

The Temporal Borders of Transnational Belonging: Aging Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore

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Abstract

Amidst public debate about the need for migrant domestic workers to assist with eldercare in Asia, we hear little about the futures of the workers themselves. This paper focuses on low-wage migrant domestic workers of different nationalities who have spent decades in Singapore, and how they imagine, prepare for, or avoid discussion of their aging futures. Singapore's immigration regime enforces mandatory retirement and return migration when domestic workers reach 60 years old. These impending displacements evoke mixed emotions as migrant women re-evaluate questions of care, home, and the relationships they have developed with employers, kin back home, and communities abroad. In this paper, I explore how *temporal borders* operate alongside spatial borders to shape migrant women's futures, illuminating uneven intersections between citizenship, gender, and care over the lifecourse. I further trace how the women navigate, ignore, push back, and bridge the anticipated ruptures of temporal borders.

Keywords

migration, aging, domestic workers, temporality, belonging, borders

Introduction

One Sunday in August, when I was in Singapore doing fieldwork with older migrant domestic workers, I attended a session organized by the “Singapore chapter” of a

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Philippines-based co-operative on “return and reintegration” for overseas Filipino workers. It was well-attended by domestic workers preparing for a “successful” return to the Philippines. In the PowerPoint slides prepared for this session, a typology of return¹ was displayed: “return of failure”, “return of retirement,” and “return of innovation,” with a unanimous preference among the participants for the third option. The prospect of returning home at retirement, having spent the majority of one’s laboring years abroad away from family, was not one that many wanted to admit to. Nevertheless, a number of women sitting in the room that Sunday were in fact approaching “retirement age,” having spent much of their adult lives working abroad on temporary contracts and anticipating returns to their hometowns. Return, however, is not a straightforward process, with many migrant women harboring deep-seated anxieties about this transition having spent decades abroad engaged in diverse practices of home and place-making.

There are nearly 250,000² migrant domestic workers from the wider Asian region in Singapore who contribute to the everyday sustenance and reproduction of Singaporean households. Their labor is central to the provision of care, including eldercare, as the Singapore state relies increasingly on migrant domestic workers to provide home-based care for its aging population (Huang et al., 2012; Ho & Huang, 2018). Yet little attention has been granted to the aging experiences and futures of migrant domestic workers and carers themselves. There are widely held assumptions in Singapore that domestic workers tend to be younger, only there “temporarily” and that their aging concerns will be dealt with in their countries of origin by the respective states and/or by migrants and their families, somewhere in the distant future. Such assumptions around their temporariness, however, do not acknowledge that some migrants may spend decades abroad contributing their labor.

This paper focuses on an older generation of low-wage migrant domestic workers from countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India who have worked in Singapore for 20 to 30 years. Domestic workers arrive in Singapore on the most restrictive visa known as the “work permit,” which offers a temporary but renewable 2-year contract. Under this permit, domestic workers live in their employers’ homes, have 1 day off per week (or sometimes fortnight or month), and are not allowed to bring their families to Singapore. Migrant domestic workers are structurally, socially, and spatially excluded from many aspects of everyday life (Yeoh et al., 2020). For example, they often experience isolation in their employers’ households; face stigma for the work they do; are excluded from national schemes such as the “Central Provident Fund” (CPF) savings and pension scheme (Dodgson, 2016); and are barred from marrying Singapore citizens.³ In spite of the many restrictions that they face, some domestic workers prolong their stays in Singapore over long periods of time by continually renewing their 2-year contracts. As this paper will demonstrate, there are economic, social, and affective reasons why migrant women stay on, a number of them having developed a sense of home and belonging in Singapore. In spite of the aforementioned policies that attempt to keep them separate from the local population, the categories of “migrant” and “local” blend into one another in everyday practice,

with migrant women establishing close connections to local families and communities. The state-mandated retirement age for migrant domestic workers, however, is 60,⁴ after which, renewals are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, contingent on clearing a medical check-up and employers making a case for their “indispensability.” As the Singapore state denies them long-term residence and citizenship rights, retirement necessitates return to their countries of origin.

