon, was explained and accounted for in terms of a student from a local university working on a research project. Over time the maid agents and migrant women grew accustomed to her presence; this was marked by increasingly relaxed and open conversations.

This manuscript draws largely from these observations, as well as 28 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employment agents who recruit and place migrant domestic workers in Singapore. Held mainly at agents' shopfronts, these interviews gave us the opportunity to further immerse ourselves in the daily rhythms of maid agencies. In the course of our fieldwork, we also participated in agents' professional meetings, observed how agents recruited their migration candidates

from Indonesian recruitment companies, visited dormitories that housed migrant domestic workers, and sat in on orientation and training programmes organised for domestic workers. We also collected documents frequently used within the migration industry, such as contractual agreements, price plans, insurance agreements, payment schedules, biodata, and conflict mediation records, which helped sharpen our understanding of employment agents' practices.

While our study was focused on articulating the perspectives of migrant brokers, we also presented our preliminary findings to migrant domestic workers in order to elicit their responses and experiences of the recruitment process. We organised two research presentations with 30–40 domestic workers, followed by five focus group discussions. We also maintained active relationships with local NGOs and the migrant women they served; this included serving as volunteers and eliciting conversations with the migrant women we met to further triangulate our findings. Migrant women's voices are not explicitly at the forefront of this particular argument, which focuses on how migration brokers order migrant workers' bodies and movements, but their perspectives inform our research. Other scholars have more richly explored the migration industry from migrant women's points of view (for such an account see, for example, Killias, 2018). We sought to foreground the migration industry partly in order to understand how relations of power are reproduced and maintained by the brokers themselves.

6 | SETTING THE STAGE FOR ENCOUNTERS

The agency that forms the site of these observations is located in a shopping mall in central Singapore. The size of the agency accommodates a small waiting area and two counters, behind which sit three or four agents. Leather stools are lined up before these counters for customers to occupy. Past the office through a narrow corridor is a "back stage" (Goffman, 1959) – a partially concealed area that holds a long bench where waiting migrant domestic workers, visible in glimpses, sit and chat in low voices. On one of the walls hangs a collage of photos of domestic workers and framed awards earned by the agency. The counters are dominated by stacks of biodata – the term used for the resumes, photos, and personal data of potential migrant workers, created for employers to flip through and assess their suitability as employees – as well as files consisting of contracts, payment and insurance policies, and sales agreements.

These visual and spatial arrangements allow brokers to choreograph the encounters that occur between employer and worker in particular ways. When potential employers walk in, they do not immediately encounter the workers who wait quietly in the agency's back stage; instead, they sit down to engage the agent and look through biodata. These materialities are not merely inert objects, but are, within the rhythms of the agency, a "multiplicity of nonrepresentational forces and practices and processes through which matter is always coming into being" (Latham & McCormack, 2004, p. 705). Materialities organise process and energy; as Latham and McCormack (2004) argue, they are both emergent and diagrammatic. By casually flicking through biodata rather than interacting with the women, employers first encounter materialities that foreground a worker's country of origin, her age, marital status, and number of children as indicators of her suitability as a domestic worker. These biodata thus offer categorical and diagrammatic ways of approaching the prefigured encounter with different migrant women as stranger, as other, and as less, as is shown by the following instance:

The employer peruses the biodata on the table while Janet,³ the agent, takes a phone call. She is unhappy that one of the recommended workers has had previous experience with a British family and finds this experience unsuitable for her own needs: 'angmoh⁴ family is different.'

As she pages, she's adding more desires to her wishlist: 'I want someone cheerful. She doesn't have to be clever.'

'This one is very clean,' Janet says. They're poring over the biodata together, examining workers' photos. 'Not like, this one – a bit messy.'

'She got many kids,' the employer says, checking the marital status and family background of another worker, 'so she needs to work.'⁵

Janet says: 'This one is ex-Singapore,⁶ so if she has a clean record, it can be very fast.'

'This one, no children,' the employer says. 'I don't like.'

‘Mm, you like [someone who’s] got burden...’

‘Yes.’

Pause. Employer: ‘This one I don’t want. Got hair in the food how? Quite hairy.’

