Essentialist Identities as Resistance to Immobilities: Communicative Mobilities of Vietnamese Foreign Brides in Singapore

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Global migrations are often associated with, indeed motivated by, upward social mobility. However, the new mobilities paradigm emphasizes structural inequalities of migration mobilities that allow movement for some but mean stasis for others. This article studies the realities of marginalized marriage migrants engaged in the simultaneities of mobilities and immobilities, adopting resistant strategies against structures of social and regulatory oppression. We conducted qualitative interviews and ethnographic research with 33 Vietnamese foreign brides in Singapore. Applying an intersectionality framework reveals that, in response to multiple forms of spatial and social immobilities, the marriage migrants adopted essentialist identities at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and class. Communication technologies, symbolic of new mobilities, were found to facilitate essentialist expression. The study reveals the complexity of intersectional marginalization and mediated essentialist strategies developed by marriage migrants facing immobilities, contesting dominant views of gender empowerment in postcolonial scholarship on identity.

Keywords: gender, intersectionality, migration, mobilities, mobile phone

The mobilities paradigm underscores neoliberal promises of globalization, the unfettered movement of material, machines, capital, labor, images, ideas, information, and power ushering in an age of universal affluence. Indeed, Cresswell (2010) regards the "foundational narratives of modernity" (p. 21) to be reliant on this emancipatory movement, with mobilities seen as harbingers of freedom and progress. The material infrastructures of mobilities girding the planet, such as the transportation networks, logistical supply chains, software systems, and telecommunication infrastructures that enable travel and communication, are increasingly associated with an upward social mobility, or socioeconomic advancement in terms of education, income, and class status (Sheller, 2014). This study examines female Vietnamese marriage migrants who "marry up" with Singaporean men, engaging in a mobility of migration from the Third World to the First World in the hope for a better life. These migrant brides depart constrained circumstances in Vietnam to enhance their education, gain productive employment, and

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achieve gender equality in Singapore, an island city-state leading global rankings on most measures of development—education, ease of doing business, financial management, governance, gross domestic product per capita, and telecommunication infrastructure, among a host of others.

This emancipatory discourse has, however, been challenged by the politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2010), which argues that the practices and experiences of mobility are both differential and relational (Adey, 2006). This critique posits that there are both winners and losers in an increasingly mobile world, with the latter experiencing immobilities, both spatial and social. In the context of "migration infrastructures" (Lin, Lindquist, Xiang, & Yeoh, 2017), the benefits of mobilities, from material infrastructures to cultural norms, are extended to highly skilled expatriates. For example, British expatriates to Singapore are welcomed and facilitated by a global mobility industry, which provides intercultural training for cultural shock brought about by, for example, disorientation while grocery shopping (Cranston, 2016). These privileged assistances for surmountable problems might be juxtaposed with the discriminations, or barriers to social and spatial mobilities, imposed by social norms and governance structures on labor migrants at the other extreme of the class scale. Faist (2013) recommends that research extend beyond such binary "hierarchization of migrants" (p. 1643) to examine the resultant structural social inequalities in terms of mobilities and immobilities. This interdisciplinary study goes a step further by examining the role of information and communication technologies and cultural expression (communication studies) in resisting the social inequalities and immobilities (sociology) instigated by the spatial mobility (cultural geography) of these Vietnamese foreign brides.

To contextualize the study, the low fertility rate combined with the aging societies of Asian regional economic hubs such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore motivates the resourcing of reproductive work and care labor, respectively, from emergent economies in Southeast Asia (Constable, 2005) in the form of cross-border marriages (Tan & Basu, 2013). From the perspective of Vietnam, the home country, the migration mobility of these foreign brides is seen as a betrayal (Lee, 2014), and the multicultural family relationship in Singapore is established based on uneven sociocultural power relations (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008; Piper & Roces, 2003). As foreign brides are trapped in strict social hierarchies, their differential experiences of immobilities can also be viewed in relation to the opportunities of mobilities denied them in Singapore by regulatory norms.

