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To cite this article: Megha Amrith (2021) Ageing bodies, precarious futures: the (im)mobilities of 'temporary' migrant domestic workers over time, *Mobilities*, 16:2, 249-261, DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2021.1885834](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885834)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885834>



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Published online: 05 Apr 2021.



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Ageing bodies, precarious futures: the (im)mobilities of ‘temporary’ migrant domestic workers over time

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ABSTRACT

In both historical and contemporary studies of contract mobile labour, little attention has been granted to ageing migrant bodies from a life-course perspective. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with older migrant domestic workers in Singapore, this article investigates how, in the context of restrictive regimes of mobility shaping temporary labour migration, age crucially factors into the (im)mobility of migrant domestic workers. Growing older and approaching retirement marks a point of perceived bodily immobility as states and employers deem migrants’ ageing bodies as too frail and no longer productive, thus inducing mandatory returns to their countries of origin. The paper traces how the ageing bodies of ‘temporary’ migrants are discursively constructed by neoliberal regimes of mobile labour; the implications on migrants’ present and future mobilities; and how migrants contest such characterisations of their bodies and attempts at controlling their mobilities at different scales. In considering the later-life implications of long years of work abroad in precarious and low-wage conditions, we see how age becomes important to our intersectional analyses of racialised (im)mobile labour across multiple historical and comparative contexts, and to our understandings of how inequalities are (re)produced over time.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2019
Accepted 10 November 2020

KEYWORDS

Ageing; precarity; mobility; immobility; domestic workers; Singapore

In 1975, John Berger and Jean Mohr, in their book *A Seventh Man* on the lives of migrant workers in Europe, make a powerful critique of the economic system within which migrant workers are embedded. They observe that migrant workers ‘do not age; they do not get tired; they do not die. They have a single function: to work’ (Berger and Mohr 1975, 68).

Since the 1970s and 1980s, there have been large-scale movements of contract migrant labour from countries such as the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, within the Asian region (to places such as Singapore and Hong Kong) and to the Gulf States. As implied in the quote from Berger and Mohr above, the states that employ migrant workers see them for their ‘single function: to work’, and expect a pool of cheap, young and fit bodies to perform the work of reproductive labour in households, or manual labour in construction sectors. Countries of origin also discursively sell migrant labour as holding particular essentialised qualities, alongside a whole industry of brokers and agencies, a process of racialisation that feeds into a logic of labour as commodity (see, e.g. Guevarra 2009). Meanwhile, the temporary contracts typical of these restrictive migration and labour regimes curtail migrants’ rights to long-term residence, citizenship and family life. Socio-spatial limitations on their everyday mobilities further cement hierarchised structures of racialised exclusion and discrimination in everyday life. The racialisation of migrants collapses multiple dimensions of migrants’ identities (ethnicity, nationality, language, class) into a singular

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essentialist figure of the non-citizen 'other', excluded from the wider society. The production of this category of difference thus acquires the idiom of 'race', and as much as such categorisations are construed as naturalised, they are always contingent, unstable and contested from below (Bastos et al. 2021; Ang, 2021).

Understanding how this racialised exclusion of low-waged temporary migrants intersects with questions of age has been scarcely discussed in both scholarly and public debates. This paper illuminates the specific implications of restrictive citizenship and mobility regimes for ageing migrant women as they approach retirement. Some migrant women renew their temporary contracts over decades until the mandatory retirement age for migrant domestic workers, or when their employers declare their bodies 'too old', and not sufficiently mobile, at which point they must return to their countries of origin. In this paper, I question constructions of migrant bodies as 'ageless' and consider how migrant workers employed in precarious low-wage sectors experience growing older and how they imagine their futures in later life. Drawing primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with female migrant domestic workers in Singapore, I investigate how, in the context of such restrictive regimes of mobility shaping temporary labour migration, age crucially factors into the (im)mobility of migrant domestic workers and affects their place in a system that feeds off actual and perceived 'productivity'. These perceptions of productivity or 'usefulness' are intertwined with discursive constructions of the ageing migrant body (as simultaneously a racialised and gendered body) within neoliberal capitalist systems. The marker of age therefore becomes a part of our intersectional analyses of (im)mobile labour across multiple historical and comparative contexts. However, people's lives are not always synchronised with linear and disembodied state definitions of the value of the ageing migrant body, or with the 'ordering of timespace through state and capitalist processes' (Edensor 2010, 2). Movements of labour across space follow multiple temporalities and rhythms, moving between different scales and experiences of mobility and immobility across the life course (Bastos et al. 2021; Edensor 2010).

