Foreign Bodies: Horror and Intimacy in Singapore's Migrant Labor Regimes

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In the late spring and summer of 2020, Singapore faced a crisis over foreign bodies. Initially successful at containing infections of COVID-19, the city-state furthered its reputation for efficient, effective governance (Iwamoto 2020; Heijmans and Gale 2020). But a new outbreak threatened this image, occurring as it did behind the scenes, among migrant workers and not Singaporean citizens, exacerbated by crowded worker housing. The outbreak revealed the extent to which migrants existed in a bureaucratic shadow, and public reaction to it revealed the anxieties that the city-state's residents felt about their own vulnerability.

The recent outbreak was cast as a surprise: as Singaporean journalist Kirsten Han (2020) cuttingly characterized the official reaction, "You can't have foresight for things you refuse to see." In contrast to the way that the government dealt with Singaporean citizens, cases among con-

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struction workers were siloed off into their own accounting and regulatory system. Among private companies, too, the desire to contain and hide the epidemic sparked panic: one operator of a migrant workers' dormitory simply locked all the workers together inside after one of them had a suspected case (Mohan 2020). Two worlds existed in parallel, one full of danger and infection, and the other a glossy and efficient state. The boundary between these worlds became a matter of life (for those on one side of the boundary) and death.

Such a boundary requires policing. In a letter to *Lianhe Zhaobao*, the country's Chinese-language newspaper, Li Shiwan (2020) placed the blame for the outbreak upon the workers, writing that Singaporeans "have to think if the spread of certain diseases also has to do with . . . personal hygiene habits?" Responses to Li's and similar letters focused on the potential for this new outbreak to cross the divide and spread into affluent homes via sexual liaisons that construction workers might have with domestic workers. While news outlets emphasized that this was not happening, user comments were explicit: as one example, Marcus Chew writes, "Check domestic helper also, some [engage in a sex act] and went home continue cook and care for the employer families. Ants spreading."[1]

Ants spreading. The image is one that combines a dehumanized depiction of foreign workers, an invocation of a natural world that requires suppression, and an unclean infection threatening the glossy facade of the city-state. The fear over foreign bodies and the call for their containment is one that I explore here: the tension between migrant worker and employer, between the modern state and its allochronous neighbors, and between the imagined rational Singaporean employer and the potential dark influence from outside that he or she might fall victim to.

Singapore relies upon migrant work. But its laborers work as provisional residents, without being promised a permanent place on the island. Their contracts are clear: they come to exchange labor for wages, not to take part in its prosperous future. Work is racialized and gendered: certain jobs (construction, domestic work) are entirely given over to foreign nationals of certain countries—Filipina and Indonesian women do domestic work, Thai and Bangladeshi men work construction, and so on (see S. Huang and Yeoh 2003). Such gendered measures are intended to control the growth

of foreign families in the city-state, making sure that employees keep their domestic attentions focused on Singaporean families (or on remittances to be paid back home). Singapore's profit margins depend on that labor and its exploitation, and the maintenance of Singapore's hypermodern, shiny-clean international image depends upon that labor being hidden—much as COVID-infected workers were concealed. In short, the story that the city tells itself about itself being—as Singapore's premiere statesman, Lee Kuan Yew (2000) put it—a "first world" island in the midst of the "third world" depends on the maintenance of these social walls and the surveillance and control of the labor passing through its borders.

But what of intimate labor, of people who share residents' private spaces? While it is only a minority of Singapore's population that employs live-in domestic labor, this proportion has been rapidly climbing since 2010 as newly middle-class Singaporeans strive for such a marker of luxury, and prices for domestic labor fall as new countries sign labor contracts with Singapore (Awang and Wong 2019). Such intimate labor both provides the opportunity for professional Singaporeans (especially women) to work without the burden of child or elder care, but also involves incorporating a stranger—and foreigner—into the home. It can be an awkward arrangement: intimate relations, those forms of labor that, as Viviana Zelizer (2005: 14–15) describes, depend upon "shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability, and shared memory of embarrassing situations"—for example, cooking food, tending to infants and the elderly, cleaning private spaces. These are precisely the realms out of which the anxieties I detail here emerge.

Yet here is a misapprehension. While labor contracts situate such relations as an exchange of work for cash, affective labor, as Rhacel Parreñas (2017: 3–4; see also 2001) explores, by its very nature invokes a feeling in others, one that is often one-sided: the employer is cared for, the worker gains wages. A power resides in this promulgation of affect within the cared-for. As I show here, the intimate moments and emotive states generated through supposedly alienated labor create a kind of unaccounted excess, especially in situations charged with racial and gendered imaginings, an excess that brings forth new forms of horror. What does it mean to feel affection, or to see others feel affection for someone to whom one shouldn't, or to worry

about others seeking to engender unwanted emotions? What power does this emotion hold over those who have taken on the role of control and surveillance? How does one police boundaries in such intimate spheres?

