Ordering Diversity: Co-Producing the Pandemic and the Migrant in Singapore during COVID-19

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Abstract: What do measures of management during this exceptional and volatile time tell us about the regulation of migrant-driven diversity and its implications in the arrival city? Using the term “differential diversification” from Singapore, I examine how the socio-political life of the pandemic is deeply entangled with the management of low-waged labour migrants. Techno-political discourses and practices of pandemic management accelerated the state’s attempts to differently include migrant workers, revealing the bare viscerality of biopolitics already in place prior to the pandemic. I argue that diversity is ordered through a striking co-production of migrant management and pandemic management. This paper draws upon government discourses to demonstrate that measures of pandemic management contribute not only to the spatial regime of migrant management. They also articulate and rationalise the subject transformation of the low-waged migrant to the extent that, on top of being a moral risk, they are also now a medical risk.

Keywords: migration, urban diversity, subject-making, technology, management

“Urban diversity” must be understood as spatial, temporal, relational and above all, political, as a concept in migration studies. Processes of diversification hold transformative power for the city and their residents. Arrival cities are grappling with increasingly complex migration flows that are characterised by migrants from a growing array of class and educational backgrounds, linguistic capabilities, ethnicities and legal statuses (Saunders 2010; Vertovec 2007). The closely related processes of migration and diversification have prompted scrutiny of how contemporary cities incorporate increasingly heterogeneous groups of new arrivals. Arrival cities, many of which are located outside of European and North American contexts, such as Singapore, are experiencing urban growth because of migrants coming from increasingly diverse backgrounds. The management of migrants at both the level of the state and the everyday is also changing in relation to these global urban shifts. While much has been said in the literature on urban diversity about the role of space in encounters with difference in arrival cities, there remains a gap on the political nature of incorporation—its conditions, terms and rationalities—within these socio-spatial transformations. The first objective of this paper is to address the politics of diversification through migrant management.
As I am writing this, we are also living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the world, the story of COVID-19 is unfolding closely alongside the story of differentiation. While the virus affects all bodies, its impact is differently felt. As myriad ideas emerge about how we ought to be behaving as civil citizens during this time, people also hold different capacities to respond. Indeed, not all bodies undergo the same processes of life and death (Tyner 2015). Institutional responses to the pandemic have laid bare already existing forms of differential inclusion in cities. The diversity of reactions to and impacts of COVID-19 continue to differentiate migrants in arrival cities. How difference is managed, conceived and experienced in these arrival cities is, thus, an ever more pressing issue. These forms of management reveal and multiply layers of governance that produce difference as the city changes in relation to the pandemic. The second objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between pandemic management and migrant management.

This paper engages debates on urban diversity through its first and second objectives. I examine the politics of diversification as intensified through the relationship between pandemic management and migrant management. These concepts of diversification elucidate Singapore as a migrant-arrival city. As a city-state with a density of 7796 people per square kilometre (Seow 2018), the ways in which migrants are differently included into Singaporean space is itself a product and productive of power. Inclusion is now increasingly based on skills and codes of conduct in public. I argue that measures of inclusion carry out the political work of management that structures what form belonging takes and, consequently, stratifying who belongs and who does not. Rather than being intrinsically open or opposed to exclusion, the aggregate processes of “incorporation” subject people to particular imaginaries of diversity and situate how different migrants “ought” to be (Ye 2016a).

Aside from its diversity, Singapore makes a particularly cogent case to examine the governance of migrant-driven diversification in a time of pandemic as it seemed to be managing COVID-19 well in the earlier days of detecting the virus, hailed by many cities around the world as exemplar (Carroll 2020). The numbers of infected, however, have spiked since March 2020, with the vast majority being migrant men living in large-scale, purpose built dormitories around the peripheries of the island (Ratcliffe 2020). While these are unprecedented times, the effects of the pandemic do not occur in a vacuum but rather, are constituted and lived through pre-existing social and spatial stratifications that blur the borders between inclusion and exclusion. As infections spread, there is a corresponding ordering and multiplication of statuses and experiences of the pandemic in the city. The socio-political life of the pandemic is deeply entangled with the management of migrants. I argue that diversity is organised through a striking co-production of migrant management and pandemic management. This co-production generates a new subjectivity for the new low-waged male migrant. They shift from being cheapened labour and moral threat, to being a medical threat that need to be isolated from the rest of society; rather than being “threatened”, they are positioned as “the threat”. How diversity is organised therefore tells us about how precarity is regulated and crystallises the precarious migrant
subject. This is to say that a new subjectivity emerges through the management of the low-waged migrant. This new subject is the migrant as medical threat. Conceptually, the continuities and ruptures in management together demonstrate how governance works to biopolitically generate the COVID-19 version of the classed, raced and gendered migrant subject.

I draw upon Foucault’s writings and debates to frame and analyse the issues and questions that COVID-19 amplifies (Foucault 2007). As Hannah et al. (2020) argue, “[s]een through a Foucauldian lens, the current situation is clearly one example of a constellation in which elements of sovereignty, discipline, biopower and biopolitics, and governmentality are combined in uneven—as well as geographically situated and rapidly shifting—ways”. This paper follows this Foucauldian reading of pandemic management as the production of life through negation and protection of lives. In this sense, Hannah et al. (2020) point out that there is a necessary “inclusive exclusion”. In the Singaporean context, this inclusive exclusion is grafted onto already existing diversity management practices through which low-waged migrants are differently included. This is constituted through state power, such as the enforcement of migrant dormitory borders by the Armed Forces and the prolonged lockdown of these dormitories while the rest of Singapore has gradually taken on a protracted normalcy. State disciplinary measures also lie at the core of shaping our experiences of taming the virus by relying on surveillance enhanced through technology. It is through the disciplining of population that new differentiation is emerging, further segregating low-waged migrants from other urban dwellers in Singapore by creating the migrant as a medical risk.