This tension between mobility and immobility in migrants' lives echoes points raised in the critical mobilities literature, which argue that studies of mobility must necessarily attend to 'friction, turbulence, immobility, dwelling, pauses and stillness' (Sheller 2011, 3), as well as the inequalities and unevenness of mobilities, as they are experienced and embodied in starkly different ways, depending on how one is positioned within constellations of power (Cresswell 2010, 21; Salazar and Smart 2011, iii–iv). Mobility and immobility simultaneously occur and are mutually constitutive on range of scales: from the macro level, to familial and everyday spaces, and at the level of the body itself. On a macro level, are the aforementioned 'regimes of mobility' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) whereby states, and associated actors, institutions and infrastructures, (re)produce conditions for the ongoing and serial international mobility of low-wage migrant workers to perform jobs that local populations shun or to await their remittances (Parreñas et al. 2018). Under these regimes, migrant workers' lives are regulated to make them as immobile as possible through restrictive visas, such that their everyday mobilities and relationships are 'contained, and constrained' (Bélanger and Silvey, 2020, 3423). Bélanger and Silvey (2020, 3424) highlight how these socio-spatial immobilities occur in 'gender-specific ways that intersect with nationality, citizenship, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic class' (and as we will soon see, age). Migrant domestic workers live in the confined spaces of their employers' homes with minimal time off, while laws are designed to limit their rights to family life and to intimate relationships. Such socio-spatial limitations on their intimate lives reflect moral anxieties that states and wider populations hold about regulating female migrant bodies and their sexualities, perpetuating constructions of the docile migrant woman whose place is in the private household.

From the point of view of their families, migrants' international labour mobility is bound up with aspirations for a better future. Ideas, emotions, goods and images circulate within transnational families, mediated by smartphones, yet their connections are also punctuated by hard borders and the challenges of sharing intimacy from a distance. Meanwhile, kin get accustomed to migrants' prolonged stays abroad, expecting continuous material and financial contributions, seeing those

abroad as rich and making them feel, in some cases, almost trapped (or immobilised) in these patterns of long-term migration, giving and indebtedness.

In spite of these constricting expectations from kin, and the immobilities of everyday life as a consequence of state policies which see migrants as having 'a single function: to work', migrants find ways to make their lives meaningful and to challenge restrictions on their socio-spatial and bodily mobilities (Salazar and Smart 2011, v). They prolong their stays abroad because they have forged deep friendships, built communities and cultivated new subjectivities and ways of being. Forms of affective belonging, desire, hope and care emerge in and occupy these spaces of everyday dwelling that are produced in the tension between mobilities and immobilities. We see in the ethnography the ways in which migrant women 'endure' in these spaces, taking pride in their ways of '[maintaining] ongoing relations with others and the world' (Baraister, 2017, 4), such that spaces of containment and curtailment also become spaces of home, freedom, and indeed, mobility.

Growing older and approaching retirement, however, marks a point of perceived bodily immobility as states and employers deem migrants' ageing bodies too frail, no longer useful or productive, thus inducing mandatory returns to their countries of origin. These prescriptions are at odds with migrants' own valuing of their long years of labour, their sense of self, purpose, and wellbeing. Sometimes this return is longed for by migrants – a chance to spend time with grandchildren and to rest, but it often creates new anxieties, fears and uncertainties about being idle or 'useless', feeling insecure and isolated. The article thus moves us beyond a static snapshot view of mobile labour at a specific moment in time, to an understanding of how life projects, aspirations and relations are recalibrated at the point of retirement. In the case of the migrant women I work with, this constitutes a biographical reflection on the twenty to thirty years of their adult lives that they have spent abroad and how their long-term experiences shape their understandings of the present and future.

In the sections that follow, I situate this ethnographic case within a broader historical and comparative perspective, examining how ageing migrant bodies have been discursively constructed and how scholarship on migrant labour has addressed questions of ageing mobile labour. I then introduce the ethnographic case and demonstrate firstly how migrant women engage with and challenge institutionalised, state-based and societal constructions of their ageing bodies and their 'value', and the implications on their mobilities; and secondly, to examine how they imagine their futures at the point of perceived bodily immobility and subsequent returns to their countries of origin. Taken together, this paper sheds light on how older migrants negotiate mobilities and immobilities (physical, metaphorical, imagined, potential, literal); how intersecting migration, labour and citizenship regimes (re)produce inequalities over time; and how migrants imagine their futures towards the end of long years of work abroad.

Historical and comparative perspectives: ageing mobile labour

An exploration of the futures of precarious mobile labour necessarily means situating this particular ethnographic case within a broader perspective on low-wage and unfree migrant labour as bound-up with colonial violence and capitalist expansion globally. Similar experiences can be found across continents and generations, even as each context is shaped by specific historical intersections of political and economic structures, different border and citizenship regimes, and gendered constructions of labour.