A significant body of scholarship and contemporary discourse reveals that immigrants, upon arrival, encounter various forms of socially marginalized positions and systems of oppression as forms of immobility, exacerbated by restrictions on work, residency, and citizenship status imposed upon them by the immigration regime (Yeoh, Chee, & Baey, 2013). The role of the nation-state in regulating, dominating, and excluding migrants, their identities, and their position is a notable issue for marriage migrants. Wang and Bélanger (2008) underscore the concept of "partial citizenship" to show how the operation of institutionalized laws and normative discourses of citizenship justify the perpetuation of a hierarchy to preserve the notion of a superior nationalist identity. For example, the Singapore immigration regime treats marriage migrants as "outsiders within" (Lan, 2008), whose long-term-visit passes put their legal-resident status at the mercy of their conjugal relationships, reinforcing the dependent relationship with their male spouses.

The new mobilities paradigm (Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006) argues for a return to a sociology of mobilities, focusing on issues of mobility justice (Cook & Butz, 2015; Lin et al., 2017), examining systems that allow movement for some but mean stasis (immobilities) for others. We draw upon the intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007), which frames oppression experienced at the intersection of various marginalized identities, to situate the immobilities experienced by Vietnamese foreign brides. With postcolonial feminists drawing attention to the need to reflect the experiences of women of color through not just a single axis of gender but multiple grounds of differentiation (Bastia, 2014; Lewis & Mills, 2003; Mohanty, 2003), we view marginalized marriage migrants from multiple perspectives of gender, race and ethnicity, and class. We examine the lived realities of migrants engaged in the simultaneities of the mobile and immobile to understand the intersectional nature of gendered (im)mobilities (Murray, Sawchuk, & Jirón, 2016). Drawing upon critical mobilities research and intersectionality theory, our first research question is:

RQ1:   What are the spatial and social immobilities experienced by female Vietnamese marriage migrants as produced by social and governance structures?

Essentialist Strategies of Resistance

The dominant discourse within the mobilities paradigm has been associated with assumptions related to freedom of movement, a privilege extended to masculine and cosmopolitan subjectivities (Sheller, 2014). Postcolonial feminist critiques of mobilities arise from scholars who contest the universalization condition of mobility, arguing that the privileged position (masculinity) of the few is rarely extended to all (Kaplan, 2006). There is a recognition that mobility is an instantiation of power and control (Massey, 2012), particularly in relation to other social groups. Here we are concerned with marginalized female marriage migrants, who are relatively disempowered rather than in control of their mobility.

The majority of "acquired" Southeast Asian brides are expected to uphold traditional gender norms while engaging in domestic responsibilities and are framed as good wives, obedient daughters-in-law, and caring mothers to serve the ideologies of society and the state (Yeh, 2010). Denied livelihood opportunities and not incorporated fully into the nation as citizens or economically productive contributors, marriage migrants are rendered immobile—confined spatially to domestic spaces to engage in child-rearing and elderly care (Yeoh, Chee, & Baey, 2013). Vietnamese foreign brides are faced with a disembeddedness arising from a denial of both spatial and social mobilities by the regulatory regime and cultural norms.

The ambivalent position of being immobile in a hypermobile environment and engaged in a gendered division of labor in a society claiming a cosmopolitan gender equality occupied by these marginalized migrants leads to tensions and struggles. We are most concerned here with the discourse and role of the agency-less victim they have to inhabit. Asian women are either portrayed as helpless victims of human trafficking (Kang, Ling, & Chib, 2017; Piper, 1999) or as vulnerable pawns traded by brokers in the international marriage market and in need of rescuing by social protections (Yeoh, Chee, & Baey, 2013). This longstanding blanket portrayal of Third World women as victims in research has been

criticized, with arguments against viewing women of color as a homogeneous group of victims of patriarchal oppression.

Theoretically, spaces of negotiation and resistance to conditions of immobility do exist. Tomlinson (1991) argues that individuals may draw from their marginalized experiences to interpret dominant discourses and produce oppositional imaginations. In Japan and Taiwan, foreign brides exhibited collective agency and engaged actively in civic participation to assert their rights toward citizenship, albeit in a piecemeal way (Hsia, 2009; Suzuki, 2000). Although some adopt strategic bicultural or multicultural identities, members of socially cohesive racial or ethnic groups and those that face severe discrimination and limited social mobility are more resistant to adaptation to the dominant society (Wei-Ching, Taofang, Szu-Chi, & Li-Jung, 2009). We are interested here in the heterogeneity of women's experiences, emphasizing the active role of women as agents for social change.