This paper develops the concept of *temporal borders*⁵ to make sense of the critical juncture of retirement and return that emerges at the intersection of older age, gender, and citizenship. Temporal borders here refer to the idea that (return) migration journeys are not only about crossing spatial or physical borders but also crossing temporal ones at a particular moment in the lifecourse that marks a transition from present lives abroad to future lives elsewhere. The temporal border is first and foremost determined by the state’s institutional definition of a chronological retirement age, which places a “time limit” on their right to remain abroad. It is sometimes marked by the perceived frailty of migrant women’s aging bodies whose presence in the state is contingent on “good health,” being “fit” enough to work and not being a “burden” to the state. Migrants’ own understandings of older-age and life transitions, however, are not always aligned with the rigid notions of chronological age, life stages, and bodily capacities on which such temporal borders are based (Amrith, 2021b). As I will argue, there is still room for migrant women (as well as their employers and migrants’ kin) to maneuver around the timing of these borders, as they anticipate, negotiate, and delay the “end” of their transnational lives. In this process, migrant women also begin to imagine and plan for their own aging futures.

Temporal borders are felt acutely by low-waged older migrants, as they are not accorded the privilege to adopt strategies of “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999) that enable them to easily surpass these borders, nor do they have the option to easily migrate onward to other countries or qualify for re-employment due to their age. The paper first outlines the specificities of restrictive immigration and citizenship regimes toward “temporary” aging migrant labor and what this experience of aging in states of temporariness can contribute to our conceptual understandings of aging, migration, and transnational belonging over the lifecourse. It then moves on to explore the different ways through which migrant women push back the temporal border and delay return, something they negotiate with their families back home, as well as with employers in Singapore. This enables them to pursue projects of self-making, while also allowing them to dwell in the familiar space of everyday routines. The forms of belonging that domestic workers cultivate are constituted by kinship, friendship, engagements with wider moral communities, and with strangers. They further delay return because, in spite of life-long projects investing in the education of their children and building houses “back home,” their relationships with kin have shifted over the years. Yet at a certain point, migrant women come up against the apparent non-negotiability of the temporal border when their bodies are deemed “too old.” Last, the paper explores how migrant domestic workers begin to transcend the limits of temporal borders by coming up with innovative retirement plans, directing their attention to projects of self-

transformation, or living purposefully and morally in the present as a means to ensure, following a more spiritual logic, their wellbeing and ongoing connectedness with the world in later life.

Aging Futures for “Temporary” Migrant Women

Scholarly explorations of return among aging labor migrants have importantly highlighted how migrants navigate transnational care arrangements, complex relationships to their homelands and kin, and practical matters of welfare (such as pensions and health care) in the later stages of their lives (Walsh & Näre, 2017; Hunter, 2018). For Turkish migrants in Germany and Austria (who were once seen as temporary “guest workers” but later obtained long-term residency rights), for instance, belonging is a continuous project that must be negotiated over the lifecourse in both the country of settlement and the country of origin, creating a sense of ambivalence on where to spend their later life years (PalMBERGER, 2019). Nevertheless, there remains an element of choice (however constrained these choices may be), as migrants travel back and forth, weighing up the possibilities of aging “here” and/or “there” (Baykara-Krumme, 2013). However, my study of older migrant domestic workers in Singapore suggests differently, since migrants can neither obtain long-term residency rights, nor can they choose between moving back and forth in older age.