In Asian contexts, a significant body of literature has demonstrated how mobile labourers have been differentially characterised in racialised and gendered ways within colonial regimes of control and the contemporary migration industry as workers who are docile, submissive, deviant, healthy, compliant, caring, and fit (see, e.g. Markkula, 2021; Carter and Torabully 2002; Datta 2016; Anderson 2006; Tyner 2004; Deboneville and Killias 2019). In the case of migrant women, we have come to understand through diverse ethnographies how processes of racialisation and exploitation (by states, employers, and the wider society) keep migrants in situations of prolonged social exclusion, vulnerability and precarity (Silvey and Parreñas 2020). This might be through constant surveillance,

processes of racial stereotyping, poor working and living conditions, or physical and mental abuse (see, e.g. Constable 1997/2017; Paul 2011; Lee, Johnson, and McCahill 2018). The scholarship on migrant labour also illuminates how migrant women respond with complex expressions of resistance and agency, while making sense of their migrant journeys as moral and spiritual projects, signalling a richness to their lives and subjectivities beyond the 'victimized worker' label (Johnson and Werbner, 2010).

In both historical as well as contemporary studies of contract migrant labour, however, there has been far less sustained attention to old-age, ageing, and retirement and on what happens when we situate the racialised, 'temporary' migrant body in a diachronic and lifecourse perspective. Among the studies that do address ageing migrants, it becomes clear that there are varying definitions of ageing, which do not always fit with linear or institutional definitions of old-age and/or retirement. For instance, ageing in some contexts might refer more to the weathering of bodies, to destitution, and dependency rather than a 'distinct chronological stage and problem' (Sivaramakrishnan 2014).¹ In capitalist regimes of labour, workers become expendable when their bodies are worn, as illustrated in a study on Indian plantation labourers who were referred to as 'sucked oranges' squeezed dry of their productive 'juice' (IAS, 1989). The ageing labourers were left disenfranchised amidst persisting socio-economic marginalisation and an inadequate employee provident fund. In a similar vein, Sarah Horton's (2016) ethnography on Latino farmworkers in California powerfully asserts that 'it is well known ... that a farmworker's body "finishes" well before the official retirement age' and that 'physical disability often long precedes the federal government's official certification of the condition' (2016, 79, 160). Those who become unable to work fall between the cracks of social protection schemes and have to rely on a mix of faith-based and kin networks for a safety net, mutual support, and to navigate rigid bureaucratic categories. These examples serve as a reminder of how state and institutional anxieties about workers' immobile or 'dependent' bodies, and the broader neoliberal logics underpinning mobile labour regimes, generate precarious futures for ageing migrants, many of whom are unable to fully retire and who return to the poverty of their youth (Parreñas 2015; Silvey and Parreñas 2020; Raj 2020; Ray and Qayum 2009). Equally, it is clear that institutionally defined categories do not always reflect embodied experiences of age, body, work, and life transitions. People's sense of age is relational and processual, and not necessarily in sync with linear notions of 'life stages' (Coe 2016; Johnson-Hanks 2002; von Poser 2017).

Closer to the context of my ethnography on migrant domestic workers, it is notable that themes of retirement and old-age are in fact discussed in newspaper, photography and oral history archives in the case of Cantonese *amahs* who worked as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore between the 1930s up until the 1970s, prior to the arrival of domestic workers from other countries. A newspaper article in 1975 portrayed them as 'liberated women' who left their villages in their teenage years to support their families. The article reflected on this figure, commenting that 'she nursed other people's babies, she cooked other people's meals, she washed other people's clothes, she swept other people's rooms. And now she is 62 years old – still poor, still alone. What is there to show for her life's work?' (The Sunday Times 1975). While returning home to their provinces in Guangdong may have been an option for some, retirement was largely imagined in Singapore. *Amahs* made preparations and contributions over time to move into so-called 'vegetarian houses' for retired Chinese immigrant women, many of whom were single. Such houses, formed around villages of origin, served as an informal and intergenerational system of old-age security and companionship, which depended on the cultivation of friendships and a sense of sisterhood over many years (Gaw 1991, 144).² Only in exceptional cases did employers themselves provide for *amahs* in old-age (Constable 1997/2017).³

As Kenneth Gaw writes in his study of Cantonese *amahs*, retirement was not a definitive age but instead referred to when one felt 'too tired' or 'too ill' to work, with many women working well into their seventies. Their imaginaries of old-age meant not being a burden, dying a quick death and staying healthy until that point (1991, 140–141). One of the women quoted said that 'rich people usually fall ill because they don't exercise and never fully use their energy. Poor people worked all

day, therefore they always exercised their muscles and bones. If you are hardworking you will not often fall ill' (1991, 139). In this quotation, we see a reconfiguration of hierarchies which connect good health, vitality and continued bodily mobility to an ethic of dignified hard work. At the same time, it is worth remembering that ill health could also have meant losing their jobs.