Postcolonial feminist theories emphasize the imbalanced privileging of gender over other sociopersonal identities among Western feminists. Debunking earlier notions of essentialism (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005) and the proposition that women are inherently nurturing, caring, and more submissive than men, scholars have enthusiastically galvanized their roles as agents for change and equality (Mohanty, 2003; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Sandel and Liang's (2010) work on female marriage migrants in Taiwan indicates a complex process of identity negotiation and management, suggesting a need to broaden the theoretical scope beyond merely examining static identity categories.

We challenge the view of the female marriage migrant as an oppressed individual condemned to a situation of stasis discursively linked with immobility. We argue for the need to reconsider the existing conceptualizations of gender that withhold agency from women within the Asian mobilities context. It has been argued that essentialism, or the idealized representation of femininity, becomes a site for migrant women to gain agency as the result of strategic display of femininity with the purposeful reproduction of gender differences (Nguyen, Chib, & Mahalingam, 2017). Our second research question thus is:

RQ2:   What are the essentialist strategies of resistance adopted in response to the immobilities imposed by social and governance structures?

Cultural Expression and Communication Mobilities

The relational nature of the mobilities paradigm has rested conceptually upon the presence of immobilities within, for example, geographic boundaries, geopolitical borders, national citizenship, and cultural belonging. In an increasingly nativist world in which sharp imaginaries are being constructed to divide citizens and immigrants, notions of belonging and identity are being reconstituted by migrant agents. Diminescu (2008) evokes the image of the "connected migrant" as one who maintains a culture of bonds using modern information and communication technologies with groups such as the home network but also coethnics and disparate alliances in the host country.

Within the study context, social cohesion in Singapore has been based on the notion of multiculturalism, which is the acceptance and promotion of multiple cultural traditions in the interaction of

disparate groups. The (im)mobilities of migration, however, are woven into pressure for social integration of migrants amid public debate around maintenance of national identity (Faist, 2013). The nonintegration of immigrant wives remains pervasive in Singapore (Yeoh, Chee, & Dung, 2013), with vulnerable migrant wives facing difficulties in forging support networks within civil society (Chua, 1997). Despite claims of multiculturalism, the nation-state asserts an ideology of racial and cultural domination, immobilizing newcomers' establishment of the culture of their origins (Tesfahuney, 1998).

From a communications perspective, contemporary global mobilities have been actively facilitated by the ubiquity of communication technologies and migration of cultural commodities; the Internet and mobile media in particular emerge as facilitator sites (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). Paradoxically, these technologies simultaneously facilitate an oppression of immobilities. The "ideological state apparatuses" (p. 693) appropriate major cultural institutions such as the media, art, education, and the family to coerce immigrants into the dominant ideology (Althusser, 2006). Popular-culture products prescribe gender roles, "naturalize" immigrants into citizens, or otherwise "discipline" them as aliens (Lowe, 1996). Migrants' own cultural practices are described as the "other" or relegated to the imperatives of assimilation and cultural marginalization (Lee, 2014), with personal and cultural identities being obscured by the immobility of the national multicultural discourse. Despite the emancipatory claims, we see here that the mobilities of communication are instead harnessed to immobilize and deterritorialize the migrant identity.

Counteracting the imposed immobilities, resistance occurs via acts of cultural consumption and production, with marginalized migrants using the very mobilities infrastructures of communication. From a consumption perspective, ample research has acknowledged the importance of ethnic cultural materials, including music, dance, and theater, and practices of transnational migrant communities in consuming popular culture of their origin countries (Georgiou, 2007; Zheng, 2011). Simultaneously, cultural production fosters migrant negotiations of immobilities in a confining regulatory environment that does not acknowledge their culture or position.