Pastoral practices (Foucault 2007) of organisation unfolding during COVID-19 reflect and intensify socio-spatial inequalities that were already present through the lens of differential inclusion. Specifically, I highlight how state regulations—that constitute and organise Singapore’s heterogeneity through multiplication—are magnified during the pandemic using technologies of surveillance. In so doing, I analyse how migrant-driven urban diversity is managed and cultivated in Singaporean space as a diversifying city, particularly during a world in crisis. Within these processes of co-production, the low-waged migrant’s precarity is also produced through multiple regulations. By drawing upon government policies, regulations and speeches, I argue that measures of pandemic management contributes not only to the spatial regime of migrant management. More crucially, they articulate the subject transformation of the low-waged migrant to the extent that, on top of being a moral risk, they are also now a medical risk. Through modes of governance shaping the pandemic, it appears that the low-waged, male, presumably heterosexual migrant, who is part of a major wave of diverse bodies entering Singapore, ultimately remains the problematic, unintegrateable body.

Understanding Migrant-Driven Diversification through Space

Much of the recent work on urban diversity in arrival cities has discussed the dynamic role of space in shaping forms of everyday coexistence (Watson 2009;
Migration and the consequent growing diversity of urban populations have brought about new experiences of space and contact, of cosmopolitanism, creolisation and conviviality, and more crucially, changing patterns of inequality, segregation and prejudice. Physical proximity of diverse populations in spaces such as buses, parks, public squares also has the potential to generate hostility as much as conviviality. Indeed, both the conviviality and conflict of living with difference are not untethered to wider structures of power relations. Processes of inclusion and exclusion that are integral to migrant-led diversification also unfold unevenly across the cityscape, inhering in specific sites and locales with different outcomes. Places such as the lawn (Watson 2009), public transport (Wilson 2011), weekend enclaves (Goh 2014), retail spaces (Yeoh and Huang 1998) and markets (Terruhn and Ye 2021) are spaces where both newcomers and longer term residents co-exist with difference of various configurations. Examining these everyday spaces of urban life, social science scholarship is now raising new questions about the study of social difference. On the one hand, existing work demonstrates the potential of convivial coexistence through encounters. The intense gathering of ethnic and cultural difference is seen as spurring the transformation of cities into “cosmopolitan melting pots where hybrid identities connect the most intimate relations with the most remote places” (Simonsen 2008:146). Koch and Latham’s (2012) ethnographic observations of the Prince of Wales Junction in West London further shows the forms of sociality and togetherness through actions that “domesticate” public spaces. On the other hand, there is a second key branch of work on urban diversity that highlights the modalities of spatial power that shape the way diversity is organised in particular places, spatialising the politics of diversification. Nayak’s (2017) research on young British Bangladeshi women demonstrates that routine interactions are negotiated through landscapes of power and inequality. In exposing the racist violence that unfolds in mundane British mobilities and spaces, Nayak (2017) reminds us that tension and rupture point to the inequalities that are compounded through encounters. Simone (2015:22) also highlights that while everyday interactions in two of Jakarta’s inner city kampungs may appear to indicate social collaboration, these can hide “highly murky maneuvers of opportunism and trickery”. Diversification can thus also be seen as a threat to an imagined socio-spatial order.

Implicit within these studies is the way lives are organised and managed in this changing terrain of the diversifying city. There is a spatial structuring of urban diversity and co-existence that manifests in the biopolitical management of difference. There are spaces of exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice but they can also be—whether simultaneously or in temporally disjointed fashion—spaces of mixing, integration and living with difference. Across these urban spaces, various modes of migrant management include and exclude in different ways, generating different migrant subjectivities that draw out vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality. That is to say that there is a broader context of power shaping the nature and impact of migrant-driven diversification.

In response to Vertovec’s (2007) conceptualisation of superdiversity, Suzanne Hall (2017) argues that diversity must be “moored” to existing regimes of
migrant management with particular reference to Europe. Just as migration processes are highly complex and dynamic, processes of diversification are not universal. There are multiple modes of negotiating, advocating, experiencing and producing different forms of diversity that are contingent upon historical and geographical circumstances. There is, indeed, a need to “moor” analyses of superdiversity as Goh (2019) argued. During COVID-19, this mooring exceeds the simple grafting of diversification onto the changing context of a city whose diversification is composed of differentiated new arrivals. Rather than an empirical exercise, this “provincialism” of diversification speaks conceptually to a wider Foucauldian understanding of a techno-political project of management and governance of population (Foucault 2007; Robinson 2003). Singapore’s growing milieu of migrant management practices and discourses in its quest to maintain global-city status means that any discussion of diversity must be attached to understandings of its migration regime. This paper was written during a partial lockdown in Singapore, when encounters especially between long time residents and low-waged migrant arrivals are framed as problematic and are thus curtailed. What do measures of management during this exceptional and volatile time tell us about the regulation of diversity and its implications? Rather than focusing on the micro-scale of everyday urban encounters, I discuss the state-driven ordering of a diversity premised upon differently included migrants. I aim to illuminate how the process of diversification in the arrival city is articulated through management during crisis in ways that build upon pre-existing management patterns. In this sense, this paper analyses the role and impact of the state in generating and rationalising norms of coexistence during COVID-19 in the absence of physical encounters in the city. I aim to highlight how politics and regulation shape the low-waged labour migrant subject by examining the linkages between pandemic management and migrant management.