Here, I explore the horror within labor relations by looking at witchcraft accusations against foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore. In the examples that I draw from, Indonesian FDWs working in Singapore are accused by their (mostly) Chinese Singaporean employers of using magical means—often made synonymous with Islam[2]—to enact unwanted changes upon the homes and bodies of those employing them. These changes include generating unexpected affection from employers, sending swarms of insects or disease, or even inserting Southeast Asian traits into their employers' children. These are stories about the potential breach in those social, ontological, and epistemological walls that are supposed to keep Singapore's status as the (imagined-to-be) bubble of prosperity, rationalism, "Confucian" (Barr 2000) values, and development. They reflect fears over a thought-to-be transcended "third world" (often expressed in terms of "the jungle," "the village," the *kampong*" [rural Malay village], etc.) invading supposedly protected space. Indeed, at times FDWs are—in an ironic twist—blamed for forcing their employers to use counterspells and other magical acts, an uncanny devolution into irrationality in what is supposed to be a hyperrational, "first world" citizenry. Witchcraft, here, is a violation of boundaries that threatens the assumed supremacy of rational, "developed" space. It is a haunting of the claims of which Singaporean state projects are so proud.

Migrant Work

Accusations of black magic are more than just a spat between employee and employer; they carry, as Audrey Verma (2011: 25) points out and as I show here, very real consequences. Suspected users of magic are often terminated or are reported to the police, with latter charges falling generally under the broad category of "criminal mischief."[3] The subsequent gendered and racist violence enacted upon FDWs by such accusations is clear, as is the abuse of power in such an intimate setting. But I seek not to create out of employers what Hoon Song (2006) refers to as "deserving victims": abusers of power

who can be safely cast as villains. Instead, following Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler's (2000) complication of "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1992) and, elsewhere, James Siegel's (2006) look at the perpetrators and victims of witch-killings in Java, I seek to capture the complexity of the discourses surrounding such events and to understand the racialized, nationalized, and gendered tensions that emerge in such moments.

This article is based upon interview data, news reports, and online message boards from 2010–20. As much of my data involves posts in online forums and popular news outlets, I follow James Siegel, who, in *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta* (1998), analyzes publications geared toward particular class backgrounds to see the emergence of popular anxiety surrounding criminality and the role of the state. In Singapore, assembling a class portrait of popular media is simple—there is one dominant media outlet, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which has divided publications into class and language sectors: Chinese-language dailies such as the higher-end *Lianhe Zaobao* and the tabloid *Lianhe Wanbao* target a working-class and bourgeois audience, as this is the audience likely to get their news in Chinese, as opposed to the English-language *Straits Times*, which is geared toward a more elite audience. These SPH-run publications exist on the fringes of what we might term "state media," as their chairs and board members are often staffed by very high-ranking politicians from Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party, including two Singaporean presidents, the director of the Internal Security Department, and, currently, a senior cabinet minister. As such, they are a part of—however minor their theme—state discourses. Such media presentations often mirror stories told to me personally or presented in independent message boards online.

With this in mind, I present a representative sample of stories of witchcraft. I draw from three major themes in these stories: the violation of boundaries, a perceived threat from an allochronous rural world, and an uncanny blending of bodies. Each presents a particular challenge to a sealed, prosperous, "first world" Singaporean self-imagining.

Cases of Hauntings

Matter out of Place

A typical story: a new FDW enters the household and charms the family by cooking "delicious Indonesian delicacies." But she hides other appetites: she is discovered sneaking a Bangladeshi lover into the house when she thought that the family was out. Desperate to find what else she might have hidden, Bernice,[4] the furious employer, searches her FDW's room, finding a cache of stolen jewels and a clutch of black pigeon eggs under her bed, proof enough that magic had been done. The FDW admits attempting a magical spell, and the family calls the police to have her arrested. But suddenly, the entire family falls sick "and the doctors could not explain why." The crisis is resolved when the family calls a Taoist medium (*tang ki*) to perform an exorcism at the same moment that the FDW is repatriated to Indonesia, and normalcy returns.

Here is a common plot: initial good impressions, especially focusing on the FDW's bringing of foreign, often strangely alluring food, give way to suspicions. The FDW may have a lover (always another foreigner—in one story related to me, the construction worker had been secretly living underneath the FDW's bed), a strange attachment between the employer's child and the FDW, a family member being overly sympathetic to the FDW, and so on. As the tension escalates, employers surveil their workers—searching rooms, opening mail, installing cameras, and so on. These surveillance efforts uncover the practice of magic, and then employers instigate legal and magical means of counteracting it.

Accusations like these have existed in Singapore for years (Verma 2011). But, along with the post-2010 boom in the employment of FDWs, these stories flared. The particular focus on magic gained popular attention in 2011, after employer Hylda Low allegedly discovered her Indonesian FDW infusing the family's dinner using her used sanitary pad. This was, according to Low, a magical attempt to convince the family to be lenient on (*sayang*) the FDW—what the worker desired was to be able to use her phone more often, have a day off, or, according to Low, bring her lover to the house. In the wake of Low's campaign, employment agencies began to use such stories in order to cast doubt upon the trustworthiness of their competition. Low

herself began a Facebook group entitled "Dangerous Maids," collecting stories and pictures of FDWs that employers feared were using magical means, and another—now defunct—site supplemented these stories with scanned images of FDWs' passports.[5]

Anxieties over magic persist. In 2018, a few years after Low's crusade, a case involving the suspected us of magic made headlines again. In this case, *Lianhe Zaobao* (J. Huang 2018) reported that a middle-aged Indonesian FDW caring for an elderly Chinese Singaporean man, Huang, convinced him to sell his apartment and spend the profits on her. Huang's relatives claimed that he had increased the FDW's wages from SGD 500 per month (USD 376) to SGD 700 per month (USD 526), bought her expensive clothing, and allowed her to wear makeup at home. These matters were so out of character for Huang (or so counter to his children's interests) that they suspected magic. The family's worries were confirmed when, after having been brought to a Taoist temple for a counterspell, Huang suddenly renounced the FDW and agreed to fire her. Sent back to Indonesia, the FDW threatened to cast a curse in retaliation for her termination, and the family reported the case to the police, although what the police made of a threat to cast a spell from abroad, *Lianhe Zaobao* does not report.