Migrants selectively access and produce cultural materials that represent their life experiences, resistance against oppression, and even political opinions. Amid ambits of power and domination, immigrants have resorted to cultural and artistic practices on formal stages to express their marginalized experiences within the dominant culture and as platforms for representation of the self and recognition of identity (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008). The symbolic song and dance of Zulu migrant workers constitutes an empowering performative strategy to mediate ambiguous experiences of alienation and powerlessness (Erlmann, 1992). The shattering of spatial and social immobilities occurs with the construction of protective spaces and the metaphorical remodeling of the social order. Music production has similarly been recognized as a generator of discourses of resistance by immigrant groups, such as raï music for Moghrebies, and young North Africans (Cremades, Lorenzo, & Turcu, 2015).

Examining Asia, Bell (2006) suggests that "'mobility' is inflected through a profoundly cultural lens" (p. 43), playing an inordinate role in our use of mobile technologies. Studies have investigated how migrants' feelings of nationalism, ethnic belonging, and citizenship were strengthened or dissipated by such transnational virtual exchanges in Haiti (Parham, 2004). Korean migrant women in the United States

harnessed Korean websites and forums to communicate about sociocultural issues of the home country and to assert their cultural and national pride in these virtual spaces (Oh, 2016). Communication technologies, particularly mobile phones, are therefore more than just coordination technologies; they are mobility sites of cultural creation as acts of resistance to social and spatial immobilities. Our third research question therefore is:

RQ3:   *How does essentialist expression (of race or ethnicity and gender), facilitated by mobilities of communication technologies, enable resistance to immobilities of spatial and social structures?*

Method

The study used a qualitative research approach including in-depth interviews, augmented by ethnographic work of observation of, and researcher participation in, cultural activities, home visits, and social meetings organized by the migrant community. Two phases of fieldwork occurred from January 2015 to August 2016 in Singapore. Participants were Vietnamese foreign brides, defined here as the Vietnamese women that migrated to Singapore exclusively through marriages with local men, who were from lower socioeconomic strata. The majority of these marriages involved commercial mate-matching agencies, although some engaged informal marriage brokers in the form of existing friends or relatives in Singapore.

The significance of research focusing on this group is justified considering an increased number of marriage migrants, mainly foreign brides from Southeast Asia, arriving in Singapore in recent years (Tan & Basu, 2013). This conjugal pattern has resulted in inquiries into social policies for marriage migrants and the dynamics in their identity representation amid local concerns over the conservation of multiculturalism in Singapore (Yeoh, 2004). Respondents departed from impoverished Vietnamese villages to seek brighter prospects in Singapore via international marriages. From the perspective of those left behind in Vietnam, foreign brides readily achieved upward mobility in a developed country (Le, Truong, & Khuat, 2014). The reality is markedly different. In fact, in Singapore marriage migrants faced employment restrictions, unsettled legal residential status, lack of citizenship rights, and patriarchal control imposed by their in-laws (Yeoh, Chee, & Dung, 2013). The circumstances became more daunting when the migrant women were deemed to be of a low social class, given their relatively low incomes, limited education, and limited work experience (Lynch & Kaplan, 2000).

Initial access to the community was a challenge, as the study group maintained a low profile in a discriminatory environment, with many refusing to participate in interviews altogether. We therefore sought help from the Vietnamese embassy, and the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, which provides free English classes and counseling services for immigrants, in approaching the group and assisting our initial connection. Over time we built trust and a reputation, which resulted in more people opting in to research participation. The initial interview respondents were randomly selected from sociocultural events, and subsequent participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Eventually, 33 respondents participated in in-depth face-to-face interviews after signing consent forms.

The respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 50, with 83% (25) in their thirties at the time of research implementation. In terms of legal status, no respondents had been granted Singaporean citizenship, the majority (24) held long-term-visit passes of discrete valid durations, and the rest (9) had achieved permanent resident status. Because of their limited qualifications—82% had not attained college or university education levels—and minimal local language skills and low or unrelated employment experience, several women (8) were homemakers engaged in domestic duties. Those with an entrepreneurial mind-set had established home-based online businesses to sell Vietnamese food, fashion, and cosmetic products, thus assuming the dual roles of earner and housewife (read about aspirational strategies in Nguyen et al., 2017).