Producing Difference through Migrant-Driven Diversification

The productive power of migrant management (Nail 2015) at the scales of policy regulations and discourse as well as at the everyday plays a significant role in reproducing migrant-led diversification. While the “crisis” framing of migration has been pronounced within public debates in the European and American contexts, especially with regard to “illegality” and refugees (Coleman 2007; Sigona 2018; Taylor and Meissner 2019), this has been less so in Asian global cities where migrants enter predominantly as forms of short-term labour. Migrant management, therefore, looks different in this part of the world. As COVID-19 develops, the framing of a migrant-related crisis has emerged at the dormitories in Singapore. By migrant management, I refer to efforts by state agencies to control, document, arrange and police new arrivals. I also include a discussion of NGO involvement in shaping migrant subjectivities especially during this crisis by translating the state. I go on to demonstrate that processes of inclusion and exclusion that are integral to migrant-led diversification also unfold unevenly across the cityscape, inhering in specific sites and locales with different outcomes. During COVID-19, the spatial segregation of
work permit migrant workers are enforced to a far greater extent than during ordinary times. Regulations of segregation therefore continue to reinforce not only their differential inclusion into Singapore but these regulations also generate multiple statuses, exposing some to greater harm than others. At stake is also the reproduction of hierarchies, as certain migrant groups are seen as requiring more intervention and surveillance than others.

I examine the arrival city as one that is diverse by looking at diversity vis-à-vis differential inclusion through [a] the socio-political positioning of low-waged labour migrants and [b] how these positions shape and are re-shaped by their pandemic geographies. The concept of differential inclusion has travelled widely in Sociology and Anthropology to theorise various forms of strategic organisation and permutations of urban citizenship (Cacho 2012; Espiritu 2003). This concept not only questions nation-state belonging, but also to urban spaces of inclusion and exclusion that are subject to varying degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination and segmentation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Its strength lies in demonstrating how its deployment through both state and everyday practices governmentalises the experience of belonging through the carefully calculated processes of inclusion that shares blurred boundaries with exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Differential inclusion “registers the multiplication of migration control devices within, at and beyond the borders of the nation-state ... and the multiplication of statuses they imply” (Mezzadra et al. 2015:79). The concept also provides a way of thinking through the discourse and practices of incorporation in the context of the crisis of multiculturalism. Rather than social banishment, inclusion and exclusion share an intimate relationship where management tools function as devices to conditionally include. Set within the context of Singapore’s diversification, I revise differential inclusion by employing the term “differential diversification”. This term explains the application of governmentalising practices that multiply and order, rather than nullify, statuses through pandemic management. That is to say, differential diversification sheds light on the productive, biopolitical dimensions of difference-making during crisis management in ways that amplify the orientations of migrant management during ordinary times. This project of diversity-making as difference-making coheres with the notion that any migration generates a state of exception which legitimises treating migrants as separate from the rest of society (Agamben 2005). This political disempowerment and separation is supported by technological and statistical means. Practices of differential diversification are embedded in structural measures that produce, organise and govern diversity through the related processes of pandemic and migrant management during COVID-19. Consequently, these measures justify a particular ordering of diversity primarily by state agencies and actors, shifting the raced, classed, sexualised and gendered migrant from moral to medical risk, where he is rendered as both a victim and a threat of the pathogen.

**Differential Diversification in Singapore**

Singapore, as a post-colonial city-state, has always had to deal with difference. During colonial times, race was the predominant mode of sorting difference as
migrants arrived from Southern China, India and various parts of the Malay Archipelago (Yeoh 1996). There is thus, a history of institutionalised multiracialism in Singapore (Lai 1995). The post-independence government carried forward the multiracial framework of the “Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other” (CMIO) that still forms its basis of multiculturalism. Thus, while more recent European and British writings on diversity shine light on the potentials and problems of learning to live with difference on this side of the 21st century, Singapore, like many Asian port cities, has, historically, already been developing ways to organise and manage diversity (Furnivall 1948). There is, hence, a wider, older mode of diversity management that have been foundational to the formation of present-day communities in Southeast Asia (Goh et al. 2009; Lai et al. 2013). The number of new arrivals today remains steadily growing. Unlike migration to Western European and North American contexts, migrants to Asian cities are primarily labour migrants, most of whom are administered as transient bodies (Asis and Piper 2008). It is within this regional context that we situate migration patterns to Singapore today. Foreigners currently make up 33% of the total workforce in Singapore, numbering 1,427,500 in total in December 2019 (MOM 2020a). The majority of this growth continues to come from low-waged male and female transient migrants, with growing numbers of high-status economic migrants, transnational marriage migrants and university students (Strategy Group 2019). Inclusion is differentiated by skill status and income, and is institutionalised by the issuance of a range of work passes, permits and social visit passes that determine economic migrants’ access to rights and entitlements. The uneven incorporation of foreigners is highly monitored and structured according to perceived needs of the economy. It is through these varied passes and criteria that various non-citizen-subjects in Singapore are multiplied and reproduced.