This idea that security and care in older-age is a private responsibility, something for which one has to depend on personal and kinship networks is still highly notable in contemporary and neoliberal contexts of precarious mobile labour, as the ethnographic data I discuss also reflects. Where state schemes do exist, they involve complex, bureaucratic negotiation, particularly where it concerns racialised immigrant labourers who remain outside the boundaries of national social protections.

At the same time, popular Euro-American policy and gerontological discourses on 'active ageing' take on a completely different resonance in the lives of mobile labourers who have long worked under conditions that have demanded their activity, fitness and tirelessness. There are striking parallels between historical and contemporary regimes of mobile labour. The fears that workers may hold about the future are largely produced by states and employers, yet also seen as external to the logic of the labour mobility regime. Future (bodily, and socio-spatial) immobilities are seen by these very same actors to be a matter to be resolved privately, elsewhere. I now turn to consider the experiences of female migrant domestic workers in Singapore and the different ways in which ideas about age occupy their lives, imaginations, and futures.

Older migrant domestic workers in Singapore: context

In the early days of my fieldwork, I attended a large gathering of women's organisations in Singapore for an afternoon forum focussed on the ageing trajectories of women in Singapore and their financial security in older age. Speeches from parliamentary representatives, researchers, civil society organisations, media personalities, corporate insurance partners and caregivers raised important questions about how gender inequalities in the lifecourse accumulate to disadvantage women in later life. But as the sessions went on, I began to notice a pronounced absence in these discussions of the nearly 250,000 migrant domestic workers who also live in Singapore and in many ways, enable middle-class and wealthier Singaporean women to balance work and family life. In other words, tackling inequalities over the lifecourse has been made possible by the availability of 'cheap' domestic labour, performed since the 1970s in Singapore by women from the region (primarily the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and more recently, Myanmar). It was only towards the end that a participant stood up and asked the question: 'aren't migrant women's issues also our women's issues?'. In my field research since 2018, I have been looking into the experiences of these migrant women, those who are left outside of the national conversation on ageing and gender inequalities, since their presence is seen, by the Singapore state and by a large part of the population, as temporary.

Migrant domestic workers arrive in Singapore on renewable two-year contracts, their lives governed by the most restrictive visa available called the 'work permit'. This is the same permit that male construction workers hold, but domestic work, exceptionally, is not covered by national employment legislation. Migrant domestic workers are required to live-in their employers' homes and have one day off per week,⁴ though many employers pay them in lieu, leaving them just one or two days off per month. The permit does not allow them to bring their families to Singapore, marry Singapore citizens or get pregnant, with the latter leading to deportation. Their contracts can be renewed until domestic workers are 60 years old, after which renewals are evaluated on a 'case-by-case' basis. It is an explicitly hierarchised immigration regime which perpetuates the racialisation of low-waged migrant workers as 'transient', noncitizen, 'Third World' presences, while enabling higher-earning, 'professional' migrants pathways to long-term residence (Yeoh 2004; Cheah 2006; Ang, 2021).

The migrant women I encountered during fieldwork are not yet retired: they are mostly in their late-40s and 50s, a few just over 60. I spent time with them in different spaces across the city: from a government-sponsored clubhouse for domestic workers to financial literacy classes, religious spaces, shopping centres where migrants gather (which are full of remittance agencies and eateries from their countries of origin); public squares; Facebook discussion groups, Whatsapp and the 'void decks' of Singapore public housing blocks where people sit to catch their breath and talk to their families on the phone. In addition, I interviewed representatives from NGOs, community groups and government representatives working on issues related to migration, social protection, and futures.

Turning 60 is something they all refer to: it is the age when the likelihood of the Singapore government refusing contract renewals goes up significantly and it thus marks the moment of returning home for good. This institutionally marked threshold has important implications for their lives, choices, and mobilities. For most, going home is not a choice but one that is determined by their employers and the Singapore government. In a couple of cases, employers applied for the domestic workers to obtain permanent residence in Singapore, but these applications were turned down on the grounds that these women 'do not contribute to the Singapore economy', a reflection of the ways in which care labour, particularly that performed by low-wage, immigrant women, remains fundamentally devalued.⁵

Some have been in Singapore with the same employer for decades, while others have had multiple contract renewals or transfers to different employers, interruptions between contracts in their countries of origin, or previous contracts in Dubai, Beirut, Kuwait or Hong Kong before coming to Singapore. Some of their friends moved on to countries such as Canada or Spain when they were younger. Even if futures in Canada or Spain remain in the imaginations of some older domestic workers, most acknowledge that onward mobilities to these countries is no longer a plausible scenario at their age.