There are intersectional classed, racialized and gendered specificities to consider when analyzing the experiences of “compulsory return” (Killias, 2018: 8) in the context of (a) large-scale state-sponsored labor migration regimes which profit from the remittances and labor of migrant workers, and (b) of transnational care workers whose mobilities have been monitored and constrained by sending and receiving state policies and discourses which construct migrant womens’ bodies as working bodies, while overlooking their social and intimate lives (Bélanger & Silvey, 2019). Only recently are we paying greater attention to the aging experiences of low-waged migrants from the Global South who have long worked under conditions of precarity (Parreñas, 2015; Silvey & Parreñas, 2020). Since the 1970s and 1980s, contract migrant workers have gone abroad to work within exploitative migration and labor regimes in Asia and the Gulf States that keep them outside of residency, citizenship and social protection schemes (Kaur, 2010; Yeoh et al., 2020). Labor-sending states such as the Philippines which has promoted the out-migration of its citizens under the rubric of its “labor export policy” since the 1970s, are now facing the question of how its aging citizens will fare upon return (Guevarra, 2009; Pido, 2017). While the country’s social security system mandates contributions from migrant workers, the pension payments only cover minimal subsistence, leading to a proliferation of financial literacy and reintegration programs for soon-to-be returnees like the one described at the opening of this paper run by state agencies, cooperatives, and NGOs (Pido, 2017). In other sending countries, returning domestic workers are even worse off as there are no specifically transnational pension schemes available to them. Meanwhile, receiving states such as Singapore do not

make provisions for migrants' old-age care, despite their long years of work (Dodgson, 2016).

The simplistic logic underlying temporary migration regimes is that migrants work abroad for a temporary period to support their families and then return home. Yet migrants' notions of home and practices of belonging are far more complex. Nicole Constable (1999), in her study of Filipina migrant women in Hong Kong, for example, detailed how the meaning of "home" was plural and contradictory for these women, incorporating dimensions of their lives in both Hong Kong—linked to ideas about freedom and becoming—and the Philippines, the place of kinship ties, love and obligations. If one can imagine these women 20 years later, it may not be that surprising to find them still working abroad, their returns postponed and notions of home even more layered. Migrants' cosmopolitan encounters and relationships abroad, cultivated over many years, further complicate binary notions of home (Johnson & Werbner, 2010; Palmberger, 2019; Vogel, 2020).

A lifecourse perspective on migration thus demonstrates how migrants' subjective orientations and temporal horizons shift over time (Amrith, 2021a; Boccagni, 2017). Coe's (2016: 38) point that migration is a "transtemporal" as well as "translocal" process is fitting as migrant women experience significant moral and affective dislocations over space *and time* that they are not always prepared to confront, particularly when approaching and anticipating the temporal borders ahead of them, as the ethnographic data in this paper will demonstrate. Nancy Munn's (cited in Coe, 2016: 44) argument that time serves as "a medium of hierarchic power and governance" is also apt in illuminating how the state uses temporal borders to determine the limits of a migrant's right to dwell in its territory. As this paper argues, these state-based ideas about time and place do not necessarily correspond with migrants' own practices and emotions.

As migrant domestic workers approach the temporal borders that threaten to rupture their more fluid understandings of place and belonging, they begin to imagine, prepare for, or sometimes avoid discussion of their aging futures. As Arjun Appadurai (2013) argues, anticipation is a key pillar in the making of cultural futures, a state of being and of action that is oriented to containing the uncertainties of the future. Thus, as migrant women anticipate the temporal border, (near) future concerns about retirement and return come to implicitly or explicitly occupy the everyday present (Anderson, 2010; Crivello, 2015)

Methods

This paper's methodological and analytical focus on an older generation of domestic workers, namely, those in "middle" and "late-middle-age," offers a unique vantage point for understanding these spaces of anticipation. As Lulle (2018) argues, research with middle-aged migrant women living in a "pre-retirement" time can offer insights into how they restructure their lives and seek out new experiences as they age, while also illuminating the effects of gender and age-related power relations. Following a

lifecourse perspective, this study does not adhere to strictly defined notions of chronological age or life stages (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), but takes a more fluid, relational, and contextual approach to transitions that pay close attention to the interactions between migrant women's own subjective notions of age and employer- and state-based framings of age.