In this latter case, what is *not* discussed is significant. Notably, no one speaks about seduction, manipulation, or even simply affection between the two. Missing, too, are explanations about Huang's behavior that would emerge from his own agency: facing the twilight of his life (and, given his children's focus on his money, tense intergenerational relations), an old man makes an unusual friend and decides to enjoy his time rather than go peacefully and leave his children a large inheritance. The relationship between Huang and the woman who should be his employee has become matter out of place; it is rendered unreal, and magic must be at work.

Huang's story is not the only one reflecting the fear of what might be termed, with apologies to Mary Douglas (1966), affect out of place. Another employer writes,

> My new maid just come 2 weeks ago. Recently she ask me to help post a letter to her husband, I kpo[6] and ask my java[7] friend to read for me. To our alarm she actually ask her husband if he receive the items or info

> need for the black magic so that we will sayang her! I think she use my neighbour's maid HP[8] to SMS. Most likely our names and Addr. Will send her to the agency tomorrow,[9] but very worried about her getting revenge using black magic. She's a Muslim. (GKmum 2011)

"Lekdao"[10] commented, adding a method to break the spell:

> My MIL ex-maid (Indonesia)[11] also the same, heard that she so black magic that is why the boss (male) always side (believe) her. My MIL found out thru asking medium,[12] true or not i dunno coz she found nothing in the maid room . . .
>
> My friend fed his indo maid the lor bak[13] gravy (break her religion) on her 1st day of work, so that she cannot do anything funny to the family. hahahaha. . . . Must not let the maid know abt the pork.

In these cases, suspicion, accusation, and evidence emerge from heterogeneous sources. The original post describes blatant violations of the FDW's trust (i.e., reading her mail) and the simple explanation "she's a Muslim" as evidence for how she might accomplish her witchcraft. For Lekdao, the indication that his in-law's FDW was using black magic came not from any paraphernalia or statement but from the unusual trust that his father-in-law gave to her. Similarly, the supposedly confirming evidence against the FDW rested upon the testimony of a Taoist medium.

Here, the violation of boundaries becomes magical warfare. Things from Singapore—names and addresses—are sent abroad for nefarious purposes, just as religious taboos are violated. Each violation happens without the others' knowledge. But further, these accusations are intimately concerned with Islam. In the case of Lekdao's friend, he takes a preemptive religious attack upon the Muslim FDW, feeding her pork in order to cause her to break her vow. Here, as in the original poster's seemingly explanatory "she's a Muslim," religious difference is rendered nearly synonymous with magical power.

This is a common thread. In fact, in the accounts I describe here, those who are accused of witchcraft are all Indonesian—a nationality that, rightly or wrongly, is often assumed to be synonymous with Islam. As in the above cases, simply being Muslim—specifically *Indonesian* Muslim—rendered

one suspect. But this, too, is an intimate relationship—recall that the island of Singapore itself sits at the border between Indonesia and Malaysia, and prior to its British colonization and the subsequent influx of its Chinese majority, the island was Malay. Islam, especially Islam linked with Malayness, is the ground upon which Singapore builds its "first world."

The uncanny return of the original inhabitants of the land as outsiders should be familiar to many in settler contexts. In American horror films—especially in the 1980s, such as *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Pet Sematary* (1989), and even *The Shining* (1980), the presence of Indigenous sites suffices as an explanation for why haunting occurs. But such haunting is not political, and the link between malevolent spirits and Indigenous land does not call for revolution or reparation. Rather, it simply serves as fuel for settlers' own fears, and the terrorizing of white settlers unconnected with the original dispossession becomes a sign that something has violated the (settlers') everyday. It is a connection to another time and place, one that contains within it magic neither present elsewhere nor welcome now. And, similarly, the spirits that emerge in these and other stories are defeated (or evaded) by new settler occupants and by the settlers' own unrelated technologies. Compare the "burial ground" explanation with the flat "She's a Muslim" from the story above—just as "Indian burial ground" in American horror film serves as an explanation, "She's a Muslim" is explanation enough.

Untimely Presences

From here, then, I turn toward stories of the return of the Malay repressed—specifically, the return of the *kampong*. In closing her story, Bernice exhorts other potential employers: "If she [the FDW] is from rural areas, then stay alert and do not let your guards down! You won't want to lose your life just because of a voodoo doll or pigeon egg, do you?" Here, then, I turn from "She's a Muslim" to the fear of "rural areas." In part, this also allows for the incorporation of Muslim employer's voices. While the majority of stories I cite here were from ethnic Chinese Singaporean employers, there were a number from Malay families. Here, the locus of fear moves from a generalized "Islam" toward a fear of syncretic, village practices (see Peletz 2003).