The interviews were semistructured and conducted mostly in Vietnamese, with a smattering of English. We have chosen to retain the cadence and composition of language, sacrificing grammatical purity, to present as natural expression as is possible via translation. Respondents described their use of mobile phones, social media and other technologies, and their cultural practices and habits of consumption of news and media channels, access to cultural materials (e.g., music, movies, drama, dance, and performance), and informal production and reproduction of cultural materials. The interviews revealed insights into the women's migration journeys, life experiences, and interpersonal relationships in Singapore. We approached performers at cultural events to inquire specifically about the motivations, objectives, imaginaries, and stories behind their cultural practices.

The study simultaneously employed an ethnographic method to allow researchers to observe human lived experiences in a natural way and to allow for triangulation of data. This allowed us to engage in cultural narratives and materials, especially because non-Western cultures, such as Vietnamese, emphasize verbal and observable forms rather than formally documented ones (Seale, 2004). Reflexivity is an important component in our work (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), with one coauthor a Vietnamese migrant to Singapore and the other a transnational migrant. Listening and participating, beyond administration of questionnaires, allowed the voices of the marginalized community to emerge. Being "insiders" (Nast, 1994) helped us build a relationship with the community and deeply grasp respondents' cultural expressions, identity representations, and daily interactions, thereby capturing subtle realities and necessary silence in their lives.

After completion of data collection, conventional methods of qualitative data analysis were employed: (a) Interview recordings were transcribed and translated verbatim, and (b) a coding scheme was created by the researchers before the data were coded and integrated into various themes necessary for answering the research questions posed (Slater, 1998).

Findings

Immobilities—Spatial, Social, and Intersectional

Vietnamese foreign brides engage in the marriage gradient, or marry up with Singaporean men, in the hope that the spatial mobilities of migration will lead to social mobility (Thai, 2002). These marriage migrants trade the constrained resources of Vietnam—educational, economic, class, patriarchal—for improved socioeconomic and gender status in Singapore.

Before the marriage I referred to some media resources, and knew that Singapore is a pretty island with good weather; life is so safe and "civilized" with different cultures celebrated. My acquaintance said that whoever can go to the country is of very good luck, which complements my beliefs and hopes for a better prospects in Singapore. So I agreed to come here.

The reality of the lived experiences of our respondents diverged radically from the emancipatory hope. An intersectionality perspective reveals that dual marginalizations presented by the patriarchal social structure (gender) were accentuated by nativist sentiment against immigrants (race and ethnicity), with a respondent stating, "We're coming with the label of 'foreign,' so we need to think about our position and location even in the family. If we're too submissive, then the husband may follow up my [dis]advantage." Most foreign brides were spatially immobilized to undertake domestic responsibilities within the confines of the home, normally shared with the parents-in-law.

I used to go to work for several days but my husband wasn't happy. He said, "Who will take care of the family and cooking? Who will teach our little child?" So I need to stay at home.

The spatial constraints of domesticity were exacerbated by social stigma heaped upon them in public spaces, with Singaporeans holding stereotypes about sex workers from Vietnam. The historically contingent nature of the sourcing of sex labor from regional countries (sex work is not illegal in Singapore, though it is often practiced outside the boundaries of the law; both avenues are sources of stigma) led to respondents being mischaracterized as sex workers, compounding the problematic relationships with their in-laws.

Some Vietnamese girls coming here to work illegally and being prostitutes, so my mother-in-law didn't have good impressions to us. Like other people in Singapore, she thought that I'm coming here to deceive my husband and to take his money.

There is ample scholarship on the denial of work opportunities for marriage migrants via a strict regulatory regime (see Yeoh, Chee, and Baey, 2013, for more on Singaporean immigration governance). However, for those foreign brides who did manage to undertake paid work outside of the household, an intersectionality perspective suggests that some Singaporeans situated in a position of class privilege caused humiliation by belittling the brides' identities across a range of social positionings.

When I first did nails in Hougang, one of my customers asked me, "Why don't you marry an older man, like a 60-year-old, so you can soon take all of his property when he dies?" I felt so sad because they thought that I married my husband because of money . . . Of course, some customers are sympathetic and understanding, but many showed discrimination because they're thinking I'm at a lower social position.