Janet, handing a biodata over: ‘This looks very humble, ex-Singapore.’

The employer asks about the state of a worker’s teeth, noting that she did not want to be held responsible for any possible dental issues.

Janet, on another worker: ‘Looks sleepy-eyed, but the response is quite good.’ (14 December 2016)

As is clear from this punctuated commentary, the materiality of the biodata offer the purchase necessary for employers and agents to verbally express implicit assumptions about what would constitute an ideal domestic worker candidate. These interactions, focused on women’s migration backgrounds, personal histories, and bodies as displayed in photographs, gesture into being affective economies of disgust (“Got hair in the food how?”), ambivalence (“I don’t like”), and wary hope (“but the response is quite good”) – intensive relationalities that inform and frame potential intercorporeal encounters with migrant women. In other words, in the material shuffle of biodata,⁷ brokers have already begun to lay out the choreography of encounters between employers and workers, setting the rhythms of the migration industry into motion.

The rhythms constituted by the materiality of biodata and other visual paraphernalia also signal to migrant women that they are in a space of commodification. As one domestic worker commented, being at an agency made her feel as if she were a doll in a supermarket (Malay, 2014). There is an echo of sameness in the rhythm between employers’ and brokers’ interactions with the materiality used to facilitate women’s passages through the migration industry and the rhythm of their interaction with the women themselves. As we will show, much like biodata, which are picked up and put away as needed, migrant women are asked to move – to animate their bodies – generally at brokers’ behest or through habituated dressage, and expected otherwise to wait until called to face-to-face encounter.

7 | CHOREOGRAPHING BODIES

Aside from being sensitive to the materialities that construct the agency space, paying attention to the choreography of bodies and how they, too, constitute the fabric of materialities helps us to understand how embodied rhythms – relative speeds, movements, and velocities – reproduce codified norms of encounter within the maid agency (Adey, 2006; Brown, 2012). In our observations, migrant women spent the day waiting. In this particular agency, restrictions were comparatively lax and women were permitted to speak to each other quietly; in one instance, we observed a woman taking a nap. However, other agencies were far more stringent about the bodily comportment of waiting women. We observed maid agents hushing migrant women who spoke, even to each other, agents who required women to sit upright without leaning on their seats, and agents who instructed the women to bow and chorus “good afternoon, ma’am” whenever a potential employer entered. To spend all day waiting, sometimes for a week, or weeks on end, at varying levels of attention, discomfort, and boredom, is a kind of “relation-to-the-world that transcends and folds through [a] relational dialecticism of (im)mobility” (Bissell, 2007, p. 284). In other words, waiting is not simply dead time; women were expected to wait in a particular way that performed their subject position, and were expected not to wait inattentively but to hold themselves in animated suspension.

Their occupation of a state of ready attentiveness often translated to rhythms of springing up and attending to the never-ending tidying up of the maid agency as agents choreographed their bodily rhythms through instruction or reminder. For example, after employers left, a woman often got up, without prompting, to line up the scattered stools with fastidious, inch-perfect accuracy. Women performed this task with routine efficiency every time the stools were occupied and subsequently abandoned, their flurry of mobility activated by the inhabitation of employers’ bodies in the agency space. As Lefebvre writes, dressage puts into place “an automatism of repetitions” (2004, p. 40), a process that superimposes the rhythms of choreographed movement on the natural rhythms of the body. Movement is dictated not by, for example, the fatigue of sitting on a hard bench for 10–12 hours, but by brokers’ desire to present migrant women as disciplined, pleasant, and quick to please, and to use women’s bodily labour to maintain the neatness of the agency space.

While agents sat at fixed points behind counters, migrant women moved to ensure agents' comfort. We noted that migrant women kept emerging from the back stage of the agency to hand sheets of paper over to the seated agents before returning to their seats. The agents had asked the women to ferry computer printouts to them, saving themselves the multiple trips of trekking to the printer and back whenever they required a printed document. Domestic workers also made frequent trips to the toilet as agents nodded to permit their comings and goings. As we later found out, it was often to check their phones, chat openly, and unwind in the relative privacy of the toilet away from the sometimes intense surveillance of the agency space. To have to make several trips to check one's phone and chat openly is a choreographed rhythm that preserves a particular optics of obedience within the maid agency. The peaceful, routine, and ordered eurythmia of the agency both conceals and is dependent on a choreography that sends distorted arrhythmias jittering through the tense, stiff bodies of migrant women.