'Is a 46-year-old helper too old?'

Age is a subject that the migrant women I worked with frequently bring up in different forms, as acutely aware as they are of their own sense of age. They would refer to themselves as the 'older generation' of domestic workers, who are distinct from the newer arrivals. They express that values such as hard work, resilience, struggle and patience are what makes them 'good workers', unlike the younger generation whom they see as weak, spoilt, calculating and 'having it easy'. Many women argue that employers value their experience, maturity and their ability to 'give and take' (not just 'take and take'). Ironically this idea of 'take and take', if framed differently, refers to a greater awareness among younger migrants of their rights, compared to ten or twenty years ago, yet older domestic workers do not always acknowledge these developments.

A lively Facebook forum on working conditions for domestic workers in Singapore with over 40,000 members has posts that debate all kinds of themes from reflections on how to change employer, whether employers allow Wi-Fi access, the posting of Christmas bonuses and 'good morning' messages. One of the topics which comes up in different forms relates to the 'ideal' age of a domestic worker. One potential employer posted, 'what are the pros and cons of hiring a 46 years old helper?'. The answers from other employers ranged from 'it is not the age but the mentality of individuals', to 'I think aged means she will come with good experience and you will have a motherly figure around ... cons may be depend on physical fitness', 'not only physical fitness but I think higher risk of getting age related sickness – might have to go for more frequent health screening', 'seen the world n tried everything, so less surprised. Matured. They know how to avoid troubles', and 'menopause ... mood swing'. Meanwhile, responses from domestic workers would protest these ideas saying: 'those negatives here all wrong!! My aunt now is 61 years old but still strong n working for 33 yrs with her employer! They just don't wanna release her cos they love her work n kindness ... age is just a number as long as she is fit to work', or another who expressed 'just to let you know that in my 25 years working with my employer I seldom fall sick im still strong as bull,

so age is not a problem at all'. These discussions relate to the question that sociologist Nick Fox (2005, 494) asks, 'what can an ageing body do', recognising how this body is at once 'defined by its relations yet emerging from individual reflexive and embodied constructions'. In this specific context, I add that the relations by which it is defined stem also from the logics of the capitalist care economy and this mobility regime, which define the parameters of what the ageing body can do and how mobile it can be, often in contrast to workers' own ideas about their bodies, its capabilities and mobilities.

Consistent with these responses, most of the women I spoke with said that they want to keep working 'until I still can'. Their own perceptions of their age do not correspond with the institutionally defined 60' (and its connotations of bodily immobility) that they know is looming. They may of course recognise that their bodies have aged, that they are not tireless and need rest, but this does not equate to their disposability. As a 58-year-old domestic worker said, 'I have high-blood, so I take it easy; my work is anyway less strenuous now that the kids in the [employer's] house are grown up'. They also discuss some of their strategies to stay healthy, such as using a specific headache balm, or taking taxis on their day off instead of walking in the hot sun to the bus stop, or simply trusting that closing one's eyes, resting the body and waking up to a new day refreshes them. Each time a domestic worker renews her contract, she has to undergo a medical check-up, one which becomes more thorough at the age of 60. One of my key interlocutors, Hema, from Sri Lanka, had just turned 60 and felt better than she ever had before. She showed me pictures of herself from ten years earlier, commenting how tired and overweight she was. Now on Sundays, she regularly dresses up and participates in Zumba classes at a domestic worker's clubhouse, prepares turmeric and ginger concoctions and eats spicy food that she believes protects her from illness. Hema and others of her generation contrast themselves from the younger workers who they claim 'just sit around' doing nothing. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, Hema explained that she is doing everything she can to stay healthy, as she worries about the increasing surveillance of her health. Meanwhile, rising costs of healthcare for those who develop chronic conditions, which may not always be covered by their basic insurance, might make an employer (who is typically responsible for these costs) say that they can no longer support them. Dependent and 'immobile' bodies become expendable in this mobility regime since there are no social protection schemes for their health in later life.

The challenges that migrants with chronic health conditions experience is demonstrated clearly in the story of Cris, a domestic worker from the Philippines who had worked in Singapore for twenty-eight years. When I met her, she emphasised this 'long service' repeatedly and with pride, talking about how her employer sees her like a sister, and how she has an unbreakable bond with the child with disabilities that she raised. Meanwhile, she has a daughter of her own who is now in culinary school in Manila, and for whom Cris has taken a mortgage on a condominium unit with her earnings in Singapore. Cris is now in her early fifties, and she told me she had plans to stay on for around 'four more years', or 'two or three more contracts' so that she can accumulate some savings for herself. A few months later when I tried to reach Cris, I discovered that she had suddenly returned to the Philippines 'for good' and that it was because of her high-blood pressure condition. Cris generally felt fine, but was wary of taking medication thinking it would trigger something worse. Her medical check-up noted this condition but also gave her the clearance to continue working. Her employer, however, became worried and abruptly told her to leave, refusing to write her a transfer letter when Cris said that she would rather find a new employer in Singapore than return. She then returned to Manila in debt (still paying off her mortgage), and at a loss for what to do since her source of income and livelihood had suddenly been cut off. She would not be able to go abroad again due to her age. Cris's best friend talked with me about it and said with dismay, 'can you believe, an employer of 28-years can just do that?' Cris's own sense of wellbeing was juxtaposed with her employer's anxiety about her health. It was never clear if this was genuine concern, but from how she told the story, it sounded like the employer did not want the 'burden' of an ageing worker with a medical condition. The boundaries of care and its withdrawals in a commodified employment relationship (even those