This article draws on ongoing ethnographic research since 2018, including 50 in-depth interviews with migrant domestic workers of different nationalities, primarily from the Philippines, but also Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka, as well as with policy officers, co-operative and NGO representatives.⁶ The women quoted in this article are between the ages of 48 and 68, and have been living and working in Singapore for 18–35 years. I made initial contact with domestic workers through local NGOs and migrant community organizations, at skills courses and via an online Facebook group for domestic workers. Some of the domestic workers then introduced me to friends and acquaintances (who did not necessarily share the same social spaces) who had been in Singapore, in their estimation, for a “long time.” The interviews were complemented by regular encounters, informal conversations, and ethnographic observations in spaces where domestic workers socialize, such as shopping malls, religious spaces, a domestic workers' clubhouse, at the decks of public housing blocks, parks, Sunday classes and online platforms. We talked about their early days in Singapore, their religious and social lives, their important relationships, aspirations for the future, and on how their experiences have shifted over time. I found that women quite openly and candidly shared their long-term experiences of living in Singapore, and their feelings about their relationships with employers, kin, friends, spouses, and lovers. This was especially the case with key interlocutors whom I met several times and established a rapport based on trust, after which they shared their feelings on more sensitive themes. Some women talked more concretely about the “future” and “retirement,” while others spoke in more vague, spiritual or fatalistic terms. These contrasting ways of speaking about the future reflect how migrant women anticipate the temporal borders ahead.

Making Claims to Belonging, Resources, and Time

In my fieldwork with older migrant domestic workers, it was common to hear them talk about their long-term dedication to the particular families for whom they work and their sense of home in Singapore. Domestic work is often regarded as an exceptional space, where the boundaries between worker and kin become blurred and where forms of labor exploitation can be easily concealed, given that domestic work in Singapore remains excluded from the labor legislation that applies to other types of labor (Yeoh et al., 2020). Among older domestic workers, these articulations of shared kinship are heightened given the long-term nature of their relationship with a family, particularly among those who have been with a single employer for many years. This often leads to domestic workers articulating a desire to stay on in Singapore as long as possible. The trope of “long service” becomes

deployed in competing claims to belonging, resources and time that domestic workers, their kin, and employers use to maneuver around the anticipated temporal borders.

Cristine (Cris), who just turned 50, grew up on the outskirts of Manila and has been in Singapore with the same employer for the past 28 years. She explained that her relationship with her employer “is like a sister, if I have problems, she knows about it all. Even when my marriage failed, she cried with me.” In this household, she took care of her employer’s son since he was 3 months old saying that “from small until now, I brought him to school every day, I taught him to be independent. The bonding is very good, he is very sweet, loves me a lot. It’s just like I never gave birth to him.” She also looks after her employer’s elderly mother, with whom she gets along well. When we talked about what she would miss when she finally leaves Singapore, she said that she would miss this family, especially the boy. Her employer had previously tried to apply for permanent residency (PR) for her on the grounds that she is “indispensable” to the household, but Cris explained “they didn’t approve it, because they say we domestic workers do not contribute anything to the economy here.” Unable to push back the temporal border through permanent residency, Cris, in my interview with her, expressed hope that her contract would be extended a few more times so that she could start thinking about her future. Yet she acknowledges that she has hardly saved any money for herself, signaling new financial anxieties that will accompany her anticipation of the temporal border as she makes plans to save as much as possible for her future. She also hopes that her employer may offer her some financial support when she finishes her time with the family. Some domestic workers desire close relationships with employers as it enables them to make affective (if not contractual) claims for future support.

For some of my interlocutors, it is not only the relationships with their employers which make them want to stay on as long as possible, it is also a desire to dwell in the familiar routines of everyday life—cooking, marketing, gardening, and maintaining the household. Anna, a 65-year-old domestic worker in Singapore for 33 years, for instance, talked at length about how much she loves gardening in her employer’s home. During our interview, she pulled a beautifully grown bunch of green lettuce out of her bag (that she was taking to a picnic) saying “I grew this myself, from the garden, I plant so many fruits and vegetables.” She laughed, “I will stay as long as I can with my garden”! The daily, cyclical, repetition of domestic labor is a way through which some migrant women seek to inhabit the present and could be seen as a practice of self-care that avoids confronting the linear ruptures imposed by temporal borders.