The word *kampong* (alt. *kampung*) means "village" in Malay and in Indonesian, but in Singapore the word specifically marks rural Indonesian and Malay towns. It is also a marker of Singapore's own past; Singapore used to be a city of kampong. But these densely packed communities were demolished to make way for its high-rise public housing projects in which the majority of the population now live, though—like Indigenous place-names in the United States—the names live on in places such as Kampong Tiong Bahru,[14] Kampong Bugis, Kampong Java, and Kampong Glam. Indeed, the National University of Singapore's history project invites visitors to "step into the past" as they visit digital records of Singapore's "disappeared" kampong. In other words, just as with the trope of Indigenous people in American media, the kampong is permitted to exist so long as it stays in the past, but a past that exists elsewhere—in Malaysia too, such a notion of the kampong embodies a past way of being, harmful to the "new Malay" identity the state seeks to promote but full of nostalgia (Thompson 2002; Peletz 2003). Thus, with the entry of individuals from this past time, the kampong returns.

In a social media post entitled "Indo Maid Keep Bomoh Things; 'Something' Was Brought from Their Kampong to Singapore," a Singaporean Malay employer recounts how she found evidence of suspected magic in her FDW's room.[15] Encased in a small black canister was a scroll of parchment covered in Arabic writing. Confronted, the worker claims to have purchased it in Singapore as a protective charm, but upon further questioning, she confesses that she had obtained it in Indonesia before coming. The post, like in Bernice's, advises readers to "be more cautious with your maid." Even though the employer did not suffer an attack, the possession of such an object threatens, precisely because of its very foreignness.

Another Singaporean employer, Dia,[16] describes her own experience with invasive forces.[17] Her new FDW—again, as in many such stories initially charming—begins to display strange behavior when asked about her home life back in Indonesia. She asks if she can call her Indonesian home, then refuses to do so once Dia gives her permission to call. Eventually, the FDW calls her neighbor instead, who informs Dia that the FDW's family had died years ago. Disturbed, Dia begins to note other strange behaviors: the FDW will not eat but encourages Dia to eat (and then becomes upset when Dia does not). Dia suspects that, as Dia is non-Muslim, the FDW has targeted

her for black magic, though Dia has no proof other than the strange phone call.

Dia wakes in the night at other times, seeing a dark presence with glowing red eyes outside of her door or at the foot of her bed. She notices how close her father has become to the FDW and how combative he is with her mother. Dia reiterates how tolerant she is of this behavior—"Things happen ok," she writes. But then she discovers the FDW praying "the wrong way" and, later, finds the FDW holding a bag full of Dia's used sanitary pads, each time responding to Dia's shock with the seeming non sequitur "Do you want to eat?" The FDW is—over Dia's father's objections—sent back to Indonesia but terrorizes Dia with one more apparition after she leaves—a spectral figure outside of Dia's window.

Taking Dia's story as a particular reflection of her own fears, we can see, too, some common themes: an association between nonstandard Islam and magic, the discovery of uncanny presences entering Singapore from abroad, the notion of care made uncanny ("Do you want to eat?"), the rendering of (the father's) affection into suspicion.

Here, the introduction of a foreigner opens a link to an undeveloped elsewhere and else-*when*, in "the kampong," where orthodox practices are reversed and ghosts are possible. Verma (2011) similarly describes how Singaporean employers fearing black magic from their domestic workers raises an interesting ontological issue: Singapore has transcended the use of magic, Verma summarizes, but FDWs come from countries that have not yet done so, and thus they might bring magic into the house. In other words, the "kampong" exists in a state of allochrony—it is in the past, where magic exists, but simultaneously in the present.

In this way, stories of haunting, as they collapse time and space, contain within them a civilizational discourse, where that which is thought to be overcome returns. In addition, this discourse draws links between the also thought-to-be overcome jungle and inside space: as an example, one employer described how he discovered secret compartments in his Indonesian FDW's underclothes containing images of his wife and daughter—evidence of witchcraft. After he fired her for this, the house began to be infested with insects: ants appeared in the tap water; strange, never-before-seen insects appeared in the child's room; and his spouse developed a rash

that medicine could not cure. Upon hiring a new Indonesian FDW, the family is informed that, yes, if a disgruntled worker is able to make a call to a "black magic master" in Indonesia, such things are possible.

Such discourses about the kampong possessing more potent magic contain within them Orientalist tropes. As I describe elsewhere (Johnson 2016), Singaporean entrepreneurs, facing pressures of a (self-styled) "faster-paced" business environment, turn to a supposedly "slower" Southeast Asia for a source of magic that "really" works. In so doing, they reinterpret Thai magico-religious practices for their own purposes and in their own "religious repertoire" (Keane 2003). Thai and "kampong" magic here is stronger precisely because of an imagined backwardness (Johnson 2016). The difference here is that Thai practices are intentionally brought into the island nation by Singaporeans; Malay and Indonesian practices emerge unwanted.

Such a violation of seemingly sealed boundaries suggests other such violations of similarly sealed spaces—namely, those of the body. Recall Dia's discovery of the FDW in the toilet with her pads, and the question "Do you want to eat?" Indeed, most of the accusations that I look at here involve bodiliness—specifically, the blending of "unclean" substances (e.g., urine, menstrual blood) with food, or the wholesale merging of bodies. Thus, I turn here toward bodies and their violation.