framed in terms of loyalty and sisterhood) become starkly apparent, with the returned domestic worker facing multiple immobilities that she was unprepared for.

Productive migrant bodies

Productivity is not only something that the Singapore state and employers demand of migrant labour, but it also comes from the states of origin, most notably in the case of the Philippines, which is widely-known for its institutionalised 'labour-export' policy. Scholarly and activist critiques focus on the ways that this system leads to the (re)production of a racialised labour force to diligently service the global labour market and to send remittances back for the country's development (see, e.g. Markkula, 2021; Rodriguez 2010; Tyner 2004). During fieldwork, I found how questions of return now feature in pre-departure trainings as they incorporate modules on how to make sure that one makes the most of their earnings abroad to invest, plan, save and return in a linear narrative of 'success'. Financial literacy courses on managing money, saving, setting up businesses, are also proliferating in Singapore and Hong Kong, offline and online. The production of the neoliberal, mobile, financially savvy subject emerges partly in recognition of a lack of state-based forms of old-age support for migrants (neither in Singapore, nor in most countries of origin).⁶ Some initiatives are more explicit in their views of migrants as potential investors. Migrants are also targets of scams that come in the form of expensive urban condominium units or insurance schemes that they are not actually eligible for. Some of the domestic workers I met who participate in these courses talk about how they need to be 'smart' with their money. The rationale underlying many of these initiatives is that migrants are responsible for their own futures – those who are smart do something with their earnings and can have a secure future, and those who do not only have themselves to blame.

While many domestic workers are thinking about what they will do upon return, not all are taking courses and planning in this financialised way. Some hold vaguer ideas about helping with a family business, setting up their own (running a guesthouse, or catering service) or taking care of grandchildren. 'Retirement' does not mean much since many expect they will continue to work in some way or another once they return. I found little evidence during my fieldwork of mobilisations against this privatised construction of old-age and to redress the structural inequalities that make futures precarious in the first place. Being idle and 'wasting time' is something they scorn and say 'when I go home, I get bored if I just sit there', 'there is nothing to do', a reminder of the lifelong precarity that care labour is bound up with. These fears about 'doing nothing' and being immobile are significant. However, it is not clear that investments and savings alone would alleviate these anxieties given the deep emotional connections and sense of purpose that their lifelong mobilities have ultimately given rise to, in spite of the restrictive mobility regime within which they labour.

Enduring, staying, being

The women I spent time with during fieldwork have all been abroad for decades, having spent a large part of their adult lives working abroad on temporary contracts. Few intended to stay this long, and going to the field, I had expected that many would have had enough of being in this state of temporariness and all the restrictions on their mobilities that comes along with it. For one, as described above, many domestic workers fear the emptiness of return (which they perceive to be far more existentially heavy than their immobilities abroad), but there are also a number of reasons why they remain, deferring their eventual returns and pushing back at the idea that they are no longer useful as migrants abroad. There is a dominant narrative of being compelled to stay, with women saying that they still need to support their families back home: there is still one more child or nephew to finish college, they need to finish constructing their house, or support the medical expenses of their ageing parents, and ultimately, they need to save for their own futures, not wanting to depend on their children. These kinds of life projects require time and energy and can regularly suffer set-backs and major losses if debts build up or unexpected events (typically climate

or health-related) occur. Coe (2016, 37-39) demonstrates how 'care relies on the orchestration of lifecourses', wherein women especially are expected to 'synchronize their lifecourses' with those of others. Transnational migration, however, can mean that this temporal orchestration becomes complicated and thrown out of sync by a whole range of factors such as time, distance, borders, as well as shifting relationships, roles and aspirations.