There are some cases when domestic workers themselves plan to leave Singapore earlier to return to their kin, with the pressures to push back the temporal border coming from employers’ families. Eli a 54-year-old domestic worker from Indonesia, who has worked for the same family for 16 of her 20 years in Singapore, told me how she is feeling the long years of work in her body (her back hurts when she bends), and that she would like to return to her daughters and grandchild in Indonesia to manage a small

coffee farm that she put some money into. She then recounted how the 14-year-old girl she has been caring for in Singapore started crying upon hearing Eli's plan to return soon: "I feel pain when I see her cry, they tell me they need me, that she will not eat anything unless I promise her that I will stay. So I said, okay, I will stay with you." Similarly, Vilma, a 58-year-old Filipina worker who has worked for the same family in Singapore for 32 years, explained, "my daughter told me, mommy, after 60 you come home, you stop. It is our turn to look after you. Then I tell my girl here, she says, auntie, how can you go back? What will you do there [in the Philippines]? At least in Singapore, you have a salary."

The competing affective claims on domestic workers by kin "back home" and employers' families abroad draw upon the long-term nature of domestic workers' migration journeys and care labor. Kin argue that their migrant relatives in Singapore have been away for too long, while employers expect domestic workers to stay on as long as they need them. Employers' pleas for domestic workers to stay on often take precedence since they play on migrant women's financial precarity and the workers' need for continued employment. In these emotionally manipulative moments, there is an expectation of long-term loyalty from the domestic worker⁷, accompanied by deferring discussions of domestic workers' aging futures and the looming temporal border when their visas to work in Singapore expire. The transitions between domestic workers' presents and futures can thus be long drawn out. Migrant women's aging futures are not always clearly marked out particularly since they have to plan and anticipate futures in relation to multiple others and not only themselves (Coe, 2016).

In a few situations, however, migrants' returns happened abruptly (see Amrith, 2021b). It is not only retirement age but also the changing financial situation of the employer, or chronic health conditions such as diabetes or high-blood pressure, which can mark the premature arrival of the temporal border, particularly for older domestic workers. As Rhea (a domestic worker in her 50s, from the Philippines), put it: "if you are over 50 already, it's difficult to transfer [to another employer]. Better to stay with your employer as long as you can"; her statement recognizes that employers tend to prefer younger and "able-bodied" workers. Nati, an Indonesian domestic worker who is 50 years old and has been in Singapore for 24 years, explained with some regret that when she was recently diagnosed with a blood-clotting condition, her employer told her that if her condition gets worse, they will have to "send [her] back." Nati said "I felt a lot of pain when I heard that because we are together for so many years and I think about all that I have done for them ... but it's true, we say here in Singapore 'our life is in our boss's hands, not God's hands!'" The timing and circumstances of these (actual or threatened) returns leave migrants feeling unprepared and lost about the future that comes too soon.

Avoiding and Delaying Anxious Aging Futures

Migrant domestic workers face anxious futures upon return because their relationships to their original homes and kin have changed significantly over the lifecourse

(Constable, 1999). Confronting temporal borders thus also involves confronting the emotional borders that have emerged as a result of long years away from their families. Migrant women also face ongoing financial precarity (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020) and there are gendered expectations on how they ought to behave, which will accompany them into old-age. These intersecting insecurities contribute to migrant women pushing back the temporal border, avoiding and delaying their returns home in later life.

Migrant women talk extensively about their need to fulfill a number of financial obligations back home while they are abroad—to put children through school, build a house, cover emergencies, or pay the medical bills of older parents or chronically ill relatives—all of which delay their returns indefinitely. There is equally a fear of returning to a life they left behind, of falling back into normative gender roles, of performing care work without an income, or of being bored. As Rhea remarked, “if I go home, I’ll do the same work but I won’t get paid. Here I get paid!”. For all the investments that women make in their hometowns and for all the longing they express to be reunited with their families, return is seen as a journey backward rather than forward. As a single woman who did not marry in order to earn money for her family abroad, Theena, a 48-year-old domestic worker from India (and in Singapore for 19 years), has found a new sense of freedom in Singapore. Walking her employer’s dog outside on her own after dark and choosing how to spend her leisure time with friends on Sundays are things she believes she would not have the freedom to do in her village as a single woman given the moral judgments and expectations of kin and neighbors. While Theena feels more confident about standing up to them upon her eventual return, she is also afraid of losing her independence and returning to former gendered roles and expectations. Even with some time to go until she approaches the temporal border, Theena already anticipates a future back home with ambivalence.