Spatialising Low-Waged Migrants in the Pre-Pandemic City

While it is true that there is social and economic segregation of especially low-waged labour migrants from other urban dwellers in Singapore, the reasons for diversification and sheer density of the city-state also mean that there are increasingly diffuse geographies of these workers. Differentiation is, hence, a politico-spatial practice even during pre-pandemic times. Diversity is organised and negotiated at the city level, in workplaces, public spaces and at the household level (Lai et al. 2013). There is a growing range of low-waged labour migrants to Singapore who are on the work permit system, living and working in private and public spaces of Singaporean life. These are predominantly migrants from the region on two year permits that are subject to renewal, depending on the employer. Being on the work permit, these migrants have little to no access to citizenship, they are not allowed to bring their dependants and spouses to Singapore (Yeoh 2006). The majority of new arrivals to Singapore, like in many other Asian cities, are not meant to be integrated or naturalised the way they might be in Western Europe or North America. Arrival is thus characterised by transience. Women on this permit are mainly from Malaysia, China, Philippines, Indonesia,
Myanmar, Thailand and work in a range of low-service sector work in nail and hair salons, factory floors, food and beverage and janitorial services. There are currently also about 1000 licensed migrant female sex workers in Singapore (personal interview with Project X, a Singapore-based NGO that works with trans and cisgender sex workers). There are about 261,800 migrant women in paid domestic work as live-in maids whose numbers have been steadily increasing in the last five years, given the low birth rates and ageing population (MOM 2020a). Similar to domestic workers in Hong Kong (Constable 1997), arrival spaces for these new, differently included labour migrants are therefore also within the private spaces of Singaporean life.

The majority of men on the work permit are from Bangladesh, Mainland China and India, and are employed in construction and shipyard work. Employment of foreigners is regulated through the framework of “traditional/non-traditional source countries” by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM 2021). About 200,000 of these men live in large-scale, purpose-built, privately operated and highly securitised dormitories that are located around the periphery of the country (Ng and Ong 2020). These dormitories are often equipped with amenities such as communal kitchens, laundry and bathrooms, supermarkets, barber shops, basketball courts, gymnasiums and automated teller machines (Ye 2014). 12 to 20 men share a bedroom. There is close-circuit television surveillance throughout the dormitory while entryways are regulated by security guards and digitised resident cards, even during pre-COVID-19. To live in these spaces is also to live apart from other Singaporean residents. Nonetheless, there remains a substantial number of workers who live in factory and school-converted dormitories and Housing Development Board (HDB) flats amongst Singaporean residents. This mode of living is part of their work conditions that locals reject. Similar to other Southeast Asian urban areas such as Batam and Bangkok, dormitories become calculated spatial forms of differentiated migrant incorporation that discipline labour and stratify inclusion in everyday life (Kelly 2003; Rigg 2016). Their acceptance of particular wage, work and living conditions forms part of the inequalities that resonate with labour migrants globally as well (Anderson 2010; Collins and Bayliss 2020; May et al. 2006). Their experience is premised upon differential inclusion where, their positions are, as Espiritu (2003:47) argues, “deemed integral to the nation’s economy, culture, identity and power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing”.

Aside from residential spaces, the intricacies of migrant geographies are also reflected in their use of the city’s public spaces for leisure as well. Public spaces remain sites where long time residents of multicultural make up must co-exist and interact with newcomers in highly prosaic and constantly evolving ways (Lofland 1998). Part of the spatial manifestations of these changes is the emergence of migrant enclaves. Yeoh and Huang (1988) discussed how Filipina workers subverted the use of public spaces in Orchard Road on weekends. Geylang, a neighbourhood in the East of Singapore that for a long time was designated by the state as a “vice zone” (where sex work could legally operate) is also changing as new Mainland Chinese migrants move in. Little India, has, since colonial days been seen as a site for the South Asian community. More recently, new arrivals
from Bangladesh and India have transformed it to a popular weekend migrant enclave where restaurants, money remittance services and retail shops cater to this population. Aside from these more obvious migrant enclaves, low-waged new arrivals are also using public spaces at times that other Singaporean residents do not. I have written elsewhere about the use of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations as weekend socialising spaces for Bangladeshi male migrants (Ye 2016b).

Producing the Migrant Moral Risk

Such low-waged migrants’ claims to space are, however, not uncontested and have been increasingly securitised upon assumptions of their morality. Cresswell (2005) explains that moral geographies are social codes that regulate which people, things, and practices belong in which spaces, places, and landscapes, positioning that the examination of moral geographies highlight the often taken-for-granted relationships between geographical orderings and notions about what is just and ideal. In 2008, Singaporean residents of the upper middle-class neighbourhood of Serangoon Gardens protested the conversion of an old school campus to a migrant worker dormitory. Other than fearing decreasing property prices, many argued that migrants would pose immoral and security threats to residents. To appease these residents, the state built a fence and included recreational facilities within the dormitory compound. The dormitory also switched plans from housing South Asian male migrants to housing Malaysian and Mainland Chinese migrants (Sim and Quek 2008). Following the Little India Riot in late 2013, all public areas in Little India are now liquor-free zones, with heightened police patrols and CCTV surveillance (Salleh 2014). The Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar, the new town in which Little India lies, said in 2016:

> Pre-riot crowds have returned to Little India. Congregations of such high density are walking time-bombs and public disorder incidents waiting to happen. It is important that we do not take our eyes off this matter lest we want history to repeat itself. (Today 2016)

While she apologised later on for these comments, steps were taken by state agencies to ring fence common areas such as playgrounds and void decks of the neighbourhood’s HDB flats. Early in April 2020, a former cabinet minister also apologised for his comment that “it takes a virus to empty the space”, referring to the open green spaces in the new town of Kallang (Today 2020c). These encounters in some cases, or fear of potential encounters in others, highlight the “red line of toleration” as Povinelli (2011:93) argues. As Doreen Massey (2005:154) reminded us, the spatiality of diverse public places are not only formed through “a myriad of practices of quotidian negotiation and contestation”, but further “through the practicing of place ... negotiation is forced upon us”. The securitisation and policing of public spaces frequented by low-waged migrants are normalised through the state-driven gaze that produces migrants as unsavoury or criminal (De Genova and Roy 2020; Round and Kuznetsova 2016). As I have argued elsewhere, the management of migrants exceeds the state and is also carried out in quotidian ways in shared spaces. It is these pre-pandemic forms of spatial cleansing and ordering that normalise the
low-waged migrant as a risky body in need of disciplining. Rather than sharing of space as necessarily indicative of urban conviviality and shared bonds, there are boundaries, selections and enclosures embedded within public spaces (Ye 2019). The limits of coexistence are both implicit and explicit. Aside from explicit rules and regulations enforcing what should and should not be done in public, there are also everyday, tacit rules of conduct which new arrivals must adopt to be considered a good migrant (Ye 2019).