Migrant women get used to earning a lot more than they would at home, being well aware of how quickly the money will be exhausted if they return home as kin may still demand and expect them to give. And in spite of having been away from their families so long, most say they only enjoy going home for short periods of time after which they cannot wait to return to work in Singapore: '... I have to come back and work, this is where I should be [in Singapore]'. There is a certain dignity of labour that they find in their familiar routines and repetitions: this is an enduring rhythm built up over years of maintaining households, going to the market to buy fresh food, tending to the gardens, cooking and caring for children or elderly members of the household. In this rhythm, they also make decisions about the money they are earning, and sustain connections with their homes through regular phone calls, instant messenger chats, sharing photos and videos. This sense of simultaneity of being here and there is a space in which they are not 'wasting time' but slowly and steadily generating everyday relationships of care (Buch 2018). In these practices, older domestic workers contest ideas about their expendability as racialised, aged bodies, positioning themselves as knowledgeable and indispensable members of the household. Vilma, a domestic worker, who has been in Singapore for over thirty years explained how the now 33-year old that she raised still lives at home and depends on her for everything – 'she doesn't even know how to use the washing machine!' – while Vilma also helped keep her employer's recruitment agency business afloat, spending years mediating between agents in the Philippines, newly arrived domestic workers from her region (becoming an important figure in the community), and her employer.

Migrant women also stay abroad because they have built meaningful lives. They have found enduring friendships and have cultivated rich religious lives and routines – going regularly to volunteer in temples or Churches or finding new spiritual homes through conversion, something that has only come about due to long years of cultivating selves and relationships in ways that far transcend their characterisation as 'temporary workers'. Hema, for instance, volunteers at a domestic workers' clubhouse, while also going regularly to diverse religious spaces to make offerings. She reflects that 'if you treat others well, you will have a good life. No one will remember me for my money, but they will remember if I was a good person'. Her narrative resists the financialised and more linear notions of 'progress' and 'achievement' that we encountered earlier; and prioritises instead the generative relationalities of being here in the present, maintaining connections with kin in Sri Lanka, ethical practices of giving that sustain her being and that express a sense of mobile agency for her future life. Sometimes being abroad offers a greater sense of freedom, mobility, and possibility than might be the case back home, where the weight of particular moral expectations is excessive. For instance, many women who shared their stories with me had experienced some kind of heartbreak or separation from husbands or boyfriends, either in the distant or more recent past and were happy to live independently or find new online intimacies away from the judgement of kin. In spite of the multiple ways that the state, and employers, control their mobilities, they have clearly found ways to negotiate and contest these restrictions. Yet there is also an awareness that they will be 'kicked out', as one of my interlocutors put it, producing ambivalences about the future as Margie's narratives below capture.

'As long as they want me'

Margie grew up in La Union in the Philippines and worked as a vegetable seller before an agent approached her to go to Singapore. Margie has been in Singapore for almost thirty years. She knows her birth year, but not exactly how old she is. She mentions that her employers are getting older, suffering from various health problems and that they may well decide that they no longer need to

employ two domestic workers (referring to herself and another person with whom she works in the same household). Over the past few years, she has been taking courses in a financial literacy NGO on how to set up a business, and having graduated from these modules, she regularly volunteers at this NGO on Sundays. She has a plan to take over a *sari-sari* (variety) store that she helped set up with her earnings and that her eighty-year-old mother currently takes care of. She also holds some land on which her family grows vegetables. Beyond the business courses, she has been taking other classes. She shows me with pride the mobile phone case she knitted in her sewing class and pictures from a baking class and 'cosmetology' course learning about make-up and hair. She has the plan to multi-task, running the shop while also doing her customers' hair and nails. It is also perhaps time for her to rest, she thinks. Margie says with a laugh, 'when I go home, I'll be the boss' and all the others can do what I tell them to. She has one daughter in the Philippines and five grandchildren, and says that she is done with her responsibilities to send money home; her grandchildren are for her daughter to support. Margie seems to be 'well-prepared' to return, but there are hesitations that emerge beneath her more confident narrative. Margie says, 'I just pray to God, if they [her employers] want me to continue working with them, I will stay as long as they want me. But if they decide tomorrow, ok they don't need me anymore, I will go. It's okay, I will go. I am prepared now'. The idea that her employer may decide 'tomorrow' is a reminder of her precarity (both present and future), and she acknowledges that she became a little obsessed with taking all these courses as a way to tame her worries about not having an income or something to do when she returns. She is also clearly at home with her community of friends at the NGO, and enjoys her routines of tending to the big garden in her employer's home and all the things that she is planting. Margie gets worried when she thinks about the wrinkles on her face (the wrinkles perhaps a sign of a return to a life that makes her anxious), and often takes selfies using an app that erases them. She jokes that her family members back home think she has not aged a bit after all these years.

