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Project title: Hidden from the Heartlands: Boundary-making and Migrant Management in the Global City

My dissertation project examines the social marginalization of transient migrant workers in Singapore. Despite comprising roughly 15% of the population and 26% of the workforce, low-wage foreign laborers are kept cheap, pliant, and precarious by an array of bureaucratic, spatial, and affective controls. My research asks three primary questions. First, how does the state collaborate with private employers to isolate 800,000+ migrant workers from mainstream public life? Second, how are these controls adapted for each of two distinct labor populations: male South Asian manual workers and female Southeast Asian domestic helpers? And third, how do employers and the state externalize the costs of exploitation back to migrants' countries of origin in the Global South? These questions have particular relevance to Bangladesh, a major source of low-wage labor across Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Over the duration of my AIBS Junior Fellowship, my fieldwork has involved deep participant observation at two local migrant advocacy NGOs—yielding over 50 extended interviews, over 50 direct case discussions, and scores of informal interactions with migrant workers. As part of my larger ethnographic work, I also have visited workers' gathering areas, dormitories, holiday celebrations, cultural events, and other relevant field sites. Likewise, I have busily collected other data, including photographs, reports, policy documents, news articles, etc. The mixed approach has allowed me to examine broader structures and patterns while keeping migrants' personalized, nuanced experiences in view.

My research design ensures that the fieldwork itself makes direct and meaningful contributions to migrant workers. As a volunteer caseworker, I assist migrant workers with a wide variety of abuse, salary, and injury issues. It is challenging work; many of the stories are distressing, and some involve horrific labor conditions. The casework informs my academic scholarship, but I am simultaneously able to work on immediate outcomes, helping individuals document their injury compensation claims, recoup unpaid salary, escape abusive employers, and the like. In my various volunteer roles, I am gaining valuable experience in public sociology as well—using my academic training to mentor student researchers, coordinate research, and communicate findings to broader public audiences.

Based on this long-term data collection, I am submitting presentation/panel proposals this fall to several upcoming academic conferences. I have already been accepted by the first: the Association for Asian Studies Conference in March 2020. Additionally, I have been invited to make 2-3 public presentations between now and December 2019. Beyond that, I hope to present the research in future publication(s).

I am grateful to the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies for making this research project possible. My findings so far suggest a range of areas where migrant labor protections are absent, weak, or riddled with loopholes—failures that increase the vulnerability of Bangladeshi and other temporary workers in Singapore. Translating this research into improved policies could immediately benefit Bangladeshi workers abroad *and* their families at home—for instance, by stabilizing remittance flows or improving the long-term physical and mental well-being of workers. When a young worker is permanently injured on an overseas construction site, to give an example, he is not the only one to bear the burden; the costs of his care and subsistence will eventually migrate home to Bangladesh as well, to be borne over the years by relatives and the sending state.

Notably, failures to protect migrant workers can harm Singaporean interests as well. To give a simple example, when a local construction firm unethically suppresses labor costs—and there are many ways to do so—it can now underbid honest firms in the zero-sum competition for contracts. Thus, unrecognized labor violations can exert downward pressure on an entire industry.

Ultimately, my work examines the dislocation of social and economic costs from the sites of production and/or consumption. Simultaneously, I explore the mechanisms that obfuscate the very existence of these costs; when they are kept tidily out of sight and out of mind, a well-intentioned public may come to normalize exploitative and ethically-fraught labor relations. The findings will speak to timely global questions about the hidden and displaced costs of transnational migrant labor regimes.