The moral order in public, and consequently, the moral migrant is thus distilled through these sanctioned, taken for granted socio-cultural codes of conduct. The effect of such codes is the formation of the moralised subject. Subjectivities, including migrant subjectivities, are produced through these historical and ideological articulations of space (Hoekstra 2019). There are constant tensions, struggles and disquiet over how things ought to be in such spaces, revealing dynamics—norms, acceptable and legitimate codes of conduct—that shape the nature of specific diverse, shared spaces. These spatial orderings of urban diversity that were already in motion pre-COVID-19 reveal and reinforce hierarchies in place to which people are subject. Space is hence productive of differences, rather than merely a reflection of them. This is a critical point to an appreciation of the spatial power and the subject-forming potential of such experiences (Clayton 2009). Coexistence in a diverse city in this sense is marked relationally by broader structural inequalities, spatial subversion and selective incorporation (Elwood et al. 2017). Thinking about coexistence as relational allows us to think about the nature of coexistence. Furthermore, migrant-driven diversification is highly differential when we recognise that other groups of migrants such as high-income migrants and marriage migrants are not monitored the same way as low-waged migrants. I would argue that pandemic management of public space and migrants have accentuated differentiations in ways that cohere with pre-pandemic constructions of the migrant moral risk. It is this coherence that produces the low-waged migrant as a medical threat, on top of being a moral threat. I would further argue that it is pre-pandemic regulations of disciplining migrants and pandemic management that co-produce the migrant as a medical threat.

**Organising COVID-19 is Social, Political and Technological**

By analysing government regulations and discourses on various media, the remainder of this paper examines how diversity is organised, cultivated and defined during the pandemic in ways that reflect pre-pandemic orderings of migration and labour. More specifically, I discuss how pandemic pathways continue to regulate and unevenly incorporate low-waged new arrivals. It is this uneven incorporation—or differential inclusion—that not only manages diversity but produces and stratifies difference itself. I highlight the production of multiplicity by situating spaces of uneven incorporation and stratification at the level of policy where long time residents (i.e. “locals”) and new arrivals (i.e. “new migrants”) are situated separately from one another during COVID-19. The creation of different categories and monitoring yardsticks renders the virus manageable. This set of pandemic management tools
functions to be a method of explaining the differentiating effect of the virus as though differences are intrinsic to the pathogen. At the same time, it also serves as a means of obscuring the creation of these differences, hence allowing us to take these differences for granted.

The first COVID-19 case in Singapore was reported on 23 January 2020. Since then, regulations to tame and pastoralise the pathogen’s pathways have grown incrementally. Similar to various countries, regulations with regards to border control, quarantines, gatherings in public spaces and personal hygiene frequently changed in the early days of managing the virus. Throughout February and March, practices of personal hygiene, such as frequent handwashing and not touching our faces were encouraged. By late March, physical distancing was more strictly enforced. For example, restaurants were asked to keep at least one metre between dine-in customers and various workplaces were encouraged to stagger office hours. The stance on face masks then changed in April from only wearing them when one is unwell to being mandatory (Ang and Phua 2020). During the partial lockdown that bureaucrats have termed the Circuit Breaker, people were encouraged to stay home, leaving only for exercise and “essentials” such as trips to the grocers’ and caring for elderly parents.

In a city where the lack of space and proximity has been a way of life, this enforcement of spatial distancing between people is a big shift in civic behaviour. Indeed, in the pandemic city, how civility has been prescribed has been changing rapidly. Shared spaces in public such as parks and bus stop seats have been cordoned off, encouraging social and physical distancing by using a variety of technology (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Technology underwrites much of the pandemic management framework: “Existing and new digital technologies are being harnessed to augment and supplement these traditional measures” (Kitchin 2020:362). Singapore joins a number of nations that have rapidly adopted technological measures in the attempt to curb the spread of the virus. “[C]itizens in some parts of China are required to install an app on their phone and then scan QR codes when accessing public spaces (Goh 2020) ... Hong Kong has issued electronic tracker wristbands to ensure compulsory home quarantine is observed (Stanley and Grannick 2020)” (Kitchin 2020:363). Polish residents have to take a “geo-tagged selfie of themselves within 20 minutes of receiving an SMS [from the government] (Nielsen 2020)” (ibid.). The South Korean government is using surveillance camera footage, credit card purchases, and smartphone location data to trace positive cases and their contacts (Singer and Choe 2020).