There are conflicting emotions that are produced in this particular moment. Margie and the other domestic workers I met, all recognise that they are getting older and are aware of the time to return. Equally, leaving a life and routine that they know intimately and the idea of empty time and unknown rhythms occupies their minds, even if each one has different feelings about how their trajectories ahead will play out. Margie says that she'll be 'the boss' upon her return: the respect she has earned from her decades-long mobility could be empowering once she returns to stay put. But at the same time, she worries that this inability to maintain her mobile transnational life will erode her sense of self and value. The mobility regime (re)produces insecurities, even at or after the end of the migration journey.

Conclusion

The experiences of migrant domestic workers who have long worked in Singapore reveal a life lived in the tensions between mobility and immobility articulated at different scales. In these spaces, we see women challenging the ways that their ageing bodies are constructed by others in binary terms, building meaningful lives for themselves, experiencing new kinds of freedom (amidst other lack of freedoms) and try to make sense of the inevitability of their return mobilities.

A lens onto these ageing trajectories enables us to see how different notions of time and the body intersect with categories of citizenship, gender and race. Migrant women on temporary contracts without any pathway to long-term residence and citizenship in the countries where they have worked for much of their adult lives lack formalised and state-based forms of social security when they return to their countries of origin at a later stage of life. While a whole range of actors have sought to control these women's mobilities in different ways, it is at the point when they are deemed no longer 'useful', that the very same actors retreat. Open questions remain on what 'mobility justice' (Sheller 2018) might mean for gendered, ageing subjects – older women, migrants – who have laboured in precarity over years as 'temporary people' in a system that serves to 'enhance the mobilities of some while reinforcing the immobilities, or demobilization, of others' (Hannam, Sheller,

and Urry 2006, 11; Unnikrishnan 2017). The case re-asserts the need to incorporate questions of age into the new mobilities paradigm, while recognising that the privilege of and possibilities for everyday mobility and wellbeing in later life are highly contingent on how categories of race, class, migration status, and gender have operated over the course of life (Stjernborg, Wretstrand, and Tesfahuney 2015; Ziegler 2012). In this case, the racialised non-belonging and permanent temporariness of migrant workers abroad affects their choices in retirement.

It would be key, in future research, to consider how the ageing trajectories for men in similar kinds of precarious mobile labour might be different or similar to these women in care work to better comprehend the gendered experiences of mobile ageing bodies and the immobilities that pertain to persistent 'gender and generational inequalities' (Chatterji 2017, 511). The kinds of futures that the women imagine are mixed – how 'successful' one might be, in this neoliberal narrative, depends on individual benevolence or thrift, the figure of the good employer who contributes to the worker's retirement plans or the entrepreneurial migrant woman responsible for her own future. And as much as the impending returns are spoken of with anxiety, there is always a wistful connection to this home they left behind for so long, one that is carefully maintained but most often in a constant state of mobility, and at a distance.

Notes

1. Sivaramkrishnan writes in the context of 1940s- 1950s India, when social policies around the ageing of migrant labourers were being debated by 'experts'.
2. A newspaper article in *The Straits Times*, 1953, further discussed how a new old-age benefit scheme, the Central Provident Fund (the heart of Singapore's pension system to date), was open to *amahs* with the headline 'even your *amah* is in this old age benefits scheme for workers ... domestic servants, labourers and commercial employees who do not at present have any retirement benefits are eligible to join the central provident fund' (Nov 28 1953, *Straits Times*), something which is no longer the case for migrant domestic workers in Singapore today.
3. Constable 1997/2017: 55–58) further explains that this was not a homogenous group, but rather *amahs* were differently positioned in Hong Kong, some more 'free' and mobile than others; those who belonged to sisterhoods had more chances to improve their conditions of life and work compared to others. In other contexts with similar long-term employment relationships, which are underpinned by an expectation of mutual loyalty, we also see how employers may promise care for their 'servants' in old-age, but ultimately betray such promises with poor compensation, inadequate care in older-age or expectations that servants simply continue working as they age, as Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum (2009) demonstrate in the context of Kolkata.
4. This was only made mandatory in 2013.
5. This argument is being challenged by an NGO in Hong Kong which released a report attempting to quantify the value of the care that migrant domestic workers perform. See: <http://www.enrichhk.org/thevalueofcare/>
6. The Philippines is the one state that has a social security system that Filipino migrants can pay into (it started out as a voluntary system, but has now been made mandatory), but the pensions in themselves are not enough to maintain what many of my informants construe as a decent standard of living and many do not pay into this system.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers, Special Issue editors, and colleagues at the *Mobile Labour* workshop (particularly Debbie Hopkins as discussant) for valuable feedback and inspiring discussions. She also thanks Loretta Baldassar, Victoria Kumala Sakti, and Dora Sampaio for helpful insights on an earlier draft of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was funded by the Max Planck Society within the framework of the 'Ageing in a Time of Mobility' research group; Max Planck Society [Ageing in a Time of Mobility Research Group].

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