Nasi Kangkang

In a similar way as Dia, Hylda Low's FDW also used sanitary pads in her magical practice. This is, in fact, the most common accusation of magic against FDWs that I came across. This spell is termed the creation of *nasi kangkang* (Malay, "squatting rice") and involves placing bodily effluvia—urine, saliva, fingernail clippings, menstrual blood, and so on—in food prepared for another in order to cause a change in that person's affect: to render the target more submissive, friendly, or less threatening—that is, to sayang (Goody Feed Team 2020; Farhan 2017).

The salaciousness of nasi kangkang stories spread multiple places in popular discourses, including message boards as well as short story–length novelizations of the dangers of FDWs in the house. For instance, in a self-published short story simply entitled "Nasi Kangkang," Elmi Zulkarnain

Osman (2020: 4), a Malay-language instructor in Singapore and author, describes the act as "a nasty, voodoo, witch doctorly magic. Apparently, it is a practice that many Indonesian ladies use, in its mildest form, to gain sympathetic and preferential treatment from others but, at its worst it is used to essentially make its victims a puppet and allow their oppressor to force them into complete physical, psychological, financial and often sexual submission." Osman's description here is striking in that, as human rights groups note, FDWs in Singapore often report quite the reverse situation: physical, psychological, financial and often sexual oppression from employers. Here, then, is a symbolic reversal of expected hierarchies, not only a biological one (wherein cast-off substances are instead reingested by another), but a social one. It promises a blending, an intimacy that bleeds through the boundaries set up to keep intimate labor as labor, and FDW and Singaporean employer in their respective places. It inverts structures of power and oppression.

While the movement of material from the body into food is one sort of blending, others are more direct and, much as nasi kangkang inverts "low" and "high" parts of the body, invert racialized categories. In one story, an employer described how he had heard of FDWs' ability to "mosaic" the physical features of the children that they care for, substituting their own Southeast Asian body parts for their charges' East Asian ones. The employer speculated that the newly Chinese-appearing FDW will then become an adult film star for a Japanese film studio and/or a "bank robber," whereas the children, now bearing Southeast Asian features and "unidentifiable for life," will "turn to a life of crime." It is a clear—and seemingly unconscious—commentary upon beauty norms and superficial racism,[18] but what resonates with stories of nasi kangkang is this porosity of the body. Those consuming inappropriate body parts are in turn provoked to feel inappropriately—they feel affection for those for whom they should not feel affection, and thereby they succumb to the power of the powerless. The worker works her will upon the employer, not the other way around. Similarly, children spending too long with a foreign caretaker come to take on their nanny's appearance. For the employer, intimacy, affection, sexuality, and criminality intersect in a horrific porosity—not only is one ingesting the other, but now the other insinuates herself into the bloodline, altering appearances. In a subversion of what Michael D. Barr and Jevon Low (2005)

note as an often-explicit ethnic hierarchy in Singaporean popular imaginaries (and policy), both the internal-Southeast Asian/external-Chinese FDW and the internal-Chinese/external-Southeast Asian child, via their intermingling, descend into criminality.

The Magic of Borders

Potency and Unknowability

Here, then, are stories of unauthorized blending in intimate labor. The imagined-to-be rational subject is disrupted. Employers find themselves responding in emotionally inappropriate ways to their employees, feeling affection when they should be impassive; foreign and thought-to-be transcended elements recur in modern space; medical doctors are stymied against unexplainable maladies; bodies blend, and rational city-dwellers are forced to use magic to combat perceived invasions from "the kampong." Physical and social hierarchies are overturned. One might expect here to turn to the Freudian uncanny. But instead of the uncanny as an epistemological crisis, we see a civilizational crisis. In other words, magic appears not as a fear of something that the conscious mind assumes was always false (i.e., "We believed in witches because we were primitive; now we are modern . . . *yet we still believe*"), but as something that has been conquered *but still exists elsewhere* (i.e., "We had witches because we were primitive; now we are modern . . . *yet primitive people still have witches*").

Here, overcoming a world of witchcraft and demons is a geographical and technological feat, not simply an epistemological one. Witches and demons must be identified, recognized, and combated in order to be overcome—thus the use of the term *horror* instead of *uncanny*. As with a monstrosity, the correct order of things has become dislodged and requires an intervention to set the authority of borders back in place.

I do not disambiguate *sorcery* (malevolent magic used upon others by a professional—e.g., *dukun* or *bomoh*), *witchcraft* (malevolent magic used by a lay person), and *magic* (the manipulation of potency to achieve personal gain), as my interlocutors do not disambiguate them. Here, then, I use emic terms interchangeably. The only term commonly used in Singapore that

I avoid here is *voodoo*, as the Caribbean resonances here are unproductive and, frankly, insulting to practitioners of Haitian *voudun*.

The kinds of magic described here are not purely products of employers' imaginations and do indeed come from commonplace magical traditions in Malay[19] practice. Michael Peletz (1988: 141–43) describes Malay love magic very similar to that related in the stories above—the introduction of foreign substances in the target's food, or the use of photographs or the Bismallah.[20] In Peletz's Malaysia-based account, Singapore, too, plays a role, with *dukun*[21] and individuals using magical services moving between the city-state and Malaysia. But while such practices have their origins in Malay magic, it must be remembered that the stories that I relate here are not Malay ones, even though they concern Malay magic; they are Singaporean and related mostly by Chinese Singaporean employers. While Singaporean is a cosmopolitan place, it embodies not a melting pot, but a plural society—a seemingly diverse place, but one where different groups generally socialize in separate realms (see Barr and Low 2005; Hirschman 1987). Thus magic "from the kampong" must be seen through Singaporean eyes.