Relationships “back home” also shift quite significantly over time. Many of the women in my study had lost one or both of their parents, and a number went through marital separations in their forties and fifties. A lifecourse perspective (Coe, 2016; Johnson-Hanks, 2002) reiterates how notions of home are not static but are marked by the dynamic relationships that constitute these homes. Rose, from Laguna province in the Philippines, approaching 60 and in Singapore for 32 years, reflected on her recent separation with her unfaithful husband who had been working in Saudi Arabia: “I don’t like that kind of husband. I would rather stay alone and [be] happy than wait for his money. That is why I always keep this job.” Rose explained that if she were to return, her family would pressure her to reconcile with her husband. She said, “in the Philippines, they don’t understand if you want to stay alone. If I stay here, they will leave me alone.” She added, “my family and friends [in the Philippines] have their own lives, their own children, grandchildren!” Concerned that she will not share the same experiences as her peers, Rose tries to delay returning, while continuing to provide financially for her aging mother and her many nieces and nephews. After decades-long processes of negotiating kin relationships, earning and providing, Rose’s anticipation of the future is tainted by her husband’s betrayal.

Rose's worries are accentuated when she hears about her friends' challenging experiences of return. She talks about her friend Angela at length, who had been in Singapore for 26 years and returned home at the age of 60. Rose explains that since Angela was the only former migrant in the family, the responsibility to take care of her aging siblings' medical expenses fell on her, and she ran out of money not long after her return. Rose is perplexed why Angela did not ask her daughter for money but reflected sadly that "without your money [as a remittance-sending-migrant], maybe they are not nice to you anymore." Temporal borders are thus a reminder not only of the long distances that have separated domestic workers from their families but how the passing of time might create social and emotional borders among kin (Sakti, 2020). This is also because domestic workers and their kin do not always share the details of their lives with each other on home visits or video calls (see also Madianou & Miller, 2012; Sampaio, 2020), and there are differing expectations on how care ought to be provided in migrant families (both during and post-migration).

Many women in my study echoed this point in saying that they do not want to depend on their children. In spite of their regular digital communications and visits home, they worry about emotional bonds fading. Vilma, for instance, said, "I am still here because I need to save for my own age and future, I don't want to ask my children for money." Hence, she participates in an informal village-based savings club every week with friends in a similar situation. These anxieties further expose the contradictions of both receiving country and country-of-origin policies, which benefit from migrants' long-term financial contributions and labor, but do not care for migrants at the end of their working lives. Cris (introduced earlier) further pointed out that "in the Philippines, if you don't have money, you will die faster ... if you cannot pay the deposit, [the hospitals] will not admit you." In large part, older migrant women do not know what their precarious aging futures hold. The idea of leaving their independent and active breadwinner lives is one that generates much anxiety, financially and emotionally, and shapes how migrant women anticipate the future.

Planning and Imagining Transnational Futures

Once older domestic workers retire and return to their countries of origin, their ability to lead transnational lives becomes constrained. Obtaining a work visa to migrate onwards to other countries is difficult after a certain age, and financial limitations make it challenging to continue a transnationally mobile life. To confront futures that are less anxiety-laden, some migrant women think of ways to bridge the anticipated ruptures of temporal borders by carrying elements of their transnational lives with them when they return, practically, ethically, spiritually, and imaginatively. This is not surprising as a rich literature has shed light on the moral, creative, and spiritual projects that migrant women develop abroad, including religious pilgrimages, forms of activism, and community engagement (Constable, 1999; Johnson & Werbner, 2010; Liebelt, 2011). These agentic practices are illustrative of the complex forms of belonging and identity that they develop abroad. They also complicate narratives that migrants' journeys abroad revolve exclusively around supporting their families. In their long stays in Singapore, the women I encountered similarly engage with religious and spiritual

communities. They find a new sense of independence and participate in skills and “upgrading” courses, which end up having some bearing in how they imagine their futures in retirement.