The careful choreography of migrant women's bodily rhythms and their inhabitation of time and space through the act of waiting allowed brokers the ability to shape, invite, and foreclose encounters between migrant women and Singapore employers. Encounters in the maid agency are deliberately patterned and arranged – by the materiality of biodata; by the ordering of movement – to encode dualism, status, and difference. This lays the groundwork for the appropriate dynamics of encounter, an ideal first contact, as seen in the following instance:

A new potential employer is here. I watch the events unfold from the waiting area; within the open space of the agency, it is easy to overhear conversations and to quickly scribble notes. To the agent, June, the employer describes the working conditions: big house, no kids, no older people. She appraises a Myanmar domestic worker who had earlier on in the day been 'returned' to the agency because the elderly person she had been hired to care for had passed away two months into her contract. The employer asks the worker if she is OK with the onerous task of hand-washing all of her clothes...

The Myanmar woman grapples with English: standing to the side despite the empty stool in front of her, she says, 'I very good clean.'

June, sympathetically, says: 'The house very big. You can?'

There is some conversation between the employer and the agent. The Myanmar woman hurries to fetch the employer a cup of water from the water cooler and stands silently by her side, waiting as the employer and the agent confer in English and Mandarin about her. My heart hurts. The new employer does not seem too convinced by this specific worker.

The agent and the employer, nudging a biodata back and forth, are now discussing the possibility of hiring an Indonesian worker instead. 'Can she come immediately?' The employer is asking if the Indonesian worker can do housekeeping, laundry. They call up the Indonesian candidate over Skype.

'Don't tell me that you can, and then come here and cannot,' the employer says to the interviewee's moving image on the screen. 'No handphone, no off-day.'

The interviewee says, 'yes, ma'am.'

The potential employer scrunches her face in a laugh upon hearing this and says to the agent, 'they are like parrots like that.'

She gets up. 'I take the Indonesian, I don't want the Burmese,' she says, with a dismissive gesture at the Myanmar woman. She stops and looks at the Myanmar woman properly. 'Good luck, ah. I hope you find a good employer.' She leaves.

The agent comments to me, 'walk in, take go.' She is sympathetic to the Myanmar worker. 'Very poor thing,' she says. (14 December 2016)

Not every encounter plays out in this way. Many employers behave more sensitively. However, this kind of encounter does take place with some frequency, exemplifying the success of choreographic ordering; such behaviour may trigger

sympathy (“very poor thing”) but, in general, neither outrage nor condemnation. First, the shorthand of using national origin to characterise and differentiate between migrant women (Tyner, 1999) culminates in the employer's offhanded closing comment, resulting in untroubled and racialised categorisations of the other: “I take the Indonesian, I don't want the Burmese.” Second, throughout this interaction, the Myanmar woman stands, listening, her body prickly with anticipation, alive to the indeterminacy and uncertainty of waiting (Turnbull, 2016). She performs a set, rehearsed series of actions learned from previous interactions or observations of other workers: standing and not sitting, serving a cup of water, not speaking unless spoken to, replying in broken English rather than depending on, or expecting, translation. Her arrested rhythm of attentive waiting is tied to the uncertainty of the encounter's conclusion, and to a wider socio-spatial experience of temporality where her continued stay in this country is dependent on her ability to successfully secure a new employer. Third, this mediated encounter allows the employer to selectively include or exclude the domestic worker throughout the conversation. She has the ability to mitigate, withhold, or foreclose contact, as is evinced when she addresses the sardonic comment to the agent that domestic workers are like parrots, able only to repeat words rather than to engage meaningfully as equals. Finally, the affective transmission of mood (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2015; Thrift, 2004) in the wake of this encounter reflects its uneven dynamics: more specifically, it reflects the success of this encounter in replicating and rigidifying existing relations of power. As the author in the fieldnotes writes, “my heart hurts” – and this feeling of sympathy is recognised by the agent, who comments on the encounter to the author as one of unmoved purchase: “Walk in, take go.” With these words, the broker remarks on the brisk rhythm of the employer's motions, her ability to purchase and leave in a matter of minutes, and the negligence of this encounter to her, in contrast to the tense immobility of the domestic worker, for whom the encounter carries a much heavier significance in terms of her continued stay in Singapore. The migrant woman is not addressed in this affective commiseration; in some ways, she is an object – not a subject – of encounter. Like the endless flipping of biodata, choreographed encounters like this, while individually fleeting, sediment sustained lines of power in their very repetition and banality. The potential of genuine connection (Valentine, 2008) is consciously limited in the maid agency. In fact, brokers work precisely to curtail the ambivalence of encounter by laying out its steps from the very beginning and reinforcing the expected choreography (for example, by not inviting the Myanmar worker to take a seat).