Accordingly, I turn here to look at Singaporean religious practice, following the work of Robbie Goh (2016). Christianity in Singapore, as well as Chinese traditional religion[22] (together making up about 60 percent of the population), emphasizes the struggle with demonic forces and the opening of divine pathways to prosperity—whether these be the pathways promised by the prosperity gospel or by the various Taoist entities. In other words, Singaporean religious practice reinforces the idea of a demon-free, prosperous future that must be liberated and separated from those forces that might hold it back. And, for some, those demons are intimately associated with Singapore's other religions—despite Singapore's Religious Harmony Act, which provides penalties for those who disparage religious groups. Many religious figures are blunt about pushing the boundaries of the act—an evangelical Christian pastor described to me how Taoism and other religious traditions were replete with demons; another related a story where a formerly Hindu parishioner had brought her aunt in against her will for a forcible exorcism of Hindu spirits; and a Singaporean student, in a class field trip to a Taoist medium, asked me for advice should she come under "spiritual attack."

In this way, magic becomes bound with prosperity and with combating the forces that conspire to hold prosperity back. Supernatural power allows for prosperity's flow, but the very way that prosperity rests upon the flow of people across borders opens a space for something else to arrive with them. As Nils Bubandt (2014) describes for eastern Indonesia, modernity paradoxically opens a space for witchcraft to exist. Witchcraft, for Bubandt, operates within the Derridean aporia, not to explain the unknown, but as an effect of it. Buli cannibal witches (*gua*) do not resolve the problem of the unknown but rather emerge out of this very gap in understanding opened by modernity's assurances.

Here, witchcraft is immersed in the unknowability of others, something which recurs in multiple other accounts. For instance, Peletz (1988) describes how Malay magic rests on the potential betrayal of those who seem to be trustworthy—one's family members might slip something into one's food out of previously unknown malice. Similarly, in James Siegel's (2006) horrific account of the massacres of the 1990s in Indonesia, previously ordinary villagers are revealed to be witches, and, in turn, one's childhood playmates and lifelong friends might arrive to enact vengeance for unexplained and unexplainable slights. Indeed, much as in Matthew Carey's (2017) work in Algeria, mistrust and the acknowledgment of the working of unexplainable realms seems to dominate in such spheres—thus, affection is met with suspicion, strangely delicious foreign food with distrust. The question, *Why do I feel so warm toward this stranger?* is answered with witchcraft.

Servants and Masters

The entry of an FDW into the household disrupts. Employer's efforts to surveil—in my accounts, for instance, opening mail, restricting phone access, installing cameras, and searching belongings—reflect anxieties about their proximity to the family. Nicole Constable (1997: 540) traces these anxieties back to something citywide, as a turning of the domestic moral order "inside out." Similarly, in Taiwan, Pei-Chia Lan (2006) describes the unexpected, gendered tensions that face rising middle-class families when they hire foreign domestic helpers for the first time: FDWs take over tasks normally apportioned to women in the household.

Such a tension is not unique to the Chinese household but rather stems from the combination of intimacy, a perceived racial divide and fear of otherness, and gender. Ann Laura Stoler (1995), in her study of colonial-era Indonesia, notes how the Dutch placed a great deal of anxiety on to the role of Indonesian domestic helpers—especially nursemaids—in the upbringing of Dutch children in the colonies. Stoler quotes from an 1898 handbook for colonial families that warns that Javanese nursemaids might indulge their charges with "unnatural means . . . unbelievable practices that alas occur all too often, damaging these children for their entire adult lives and that cannot be written here" (quoted in Stoler 1995: 155–56). Servants, in Stoler's account, relayed their employers' fears of their own closeness, remembering, for instance, being admonished not to hold Dutch children too tight, lest they acquire the smell of servants' sweat; as one of their interlocutors reports, "the sweat of Javanese is different, you know" (Stoler and Strassler 2000: 8). Bodily scents and presence, foods, and other sharings of intimacy "mark the lines of difference between kinds of people and distill the dangers and pleasures of contact across those lines" (9). Thus, for Dutch accounts—just as in Singaporean accounts, it is the supposedly dominant employers that imagine, fear, and romanticize the excess that lies within the violation of boundaries and the generation of affect across social lines.

In some ways, despite its postcolonial status, Singapore replays the colonizer's position in Southeast Asia. As under British rule, Singaporean statecraft is paternalistic, with a (seen-to-be) benevolent de facto single party taking what at times are draconian policies (in Lee Kuan Yew's [2019] terms, "hard truths") for the far-reaching benefit of the island. As with colonial rule, there is an often-explicit racial hierarchy that plays into such considerations. Lee was quite open about the importance of Chinese ethnicity and values toward Singapore's development (see Barr and Skrbis 2009). These attitudes are commonplace within the population: employers will demand Chinese language skills for many positions that do not necessarily interact with Chinese companies, nearly three-quarters of Malay Singaporeans reported discrimination in hiring, and, according to a poll by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, only 60 percent of Chinese respondents claimed that other racial groups had anything to teach them. Here, boundaries are set—to maintain a prosperous Singapore, one must police them.