Sundays, for instance, the 1 day off per week (or in some cases, fortnight) that migrant domestic workers have, take on renewed importance for those approaching retirement. Many of my interlocutors enrolled in Sunday classes to learn new skills such as cosmetology, caregiving and baking, or participated in Zumba classes to keep fit. Some took courses in business and entrepreneurship, increasingly popular offerings, which teach them to budget, save, and make business plans, consistent with the neoliberal idea that they are increasingly responsible for their own futures (Amrith, 2021b). Many of these courses offer certificates that women hope will help them in navigating the future. The women I met in these spaces would often contrast their own efforts with the ones who just “sit around,” commenting that they are short-sighted and wasting their time. I heard many ideas such as opening an international guest house, a boarding house for students, and multi-cuisine restaurants that would make use of their cosmopolitan experiences from their time abroad. Through these creative ideas, domestic workers anticipate different possible futures.

A number of my interlocutors also engaged in practices of giving and volunteering in Singapore’s multicultural spaces. I heard stories from women about going to the temple every Sunday to prepare and serve meals for temple visitors, staying late afterward to clean the grounds; or similarly, going early to church to prepare breakfast and volunteer during services as ushers. I met others who volunteered alongside Singaporeans at a shelter for domestic workers, at a disability association and in eldercare nursing homes. One group of friends explained how their volunteer work every Sunday morning, “actually gives us more energy to help others, and also we learn many things.” Jess, a 59-year-old who arrived in Singapore from the Philippines in the late 1980s, explained how she felt about her volunteer work in a nursing home; “when you go, it’s refreshing, then at the end of the day your body is very light. They give patients for me to look after, and to talk to . . . Malay, Chinese, Indian . . . I really enjoy that.” Many of my interlocutors and their friends, across all nationalities, were doing this unpaid, volunteer work on their day off. These practices were meaningful to women’s sense of self and belonging in ways that transcended the logic of the immigration regime which separates “locals” and “foreigners.” However, the vibrant forms to belonging they have constructed over the course of decades and which refuse the state’s demarcations of their place in the society, become increasingly fragile in the light of temporal borders. Temporal borders do not recognize these acts and practices of belonging, and threaten to diminish the meaningful connections that migrant women develop.

At the same time, it is these very acts of volunteering and building connections that imaginatively connect migrant women to their futures. A common narrative among my research participants is that doing good deeds and helping others are ultimately what matter for one’s future. These ideas are framed in religious idioms of karma, or the judgment of God, emphasizing that their moral subjectivities are what will give them a sense of continuity across temporal borders and existential impasses, in spite of uncertainties that await them. Dasuni, a 49-year-old domestic worker from Sri Lanka who has been in Singapore for 20 years converted from Buddhism to Christianity about 10 years after arriving. She explained that “if I

one day have to return [to Sri Lanka] I just want to make sure that my house has a prayer room upstairs where I will spend all my days. That is all I need to feel peace.” Dasuni is not fearfully anticipating the unknown, but finds solace in the spiritual continuities between her present and future, and between Singapore and her hometown in Sri Lanka and hopes to continue her service to her faith once she eventually returns.

In a few cases, the migrations of the next generation could offer one avenue for continued transnational connection among returnees. This is seen in the case of Lena who worked in Singapore for 25 years and returned to her hometown near Cebu in the Philippines at the age of 59. Her daughter now works in Singapore as a domestic worker, serving as a link between Lena’s life in Singapore and her “new/old” life in the Philippines. Lena looks after her daughter’s children, while her daughter’s remittances support the family household. Lena maintains Facebook contact with her many friends and former employers, regularly sharing photographic memories of her time with them. This arrangement allows migrant women to imagine their lives as a part of an ongoing intergenerational cycle of transnational care (David & Liebelt, 2011), in spite of the temporal border that marks the end of transnational working lives and the ongoing forms of precarity that underlie and perpetuate these cycles of mobility.