Despite this, encounters at the agency also incorporate the potentiality for undermining and/or reproducing difference in new ways through elements of rupture and surprise (Wilson, 2017). Encounters do not merely take place at peripheries, borders, and contact zones, but make and remake them in fleeting, contingent, and messy ways (Askins & Pain, 2011). As Lefebvre writes, “but the circumstances are never *exactly* and absolutely the same, *identical*. There are changes ... Space and time thus laid out make room for humans ... for liberty. A little room” (2004, p. 40). In the next section, we focus on the sense of surprise and rupture when the choreography of the maid agency is momentarily reconfigured by the introduction of a maid who inhabits the space with the seeming ease of a ma'am. These momentary confusions reveal the way that we make and unmake relations of power in the everyday and cast aside notions that there is anything essential, unending, or fixed about these relations: in fact, it shows how much unceasing and effortful “reality work” goes into making such social arrangements possible (Lefebvre, 2014).

8 | PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVISATION: THE EMERGENCE OF MOMENTS

As Lefebvre argues, the temporal rhythms of the everyday incorporate both repetition and variation; from this tension emerges the “moment.” The moment is a fraction in time and space that is elevated beyond that of an instant. Emerging from the quotidian, it carries a sense of festivity and possibility, of an unexpected overturning of the ordinary, of a fleeting but deeply felt arising of play that implicitly critiques existing class and power relations (Lefebvre, 2014). In conceptual spirit, the notion of the moment is quite similar to the charged, open potentiality of the encounter (Wilson, 2017). The emergence of this unexpected moment in the encounters that coalesce in the maid agency shows how a shift in rhythm can take place through migrant women's varying interpretations and performances of choreographic ordering:

Belinda is a domestic worker who is currently in the process of transferring from one employer to another. Her friend, Marybeth, drops by the agency to meet her for lunch. Marybeth is supremely confident and comfortable, greeting the agent like old friends.

For a confused moment I thought she was an employer. Upon seeing her enter, the agent beside me, June, jokes: ‘Wah, sexy ah!’

Marybeth is tanned, carrying herself with her shoulders and chest upright. She wears white cut-off denim shorts, a sleeveless blouse, and carries a leather shoulder bag. Her clothes display bare long legs and highlights a tumble of loose hair. June adds, 'Look like ma'am ah.'

Apparently Marybeth has been in Singapore for a long time and runs her employer's household with confidence and pizzazz. She obviously sees, and treats, the agents as equals, and the agents are ready to reciprocate accordingly. As she enters, she collapses into the stool and strikes up some easy small talk.

She's speaking to Janet, another agent, with Belinda in the hot seat between them, discussing the failure of Belinda's relationship with her employer. Belinda does not say very much – perhaps because her continued stay in Singapore is up in the air if she cannot find a new employer.

'High class la,' Marybeth says knowingly. 'Rich is like that. This is not the first time that we handle the rich what.'

Janet, to Belinda: 'It's the cooking, you can't handle the cooking.'

Marybeth, loyally: 'I think she tried her best...'

Janet: 'Even if their cooking is high standard, if you don't like to cook, you also won't learn.'

And now they are speaking about new potential employers. Marybeth interjects knowledgeably: 'Landed property is more better la. It's very good.'