The spatial and social immobilities of marriage migrants extended to an intersectional immobility, with Vietnamese brides encountering multilayered grounds of marginalization upon their vulnerable

gender identity, minority race or ethnicity, class, and migrant status in Singapore. The relational approach to mobilities is evident in respondents' acknowledgment of their relative social immobilities versus Singaporean women: "They're superior to us in terms of education and career, and participation in social work as well. In general they are higher and developed."

There was a realization of cultural subjugation because of their spatial and social immobilities: "We are minority, and our culture is not represented. Our culture and identity is not appreciated at home and in the wider society." Their cultural identities were subordinate to the dominant culture not only when engaging in cultural consumption, "When I watch TV with my husband, I watch Chinese programs," but also when dealing with important tasks.

> Legal issues, they're written or spoken in English on Internet, so I can't read or watch. I have to ask my husband. Translating them into Vietnamese isn't precise.

Foreign brides were restricted from Vietnamese language interaction with their children, which attacked both their gender and ethnic identities and, indeed, the cultural pride they took in their motherhood status: "I only feel I am a real Vietnamese since have a child." We find that benefits of migration mobilities, such as intercultural and language learning, instead were distorted into an intersectional immobility of identity.

> All Vietnamese brides are stressed, because our husband and parents-in-law do not allow us to talk with our children in Vietnamese. My parents-in-law told me, "Don't speak Vietnamese to him. He is going to school to learn in English. If you speaks Vietnamese to him, he does not understand you" . . . I feel depressed.

In response to our first research question, we find that social norms (patriarchy and nativism) and regulatory policies (work restrictions) engender a spatial immobility (confinement to domestic spaces) and a range of social immobilities stemming from these women's intersectional identities as foreign women with low education, language and livelihood constraints, economic dependencies, and origins from a minority culture.

Essentialist Identities as Intersectional Resistance

In response to spatial, social, and intersectional immobilities imposed upon them by the host society, marriage migrants adopted an essentialist identity as a means of resistance (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Essentialism refers to innate beliefs about the superiority of traditional gender roles, cultivated by enactment of a superior gender essence of femininity, wifehood, and motherhood, evident in the statement, "I'm not scared of them [Singaporean women], but still proud of being a good woman and a good wife in the family."

The importance of essentialist roles of wifehood and motherhood can be seen in the manner that respondents saw themselves as an elemental part of Singapore, in fact, as custodians of future generations, claiming to be "coming here to become a wife of a citizen of your own country [Singapore], so I'm a part in your country's families; the small but core seed is here, from mine." However, the

resistance to the imposed immobilities emerged in clandestine cultural practices, suggesting the need to conceal perceived antisocial behavior, albeit related to an identity of motherhood (see Nguyen et al., 2017, for more on essentialist wifehood and motherhood practices).

> I had to wait for all of them going out of home so that I could speak with my child in Vietnamese. Then when they got home, I stop talking in Vietnamese. I felt like I was a "criminal" or someone trying to propagate dangerous things.

Enactment of an essentialist Vietnamese identity by using the mobilities of communication technologies was another clandestine avenue for dealing with intersectional immobilities. Facing myriad restrictions on language usage in the home, Vietnamese foreign brides engaged in surreptitious solitary practices for covert cultural consumption away from the gaze, and out of earshot, of family during times of commuting or while conducting domestic chores.

> I often downloaded my favorite music to my phone, which are Vietnamese classic songs by some singers like Truong Vu, Minh Tuyen. I save the songs to playlist in my phone, can listen to them sometimes when I'm waiting to go home after my work at the hotel. I use earpieces to listen to music.

> I often watch . . . comedy shows in Vietnamese and Vietnamese movies. Sometimes I open these videos and movies for my baby to watch so that I can do housework peacefully. When I watch videos in YouTube, I just watch things in Vietnamese.