Conclusion

Migrant domestic workers find themselves facing uncertain and insecure futures. The narratives in this paper have examined how institutionally defined retirement and return constitute temporal borders that migrant women are not always prepared for, marking the transition from a known transnational present to an unknown future in the migrants’ countries of origin. For migrant women, the temporal border marks the end of their working lives abroad and a transition into what they hope will be a new phase of activity. Such transitions are thus not simply about moving from work to retirement according to more rigid notions of ‘life stages’, but involve a re-thinking—sometimes in non-linear ways—of place, relationships, and what it means to live a meaningful life. I argue that temporal borders are felt acutely by low-wage female temporary migrants who are subjected to mandatory returns. Temporary migration regimes are classed, gendered, and racialized as they constrict the mobilities of migrant domestic workers as noncitizen “others” over the course of their working lives abroad. They further shape their aging futures since domestic workers neither hold the means or the privileges to stay on in Singapore, nor do they have the ability to move flexibly between different countries in later life. Reintegration into their home communities, both financially and emotionally, is also challenging for migrant women after decades abroad. As such, there are conflictual and unequal intersections between citizenship, home, gender, and care over time.

The article has additionally argued for the value of studying the aging futures of migrants from the vantage point of late middle-age as migrant women begin anticipating the temporal border. Such spaces of anticipation are characterized by a looming “presence of the future,” uncertainty, and conflicting emotions (Anderson, 2010;

Appadurai, 2013), whereby the future is imagined with varying degrees of concreteness and vagueness. The experiences of the women featured in this paper demonstrate how people who have lived their lives transnationally hold multiple senses of home, kinship, and belonging that cannot easily be disentangled, even when immigration regimes leave them little choice in the matter. Approaching the temporal border and an impending return home thus requires migrants to tackle uncomfortable questions relating to their aging futures including their care, financial and emotional security, and to reflect on where their important social relationships, past and present, are located. The temporal border complicates transnational belonging because it becomes difficult for migrant women to live transnational lives once they return to their countries of origin.

While migrant women cannot directly change the structural constraints that require them to return at a certain age, there is still nevertheless room to maneuver around the timing of these temporal borders, as the narratives in this paper have demonstrated. Such strategies may be emotional, practical, moral and spiritual. One common strategy to prolong migrant women's time abroad is to claim "indispensable" employment relationships which enable contract extensions. Another strategy is to delay or avoid returns for as long as possible to homes and kin relationships that have long changed. Some women suggest that if their care goes unreciprocated (by employers or kin), their embodied, ethical practices of self-transformation through volunteer work, faith-based commitments, and "doing good" are what will carry them across temporal borders and into their futures, materially and imaginatively. These narratives recall Erica Vogel (2020)'s suggestion that migrants' cosmopolitan experiences propel them into imagining future possibilities beyond the bounds of "here" and "there" as "globalization continues to impact people's lives and ideas about their futures and pasts long after they have stopped moving, or that particular global moment has come to an end." While there remains a tentative quality to these future possibilities for middle-aged women migrants who are anxious about returning in older age, they nevertheless re-orient their actions in the present to find ways to soften the ruptures of temporal borders. In these important ways, migrant women express their agency in the face of temporal borders, which are not insurmountable, but malleable and hold creative potential.

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Notes

1. This “typology of return” displayed on the slides was material produced by Philippine state agencies and seems to be inspired by Francisco Cerase’s (1974) typology on Southern Italians in the United States.
2. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers> (Accessed 10 September 2021).
3. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/sector-specific-rules/work-permit-conditions> (Accessed 10 September 2021).
4. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/eligibility-and-requirements/fdw-eligibility> (Accessed 10 September 2021).
5. The term was first used by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) in the context of detention and deportation and how temporal borders impose modes of waiting on migrants.
6. Fieldwork was carried out over 6 months between late 2018 and early 2020, with ongoing contact via digital media with some participants. The main language of communication with domestic workers of different nationalities was English, with some Tagalog and Tamil used in interviews with Filipino and Tamil domestic workers respectively. The names in this paper are pseudonyms and identifying information has been removed. The domestic workers were fully informed about the research project and gave their verbal consent to participate. Some interviews were recorded, others were not, according to the wishes of the domestic workers and in recognition of their vulnerable positionalities in Singapore.
7. See Ray and Qayum (2009) for a discussion on loyalty and reciprocity among domestic workers in Kolkata.

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