Eventually, Marybeth sweeps Belinda off, for lunch or to run errands, calling out 'bye ma'am June!' over her shoulder as she leaves. The honorific feels cosmetic. The symbolic weight of 'ma'am' is not there for her. (16 December 2016)

The appearance of Marybeth, who dresses and carries herself in a way that confounds the conventional relationality between worker and agent, disrupts the politics of recognition within the agency. The expansive, rhythmic motion of her body, her easy occupation of the agency space as she collapses onto the stool implicitly marked for employers, the raised, ringing tone of her voice, and her ability to spark and match an affective mood of affectionate banter are all actions that overturn the expected choreography of migrant women's bodies. Lobo writes about how markers of whiteness, such as style of dressing, accents, or taste preferences can be accumulated by migrant bodies (Lobo, 2014). Marybeth's easy and expansive inhabitation of the maid agency space – her accumulation of cosmetic markers of power and status, of "ma'am-ness" – contrasts with the hushed undertones, stiff postures, and choreographed (im)mobilities of the waiting migrant women. Her display of expert information about good employers (who should own large, landed properties instead of small, cramped apartments) positions her as inhabiting a shared space of knowledge and experience with the agents. Her confident and conspiratorial alignment with the agent ("This is not the first time that we handle the rich") redraws the triadic relationship between agent, employer, and worker (Simmel, 1950) by asserting a knowing alliance between agent and worker against fussy "high class" employers who are overly particular about styles of cooking. Marybeth's encounter with Janet is so startling that Janet remarks twice on her appearance in amused wonderment, describing her as "sexy" and "like a ma'am."

The agents' encounter with Marybeth – who scrambles the choreographed rhythms of the maid agency by her presence, her body, and her affective energy – offers a glimpse into the possible, a momentary and fleeting instance where agents and workers may be bound together in solidarity by their shared class position as workers and their status as migrants⁸ (Näre, 2014). The possibility that they may be arrayed against employers as an alternative to the general allying of agents with employers allows the encounter to crackle with a Lefebvrian moment of a critical utopia, a possible inversion of the dominant mode of class relations.

While Marybeth's entrance into the agency was remarkable in its palpable confounding of the rhythmic choreography of migrant women's bodies and challenged the normative playing-out of encounter, there were also smaller improvisations that glimmered throughout the everyday. We noticed during our time at the agency that there was a particular woman who was out of rhythm with the other domestic workers. Instead of leaving her agency polo shirt loose and baggy over her own

clothes, she stylised it by tying a knot in the excess material around the waist, transforming the uniform from shapeless to figure-hugging. She strolled to the toilet rather than moving at a clipped pace; she lingered in the toilet, often belting out pop songs to herself; she did not engage in small talk with the other women. Occasionally, without catching the agents' eye for permission, she would wander out of the agency to gaze over the atrium of the shopping mall, leaning heavily on the railing with an air of boredom. While she followed the broad steps of the choreographed rhythm of the agency, she also improvised by varying the tempo of her movements and refusing to tighten her body in anticipatory waiting. These improvisations did not go unremarked. The other migrant women, wary of her refusal to conform to the rhythms of the agency space, often left her alone. An agent's snapping admonishment revealed that the worker had continually turned down offers of employment; her arrhythmic movements within the agency were mirrored by her inability or refusal to fit into brokers' preferred tempos of circulations of labour. These variations in the performance of choreography suggest that the rhythms of encounter, while broadly replicated, ebb and flow in the everyday, enfolding within them both minor improvisations and evental moments.

9 | CONCLUSION

This paper moves away from an interest in more serendipitous urban encounters by calling for a better understanding of how encounters are directed in contexts that have so far been largely neglected within the urban geographies literature on globalising cities. It insists on a continued sensitivity to relations of power and focuses on non-Western contexts where longer-term integration and assimilation are out of reach for low-waged migrant workers. We suggest extending the geographies of encounter approach to spaces that are deliberately designed by actors to choreograph encounter, so that we can better understand the "tensions that exist between the desire to design encounters and their inherent unpredictability" (Wilson, 2017, p. 465). We do so by focusing on a specific site within the migration industry: the maid agency. We also found Lefebvre's work on rhythms useful in developing the idea of choreography. Focusing on how migration brokers choreograph encounters through the usage of materialities and the modulation of migrant women's bodily rhythms of waiting and movement, we show how this choreography, in its performance, both succeeds and fails, and how failure can give rise to moments of potential subversion.