Aside from Safe Distancing Ambassadors hired to enforce physical distancing in Singapore, a robot dog, Spot, has also been making its rounds in public parks, reminding people to keep their distance from one another (Tan 2020). People caught breaking rules of social and physical distancing can be fined up to $1000 (CNA 2020c). There is also an app called OneSingapore which is now used by citizens to report safe-distancing breaches to the authorities. To access this app, users have to log in with their identity credentials through a centralised government portal (Today 2020b). The Ministry of Health (MOH), in collaboration with the Government Technology Agency (GovTech) have developed the TraceTogether app, designed to more efficiently aid contact tracing. It works by
exchanging short-distance Bluetooth signals between phones to detect other participating TraceTogether users in close proximity. Records of these encounters are stored on each user’s phone. If a user is interviewed by MOH as part of the contact tracing efforts, they can consent to send their TraceTogether data to MOH (TraceTogether 2020). To date, however, the download rate of the app remains low. In urging more residents in the community to use the app, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said:

Figure 1: Poster located at a mall (picture taken by author, 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
For these to work, we will need everyone’s cooperation to install and use these apps, like what the South Koreans have done. There will be some privacy concerns, but we will have to weigh these against the benefits of being able to exit from the circuit breaker and stay open safely. (Yip 2020)

In this sense, technology is mobilised and idealised by the state as part of the governmentalising tools of pandemic management (Foucault 2007). These
managerial discourses often constitute techno-utopian visions that are “adapted to particular political conditions or structural configurations” (Alvarez León and Rosen 2020:500; see also Datta 2015; Grossi and Pianezzi 2017; Marvin et al. 2015). Along with more conventional containment measures, the everyday gaze from other citizens, COVID-19 technologies effectively creates, captures and controls docile bodies (Deleuze 1992; Foucault 1991). This technocratic logic continues to purport efficiency in governing the spread of COVID-19 and resumption of normal life. The awkwardness of this digital “rule of experts” (Mitchell 2002), however, emerges through the reticence of its adoption. Indeed, the verdict is still

Figure 3: Sign in the elevator of an HDB flat (picture taken by author, 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
out on how effective these technologies will be in terms of taming the spread of the pathogen (Kitchin 2020). This speaks to the messiness of algorithmic governance (Del Casino et al. 2020) embedded within the multiplication of pandemic management devices.

One Virus, “Two Separate Infections”

Even though the outcomes of these techno-solutions are unclear, they have distilled the political consequence of these measures. The ordering of diverse populations is laid bare during this exceptional time of control and close management. Arriving—and returning—migrants around the world have been caught in the path of this pandemic (Beech 2020). The groups badly hit by COVID-19 are also by no means limited to low-waged migrants. Globally, migrants are a part of the various groups of people disproportionately affected who were already deeply challenged by structural inequalities of race, gender and income (Ro 2020). As mentioned earlier, the virus starkly exposes pre-COVID-19 inequalities. In this sense, the unfolding of pandemic politics is also a tale of continuity. The current most pressing, large-scale problem in Singapore is the infection clusters that have rapidly emerged at migrant worker dormitories. With parallels to Mitchell’s (2002) account of the mosquito in colonial Egypt, questions of hygiene, disease, public health and housing conditions with the migrant worker subject at its centre emerged with the help of the coronavirus.1 Pandemic biopolitics has also reinforced existing spatial difference while normalising new ones. The sharp increase in infection has motivated a wide range of calculation and interpretation of the virus and (re)location of migrant workers in Singaporean space. Policies of housing migrants also serve to differentially manage and distribute their exposure to the risk of infection. The governmental processes that manage the pandemic are, hence, also about managing low-waged migrants.

At a Multi-Ministry Taskforce on COVID-19 press conference on 9 April 2020, co-chair Minister Lawrence Wong said:

... when we look at the situation in Singapore, I think it is important to realise and recognise that we are dealing with two separate infections—there is one happening in the foreign worker dormitories, where the numbers are rising sharply, and there is another in the general population where the numbers are more stable for now. That is why we need a different strategy—a dedicated strategy—for our foreign worker dormitories, because there is a greater spread of the virus in these dormitories, and there is also higher transmission rates given the large numbers of workers living in close quarters. (Wong 2020)

The daily counter of new COVID-19 cases separate between “migrant worker” cases and “community cases”. Work permit holders living outside of the dormitories were at first not counted in the “community cases” but were instead in a separate category as they had to complete their “stay home” mandate. As of 21 May, this again changed to include them within community cases. This classificatory register makes possible new practices of managing and new claims to expertise. By appearing to explain, rather than to generate, this classification
rationalises a form of divide not only in terms of transmission rates but also in terms of governing and differentiating bodies. These shifting, calculated forms of differentiation inclusion/exclusion situate migrants ambiguously as apart from the rest of the populace even when, physically, they are within (Coutin 2010). Fluctuations of organising and framing pandemic infections point to the unresolved tension of the non-human virus and managerial expertise. In a broadly Foucauldian stroke, this also illustrates the power of numbers. Rose (1991) argues that the calculation of numbers forms the basis of realities for the operation of government. This process “evokes the paradox of numbers: as they arise in politics they promise depoliticisation through their supposed objectivity” (Legg 2005:143). The rationality of numbers, categories and frameworks is therefore deployed and interpreted by state actors to normalise divisions and constitute diversity within society. At the broader level, these changes and ambiguities in governing measures also point to the “work in progress”. That is, while the migrant is becoming the medical risk, the city itself is also becoming during COVID-19. This quality of emergence also finds spatial expression in the pandemic geographies of migrants living in dormitories.

While working from home and staying home to socially distance is now an important part of civic responsibility, these practices remain an elusive spatial privilege that many low-waged migrants (and other poorer urban residents) do not have. The state has designed extraordinary spatial tactics to prevent the virus from spreading to the “community”. While the rest of Singapore—both long-time residents and many new arrivals—had either stopped work or are working from home, the nature of their work also meant they were still working in teams and were being transported to and from worksites on the backs of trucks, before all construction work came to a halt in late April (Tham 2020). The grounding of all construction work was a reaction to the rapidly rising numbers of infected migrant men. Dormitories at this time were starting to “be gazetted as isolation areas to prevent the spread of COVID-19” (CNA 2020a). For men living in these dorms, they continue to share rooms with 12 to 20 others. Aside from sealing off several worker dorms, there are floating hotels built to house healthy workers (Koh and Ang 2020). Migrant men have also been moved to some unoccupied HDB flats, hotels and army camps. It should be noted that workers will continue to be paid their basic salary and provided with meals during this containment period (Government of Singapore 2020) (see Figure 4). Minister Lawrence Wong also said:

To minimise the risks of spread to the wider community, we have stopped the movement of workers in and out of all dormitories, and put the construction workers living outside the dormitories on a stay-home requirement. At the same time, we have implemented a comprehensive set of support measures to look after the health, well-being and welfare of these workers ... We are very mindful of our responsibility to these migrant workers who have contributed so much to Singapore. We will continue to ensure that they get the care and support they need. (MND 2020)

The volume is turned up on how much the state will care for these workers given Singapore’s reliance upon these labouring bodies. The silence remains, however,
that low-waged migrants are disproportionately affected and in need of medical resources precisely because of pre-existing measures that differently included them. This pastoral rhetoric obscures the ways in which they have been reproduced as cheapened labour that accounts for the current forms of pandemic

Figure 4: A government poster released to dormitories in English, Bengali, Tamil and Chinese (source: Government of Singapore 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
management. These state-driven interventions to care for workers also make visible the failure of the prevalent neoliberal model of providing for workers by outsourcing to private companies which contributes to its crisis. It is this failure, followed by these interventions that continues to transform the low-waged migrant subject from moral to medical risk.

**Intersecting Techno-Spatial Management of the Pandemic and the Migrant**

Strategies and tactics of containment hold multi-dimensional spatial implications within and beyond the dormitory. Since 21 April, all migrant workers have not been allowed to leave their dormitory rooms. All low-waged migrants living amongst Singaporeans were also placed on a Mandatory Stay-Home Notice for two weeks (Lee 2020). Workers are not allowed to leave their dormitory rooms. The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the police have been deployed to distribute food to residents in dormitories. The SAF also conduct swab-testing at all dormitories in mobile swab stations (MSS) that have been set up on site. The testers sit inside an air-conditioned, sanitised, ergonomic station, while the workers to be tested stand outside. Workers to be tested will be registered, which:

... typically involves writing down a migrant worker’s particulars, like name, date of birth and foreign identification number, in three places: A swab test request form, swab sample manifest list, and sticker to be pasted on the sample vial. (Mahmud 2020)

The boundary of simultaneously regulating the pandemic and migrants extends beyond the dormitory. The administration and regulation of this crisis have not only highlighted differentiation within the arrival city. Rather, the surveillance, monitoring and the enforcement of rules have generated a new geography of multiplicity through a new, legible way to manage migrants. Technology continues to mediate the related projects of pandemic management and migrant management. FWMOMCare is a new mobile app developed by the Ministry of Manpower specifically for migrant workers living in dormitories to monitor and report their COVID-19 symptoms (MOM 2020b). On top of this app, migrant workers who “stay or work in higher-risk settings” will be required to download, activate and “maintain the latest version of the TraceTogether app to facilitate contact tracing” after they return to work (CNA 2020b). This includes “workers staying in all dormitories, as well as work permit holders and S-Pass holders who work in the construction, marine and process sectors” (CNA 2020b). The Ministry of Manpower has also added a new ‘Government Facilities Listing’ feature on the Online Foreign Worker Address Service (OFWAS) to keep employers updated on the location of their migrant workers” (CNA 2020b). These technological and scientific interventions produce the migrant as a “knowable object” (Tyner 2015:362). Through this medicalised “knowing”, the migrant becomes a health risk to be managed by legitimising increased surveillance of their health and movement. Information gathering services that generate a narrative by numbers tame the pandemic which, in turn, justifies surveillance practices and regulations, ultimately reproducing the migrant as a medical threat that can also be tamed.
The new frontiers that have been amplified during COVID-19 are not simply between the dormitory and its surrounds or even between “migrant workers” and “community”. Rather, these borders are being multiplied in a highly rationalised way, albeit during a volatile time, as part of governing the pandemic as it intersects with governing migrants. Against the backdrop of how low-waged migrants have been differently incorporated, these techniques of pandemic governance are less about producing the self-disciplining labouring subject and more about containing what has become the medically risky migrant body. Indeed, there appears to be a moral tension that has emerged in pandemic management. On the one hand, there is the pastoral discourse of protection and responsibility towards migrant workers. On the other hand, these measures of containment by sealing off low-waged workers in their dormitories are also oriented to prevent these bodies from infecting the rest of society. What emerges from COVID-19 governance is not only the reinforced physical segregation of this group of migrants but further, the subjectification of the migrant, who shifts from being a moral threat to also being a medical threat. While migrant dormitories have always been part of the disciplinary spaces that structure migrant life, dormitories during the pandemic have also been transformed into spaces of infection that threaten migrants while simultaneously producing them as the threat. These trends of managing diversity through multiplication itself continue to unfold following the end of the partial lockdown. Female migrant domestic workers are asked to take their days off during the week instead of on Sunday (Chong 2020) while male migrants living in dormitories must remain in their dormitories to “reduce risk of a new wave of infections” (Lim 2020). Workers who are caught breaking these rules risk having their work permits revoked. Through these pathogen politics, the low-waged labour migrant is continually and ultimately produced as a problematic, unintegrateable body. The precariousness of the cheapened migrant body is therefore crystallised through the biopolitical and spatial management of these workers.