Countering their spatial immobilities, respondents created safe spaces to perform their essentialist identities, including joining a Vietnamese dance group that celebrated the symbolic femininity of the ao dai, the national costume of a usually silk tunic worn by women, stating, "Oh I love ao dai and miss it! It is a symbol for the beauty of Vietnamese women—feminine and attractive beauty." Dance routines performed at the Vietnamese embassy allowed the women to enact their intersecting gender and cultural identities, simultaneously allowing these marginalized women to banish their isolating spatial and social immobilities.

> At that time I had a problem with my mother-in-law. She is super clean and always checked the floor every time she got home. I had to do housework then, and did feel uncomfortable. Joining the dancing group brought me fun and I could escape from the house once in a while. Having my own space, meeting with coethnic sisters, eating Vietnamese foods.

We need to be careful with ascribing a situated agency to these marginalized marriage migrants, whose secretive acts of resistance "may, in terms of manifest behavior, seem like submission" (Peter, 2003, p. 27), particularly as these involve essentialist gender identities. Although the clandestine nature of these gendered and cultural acts suggest a lack of confrontation, we need to view these acts of resistance within a longer time frame. Vietnamese foreign brides recognize the need to act upon the source of the imposition of immobilities: "Of course, Singaporeans have to change their attitudes. We try

to influence people, but we have to do it collectively." The dance performances thus went beyond providing an immediate recourse to their spatial immobilities, further providing a contact zone for engagement with local Singaporeans as a means to longer term resolution.

Yeoh and Willis (2005) argue that these sites of temporal and spatial co-presence allow for differences to be negotiated through everyday experiences. These authors focus on global elites, but contact zones are also important for marginalized immigrants in relation to the spatial, social, and intersectional immobilities they find themselves confined within. The migrant women asserted their shared cultural identity in a safe space to a broad spectrum of external audiences as a form of representation and expression against the immobilities experienced.

> We perform to introduce Vietnamese culture to international friends, especially important when we are living here in a new land. Joining dancing group is a wonderful chance to sustain our identity and show off our culture to locals.

However, similar to the "empowerment strategies intertwined with a subordinate role" (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 180), we note that the attainment of mobilities depends largely on social endorsement, particularly from the source of the immobilities: "close others" in the form of the Singaporean husband.

> One time my husband secretly followed me to the practicing location. Turned out that he was standing from afar and filmed me dancing with other sisters. He took me up when I finished and surprised me by the video. I was so happy.

In response to our second research question, we find that marriage migrants adopt essentialist identities at the intersection of gender and race and ethnicity in response to spatial, social, and intersectional immobilities. We note, with due caution, the clandestine nature of these acts of resistance and argue that a temporal, historically grounded perspective would see the establishment of contact zones as initial steps toward dealing with the source of the imposition of immobilities, the social norms exerted by the host society and, perhaps, the Singaporean families, even if by happenstance.

Essentialist Expression Facilitated by Communication Technologies

As crucial components of new mobilities (Sheller & Urry, 2006), information and communication technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones facilitate strategies of resistance to spatial immobilities by allowing for the creation of social and cultural capital. The unimpeded flow of cultural materials online provided a resource for home-bound marriage migrants: "Of course the mobile phone and social media channels are very useful as these are the only platforms where we could access Vietnamese songs and dances online." Respondents additionally used chance occurrences in public spaces to enhance their coethnic social networks beyond the geographical confines of their homes: "I knew [Vietnamese] people around this area, maybe on street or market, then we save our phone number and Facebook." Urry (2012) considers these networks of connection to be critical in forming and maintaining advantageous social relations and, in turn, social capital. Similarly, the communicative mobilities and privacy afforded by

the mobile phone dissolved the spatial immobilities of the domestic home to create a hitherto forbidden cultural capital.

> We record a video of our dancing steps at the end of each practicing sessions, so that whoever wishes to finesse her own steps at home can just download the video to the phone or watch it on our Facebook group chat.

It is important to note that resistance to intersectional mobilities via communication mobilities often occurred at the intersection of multiple identities. To maintain the superiority of an essentialist feminine identity, respondents used mobile phones and social media to reproduce gendered activities of cooking, caregiving, and elaborate beauty regimens.

> I often use 24H [Vietnamese online forum] to learn about cooking.