While we attribute the conscious design of choreography in this paper to the specific interventions of social actors within a particular space, rhythmic movements are of course also conditioned and contextualised by broader structural forces. Brokers impatiently reassert choreographic power in obeisance to the pressures of a transnational economy of migration. Migrant women adhere to choreographic rhythms not simply because they are instructed to do so but to secure jobs in response to the pressures of poverty or the desire for success in migration. Employers behave the way they do not simply because an interaction with biodata directs them but because they also bring to the agency deeply ingrained socio-cultural ideas about the status of migrant domestic workers. Marybeth, for all her ease and confidence, still works within a migration regime that enforces her transience, limits her access to recourse, and solidifies the precarities and vulnerabilities inherent in her work. Her expressed strategy of selecting employers based on their level of income and her style of clothing and comportment (Yeoh & Huang, 1998) are both limited in scale and scope. Her ability to improvise is also dependent on her secure employment status in Singapore and her years of experience working for a local household. Ultimately, more research can be done to expand the concept of choreography to take into account these less visible, but profoundly palpable, forces of ordering at varying scales.

If encounters are a distinctive event of relation, full of alterity, tension, and ambivalence – an instance in time and space in which implicit knowledge and emotion about the migrant stranger in the city is brought to a palpable flashpoint – then to read encounter into the practices of the migration industry is to show how there is often little that is serendipitous about the way that migrants and citizens encounter each other, particularly at junctures made critical by gendered regimes of transient labour migration. Yet it also shows that the everydayness of choreographed rhythmic practice, while apparently banal, stable, and almost habitual, contains within it both the effortful reproduction of power and the potentiality for incremental change. While migrant women have to walk to the toilets to check their mobile phones, the increasing normative acceptability of possessing mobile phones in the first place, and the tacit acceptance of agents with regard to this practice, is an example of a small everyday change that has had profound consequences (Platt et al., 2016). The reproduction of power is not inevitable and absolute; choreography entails both design and performance, and it is in the latter where there is what Lefebvre calls a "little room" for challenge. As Lefebvre writes, the tide may recur, but peering closely at each wave reveals tiny disruptions: "Each sea has its rhythm ... but look closely at each wave. It changes ceaselessly ... it carries numerous wavelets, right down to the tiny quivers that it orientates, but which do not always go in its direction ... Small

undulations traverse one another, absorbing, fading...” (2004, p. 79). The choreography of encounters, with its habitual reproduction, carries within it also the potential for everyday improvisations and undulations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ There is also a dehumanising overture to this particular analogy, especially considering the historical association of ethnic and racial minorities with animals, that we acknowledge; we hope that the idea of “choreography” serves partially as a corrective.
- ² This is in contrast to Seamon's (1979) “place ballet,” the other oft-cited example of the choreography of everyday life. Seamon's argument is that the preconscious effect of routine and habit determines the daily activity of human life, while our notion of choreography is more attentive to the effect of power, particularly on migrant subjects occupying a position of vulnerability.
- ³ We use pseudonyms to avoid any risk of identifying those whom we have observed.
- ⁴ A colloquial term for a person in Singapore coded as “white.”
- ⁵ The implication is that she must work hard and without complaint to support her children.
- ⁶ Someone who has previously worked in Singapore before.
- ⁷ Biodata, while widely used, are not identically replicated across agencies. One agent we interviewed eschews photographs, arguing that they are irrelevant; another agency uses short video clips filmed by workers themselves in private booths in lieu of biodata. Biodata, and the form they take, are often consciously designed by every agency, indicating that each agent has a particular imagination of how idealised encounters between workers and employers should unfold.
- ⁸ Nearly all of the agents at this agency were Chinese Malaysian women, hired partially for their ability to speak multiple languages to bridge language barriers between employers and domestic workers. The agents themselves are thus also migrants, although their Chineseness aligns them with the predominant racial majority in Singapore and partially mitigates their migration experience. See Velayutham (2017) for more on Singapore's ethno-racial hierarchy.

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