But, as a decolonial frame tells us, such hierarchical difference is central to the colonial or neocolonial world. Just as it did with the Dutch, intimate labor often rests upon a perceived civilizational difference that assigns people in their appropriate roles. In Taiwan, Lan (2006: 38) describes an avoidance of ethnic Chinese maids as they were perceived to be too ethnically "close" to their potential employers, thus potentially giving rise to sympathetic feelings. In Malaysia, Olivia Killias (2018: 149) describes how Indonesian FDWs are conceived of as the ideal employee owing to their "less 'civilized'" status. In short, both the productive and the dangerous potential of foreign labor rests upon the potential of reified notions of hierarchy, civilization, and time, and which guarantees barriers to intersubjectivity. It remains, though, to police those boundaries.

In overseas Chinese bourgeois regimes of intimate labor, then, lies an intense concern with boundaries along with a fear of the influence of supposed subordinates. As Dutch officials projected familial affect upon servants, so do Singaporean employers—though instead of the colonial nostalgia of imagined familial closeness there is hidden lust and avarice, demonic possession and infiltration. Here, then, I turn toward this excess, and the means that employers take to reestablish the power of boundaries.

The State as Anti-witch

The promise of labor is that it will remain in its place, that in the exchange of wages for work nothing else is passed. Employers hire FDWs seeking to minimize or mitigate the agency of the maid to bring to bear affective and emotional attachments, or simply to exert some degree of autonomy over her conditions; indeed, this is why such workers are often cast as virtual nonentities. Accusations of magic and their focus on the body of the FDW reveal the failure of such ways of thinking. Thus, the horror revealed by magic is the revelation of the porosity of these borders. Suddenly, the imagined manageable space, one that is clean and rational, faces an irruption of another body, one from a place thought to be beneath the rational Singaporean home. The horror thus revealed stems from the realization that the other seeks to exert her own agency over her conditions and over the mind and body of the employer. The intercession of the state and maid agency,

then, sets the world right again. It places magic abroad, where magic can persist, and keeps the boundaries of the household intact, safe against the messy intrusions of another person.

How, then, to resolve the horrific porosity of borders? If the discourses of class and race are shown to have cracks, if employers can have their bodies and even their ontological worlds invaded by outsiders, what recourse might they have? Here, I return to Bruce Kapferer's (1997) characterization of magic as a language of power. As such, it itself is porous—magic influences and is influenced by other discourses, other ways of thinking about and conceiving of power. If magic, as Marcel Mauss ([1902] 2001) claims, is the manipulation of impersonal aspects of power and potency for benefit, it follows that the line between other sources of power and magic blur. Thus, notions of development, modernity, and Singapore's "from third world to first" status itself is under threat not simply from Indonesian military threats, arrogant Western powers, and irrational business decisions but also from magical means.

It may seem a strange leap. The state appears only as an antagonist in the accounts I describe here—the Ministry of Manpower, for instance, is a frequent target of criticism from employers who feel as though their power to surveil and discipline the (perceived) danger of FDWs is limited by the appropriately acronymed MOM. MOM grants FDWs days off, forces employers to pay for FDW's fees when they are repatriated to their sending country, and—at times, and weakly—monitors FDWs' treatment. In my conversations with employers, MOM often emerged as a foil, forced by foreign pressure to cater to labor regimes (and linked to an assertion of Singaporean pragmatism over thought-to-be naive and thought-to-be Western values). Pages such as Low's vilify MOM for abrogating what Low feels are her rights as an employer—as one post on a successor to Low's now-defunct page reports:

> This old bird FDW (who self-ad online) sms me this when I said mobile phone can only be used on weekly off days or nights because I need her full attention on my special needs child and prefer she gets at least 8 hrs rest each day.
>
> "no thanks but Im not interested to work with a person like you. we r FDW, we r human being too same as you, we know our rights and responsibilities as Fdw."

You dare employ such a maid?

Is it a common sight to see FDWs stuffed with ear pieces to chat, hook[23] on Facebook, etc? . . . using 'human rights' as a lame excuse? What sort of rights has MOM given FDWs, the domestic maids in Spore? . . . I hope MOM can set guidelines to ensure FDWs in Spore behaves, act responsibly and carry out duties as a domestic worker, not princess or prostitute. . . . MOM wanted to let our domestic maids unwind [with a mandatory day off] but for those who has high sexual desires, very lonely in Spore and needed 'friends,' why implement a mandatory off days to give us additional stress and problems? (Winter 2014).

Here is a certain mania, a desire to regulate the bodies of FDWs (e.g., mandating the hours of sleep that the FDW gets, an extreme concern over sexual activity) and to be regulated (e.g., "I hope MOM can set guidelines"). It is a mania surrounding boundaries between domestic life and other regimes, one fraught with lurid and Orientalist imaginaries of "lazy natives" (Alatas 1977) brimming over with potential vitality and sexuality, imaginaries that, I argue here, speak to the influence of the subaltern via the language of magic. I see the anxiety over magic as an outgrowth of this mania, a need for borders between Singapore and abroad, between a past kampong and the present, between the bodies and emotions of the employers and the (thought to be excessive and needing to be impassive) FDW.

But for all the complaints about MOM, the Singaporean state and the bureaucratic apparatus surrounding Singaporean employment agencies are also the last recourse that employers use. While some might at first use countermagic—the Taoist medium, the *lor bak* gravy—more often employers bring cases of suspected witchcraft to the state. In the two examples cited above involving *nasi kangkang*, the FDW was charged by Singaporean courts, and in nearly all of the cases, employers suspecting their FDWs of witchcraft appealed to MOM, or to the maid agency, for recourse.