Pastoral Care from Community-Based Organisations
Co-production of pandemic management and migrant management have also involved community-based organisations. In response to the impact COVID-19 has had on these low-waged new arrivals, there has been a surge of outreach from community-based help groups in Singapore in terms of providing short-term, direct services and raising funds. The COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition (CMSC) started as a collaborative effort between several initiatives that include smaller groups such as Citizen Adventures, Migrant x Me and Singapore Migrant Friends. Their fundraising efforts are “to facilitate the provision of basic needs and essentials to our migrant friends in dormitories across Singapore during the Circuit breaker to boost morale” (CMSC 2020). The funds collected are used to purchase food, cleaning products, face masks and board games for migrants in dorms. There were also groups that addressed mental and emotional well-being of migrants “through stretches, deep breathing and mindfulness exercises” (ibid.). In spite of likely civic-minded orientations behind these initiatives, they also translate and bolster the state’s regulation of these migrant bodies by continuing the discursive and pedagogical practices to pastoralise, to produce the migrant as a
teachable body. It is important to keep in mind, however, that civil society in Singapore, of which community-based organisations are a part, is also closely shaped by state policies.

In an interview with Ray of Hope staff members, they explained that:

In the Singapore context ... the government is fairly strong ... that is why our civil society is fairly muted and is focused on services, providing services, welfare ... advocacy work is becoming a bit more legitimised [but] it is still difficult to do. It is still very hard to do advocacy work ...

In this sense, NGOs in Singapore navigate state-drawn boundaries as well, by mainly focusing on direct-service provisions. Consequently, NGOs are also a part of the reinforcement of low-waged migrant workers as their precarious subjectivity continues to be transformed by COVID-19 regulations. Another NGO, Healthserve, shares MOM videos and posters similar to Figure 4 on their website, on how migrants themselves can practice social distancing and “help to curb the spread of the virus by practicing good personal hygiene” (HealthServe 2020). These engagement of migrants through state-driven narratives demonstrate that NGOs are translating state narratives and practices to their beneficiaries. The co-production of the pandemic and the migrant is therefore also channelled through these NGO portals, that themselves become capillaries of state-led narratives.

The interaction between state agencies and NGOs exceed direct services and narratives that reach low-waged migrants. Indeed, much of what the state has done was in response to NGO advocacy pre-pandemic. As volunteers from Ray of Hope say:

One of the lessons we learnt from COVID is [that] groups like TWC2, HOME and everybody who were involved in [the migrant space] has told the government many, many times that the dormitories’ conditions are bad, for any many years. And ... if something were to go wrong, [the migrants in dormitories] would be the first to be affected. These are all held in closed-door sessions.

This demonstrates that the state’s role in the production of cheapened labour is also non-static and is, instead, reacting to NGOs’ efforts in advocacy and pressure for both migrant management and pandemic management. The Ministry of Manpower “has been working with non-government organisations such as the Migrant Workers’ Centre and HealthServe to ensure that workers continue to have access to mental health support and assistance” (Today 2020a). The co-production of the migrant and the pandemic is, thus, not limited to the state. Rather, this co-production emerges through the cooperation and, at times, tension between state and community-based organisations.

**Conclusion**

The socio-political life of the pandemic is deeply entangled with the management of migrants. The current health crisis and its responses especially in relation to low-waged migrants are themselves products of pre-pandemic processes. The regulations of managing COVID-19 emerged from the spatial biopolitics within the state management of diversification and migration. Discourses and practices of pandemic
management accelerated the state’s attempts to govern migrant workers, revealing the bare viscerality of biopolitics that were already in place prior to the pandemic. It is at the intersection of pandemic management and migrant management where the figure of the migrant worker is reconfigured from being a moral threat to also being a medical threat. The pathogen, hence, adopted an externalised role that justified these amped up socio-spatial regulations of segregation and containment. This role was further rationalised through applying a range of technological and medicalised techniques that rendered the infection and the infected knowable.

The creation of multiple categories—multiplicities—are part of the state-led project of migrant-driven diversity governance that runs through pandemic governance, where the differentiation of diversity is amplified. There are urban implications to this co-production of the pandemic and migrant subjectivity. As many spaces of work shift to people’s homes, as density in various shared spaces is reduced through safe-distancing measures that are enforced through human and technological surveillance, low-waged migrants are increasingly limited in their mobilities. Dormitories are being reconfigured from disciplinary residential spaces to medicalised spaces of containment. Even as Singapore moves towards opening more spaces and activities as infection numbers drop, low-waged migrant men continue to be contained in dormitories, away from the rest of the population. Consequently, as part of the spatial politics of this differentiated diversity, the low-waged migrant is subjected to the regulations and norms that channel them through and fix them within particular places and statuses in Singapore. Even in the current state of exception brought about by pandemic management, there are linkages back to pre-pandemic differentiated forms of inclusion of the urban population. These multiplications of citizen-subjectivities are amplified as Singapore attempts to manage the virus in the longer run.

The nature of conditionally incorporating migrants will continue to change as the envisioning of the “new normal” evolves. Mooring super-diversity through the management of multiplicity is therefore all the more urgent for critical scholarship. Accounting for differentiation amongst migrant-driven diversification especially during this emergency is the socio-political dimension of COVID-19. While the empirical reality that shaped this conceptualisation is rooted during pandemic times, it also exceeds the present moment. The crisis of COVID-19 has magnified the longer term politics of diversity. The state and its various agencies that discipline and governmentalise need not consistently be the most relevant actors across all spaces, even in Singapore. Yet, this crisis has amplified the state-driven constitution and governance of these politics through differential diversification. Recognising this allows us to understand the continued importance of the state and its relationship with non-state organisations in the management and cultivation of differentiated subjects, their spatialisation and the ordering of diversity in the arrival city beyond the pandemic.

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Endnote
1 Using the mosquito as an example and a metaphor, Timothy Mitchell (2002) expounds on how the techno-political functions in hybrid human-technological projects of, for example, nation-building, colonialism and progress of modernity.

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