"Send her back" is the most common solution to black magic on message boards and the conclusion to most of the tales of witchcraft I detail here. Seeing magic, as Kapferer does, as one register through which we can talk about power, statecraft seems to play a role in managing and abrogating magic. Elsewhere (Johnson 2014), I show how the Thai state speaks of pros-

perity and potential in ways that echo mediumship in how it harnesses and channels an inchoate sense of power. Similarly, here MOM becomes, along with the Taoist medium, a way to set and enforce proper boundaries. Taoist mediums and maid agencies work in harmony as an anti-witch (see Favret-Saada 2009)—the former to identify them (as in the case of the FDW who allegedly sent ants into her former employer's drinking water, or Lekdao's worker who caused her employers to like her too much) and the latter to remove the witch back to her country of origin. They are agents that set the world in its proper hierarchy—the unwanted influence and person is removed back to their own milieu. Magic is not defeated but placed where it is assumed to still exist. The unthinkable reality of witchcraft must be banished, and here the maid agency does just that.

As in some of the most famous anthropological examples of witchcraft—in Evans-Pritchard's (1976) account of Azande practices or Favret-Saada's (2009, 1977) account of witchcraft in rural France, the exact mechanism of witchcraft is unknowable or unimportant; what is necessary here is to induce results. Correcting the harm here involves an anti-witch placing the foreign body back in its place, and temporarily alleviating the porosity of borders. The crisis provoked by finding oneself changed via the presence of the foreign body is temporarily alleviated—as in the case of the elderly man who spent his savings along with his FDW, one suddenly awakens to the "right" way of seeing roles and boundaries in the world.

Of course, Favret-Saada's anti-witch is only so because he or she is capable of witchcraft. For Favret-Saada, it is only witches and anti-witches that can see and speak of witchcraft; similarly, in Bubandt's (2014) eponymous empty seashell, it is only a cannibal witch who is able to see the possessing spirit that the shell once contained. The Singaporean state possesses the secret knowledge of both worlds—able to regulate hidden "third world" labor as well as provide for its "first world" citizens. Singapore, then, is an anti-witch, its power extending beyond the bureaucratic to the magico-bureaucratic. It is the Singaporean state itself that promises the ability to truly move "from third world to first," to create a hermetic bubble of prosperity, to not fall victim to invasions of ants, to inappropriate feelings, to dark presences, to having one's child's face transformed to look Southeast Asian. This dream—of a tropical island where ants do not spread—is one that is challenged by the

intrusion of foreign bodies, but, as in other horror tales, boundaries are for the time set aright. The witch is named (see Siegel 2006) and banished, and the state retains its boundaries. Of course, as Seigel argues, such namings never really get to the source of the problem, instead increasing a perceived need for the very borders that they have subverted and a doubt as to the foundations of Singaporean fantasies of progress.

Notes

1 Here and throughout, I preserve the original syntax, even when incorrect. I will insert translations of "Singlish" (Singaporean creole English) where appropriate.
2 Muslims in Singapore comprise about 15 percent of the population, almost exclusively ethnic Malays. In contrast, Indonesia is nearly 90 percent Muslim.
3 Penal Code of Singapore, 1871, sec. 425.
4 This name is a pseudonym.
5 This is a clear violation of FDW's rights, and for this reason the site was shut down. Traces of it exist online, though, and for that reason I use a pseudonym for this data and do not quote it directly—or use searchable terms. My data here had been saved in PDF form in 2011.
6 *Kaypoh*: to be nosy, from Hokkien 鸡婆.
7 Javanese, i.e., Indonesian.
8 Handphone, i.e., mobile phone.
9 That is, she will be dismissed.
10 绿豆 (beans); a pseudonym.
11 In other words, his mother-in-law's former Indonesian FDW.
12 Taoist medium.
13 卤肉 (Straits Chinese braised pork).
14 Kampong Tiong Bahru itself is a fascinating place-name, especially recalling the use of burial grounds in American horror. It is one of the oldest public housing estates in Singapore; these are houses that replaced local cemeteries. The term *tiong* 塚 is Hokkien for "tomb," and *bahru* is "new" in Malay.
15 Suriani Yani, "Indo Maid Keep Bomoh Things; 'Something' Was Brought from Their Kampong to Singapore," August 28, 2017, https://rilek1corner.com/2017/08/28/indo-maid-keep-bomoh-things-something-was-brought-from-their-kampong-to-singapore/.
16 Dia is Malay but is explicit about stating that she is not Muslim.
17 Much of Dia's story seems embellished for dramatic effect. That said, I relate it here as she did.

18 The notion of such a "blended" figure being particularly diabolical recalls the racist depiction of the Mulatto villain in *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. Griffith, 1915).

19 I am overlapping Malay and Indonesian practices here to some extent. Although both Malaysia and Indonesia are large, multiethnic states, the majority populations in both places share cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities—Indonesian is generally mutually intelligible with Malay; further, Singaporeans' understanding of Indonesian practices are highly colored by their own exposure to Malay realms.

20 *Bismallah* is an Arabic phrase meaning "in the name of God."

21 Another term for *bomoh*. The latter is more often used in Singapore, the former in Indonesia.

22 The categories of Taoist and Buddhist are often separated on Singaporean censuses, but there is a great deal of slippage between these categories.

23 That is, engage in sex work.

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