> I went to the sites on my phone to read about health, love quotes, lifestyle, make-up, stories about marriage life, et cetera.

> I type out symptoms on Google, and read up on websites Google suggested to know about which problems my child is facing.

> When my friends post related things on Facebook, I may comment on the post to ask and share about beauty tips. Sometimes I search for info about functional medicine to keep healthy and fairness.

From an essentialist motherhood perspective, it was important that these women shared the spatial and social mobilities gained by myriad acts of resistance with their children. Resisting the spatial immobility of domesticity, the foreign brides also realized the importance of imparting their cultural identities to their children via mobile cultural products: "Sometimes I open these [Vietnamese] videos and movies for my baby to watch so that I can do housework peacefully." Foreign brides introduced their children to their cultural dance performances in public venues, ensuring there was a mobile digital trace of these acts of resistance.

> Another time when I brought my son the Vietnam embassy in a midautumn festival celebration, I also thought about my own childhood when my son was doing some performances and took photos on the stage.

These marriage migrants recognized the need to address the most immediate source of their socially imposed immobilities—their families: "We have to join together . . . change our family members' attitudes towards us first, before we can change the society." To do so, respondents reported using their children as a conduit, mobilizing their digital images on social media to initiate social change.

> We celebrate midautumn festival every year—we chip in some money and buy gifts for our children and gathering. At first husbands hardly wanted to join. Later they could felt

that our children had fun. I posted my children photos on Facebook, and showed off them with my children photos on Facebook, and showed off them with my husband. Not only my husband liked it but my friends' husbands and their families did. They started to support their children joining us. My husband, he, after a while, followed me to our event, then gradually get more familiar to our culture.

We caution that the mobilities of communication technologies have the potential to be erroneously exclusively associated with a celebratory emancipatory ideal. These bounded interactions in online environments also have the capacity to exacerbate the social and spatial immobilities of isolation (Chib & Aricat, 2016). Both individuals and groups can suffer from the inclusive (bounded) and exclusive (discriminatory) affordances of communication technologies. On one hand, cultural identity can act as cocooning force as much as a collective environment, "We created 'Ao Dai in Singapore' Facebook page for Vietnamese women in Singapore, but mainly Viet brides are in there," limiting the interaction of migrants with locals. On the other hand, intersectional identities that are partial to one particular identity, for example, race or ethnicity, have the conceivable disadvantage of being disconcerting to some.

I can see on Facebook that my friends join Vietnamese communities, but I don't join. They sometimes post about gatherings and events with exact time and venues for us. I know about I do not participate. I do not have many friends in Singapore. Most of my friends are friends on Facebook only.

In response to our third research question, we find that mobilities of communication technologies facilitate cultural expression (via cultural consumption and production), particularly by enhancing essentialist identities of gender and race and ethnicity. We find evidence that communication technologies allow for self-imposed immobilizing tendencies, however, as much as they promise the emancipatory potential of spatial and social mobilities.

Conclusion

The Singaporean success model is premised on taking advantage of the establishment of the materialities of mobility infrastructures—a world-class transportation hub, a multicultural environment attracting the finest global talent, a secure regulatory regime for foreign capital, a smart city networked through innovative communication technologies and algorithm-driven sensors—while simultaneously representing the subjectivities of a cosmopolitan, elite, exclusive, urban patriarchy. Within such a milieu, this article is concerned with the marginalized and discriminatory environment for spatial and social (im)mobility that migrant women find themselves in postmigration, despite their aspirational journey to an imagined developed land of equality and opportunity.

First, the transnational imaginaries of belonging give way to an environment of control over migrant women, their bodies, their identities, and their aspirations in the adopted home, represented metaphorically and spatially in their conjugal households, their adopted society, and the immigration regulatory regime. We find the feminization of (emotional) labor (Yeoh, Huang, & Lam, 2005) and a

(reproductive) conjugal relationship in a hierarchical patriarchal society creates all-encompassing spatial, social, and intersectional immobilities.

Faced with spatial and social immobilization as economically unproductive domestic caregivers, female Vietnamese marriage migrants have to further contend with threats and pathologization of their identities as sex workers (see Kaur, Tan, & Dutta, 2016, for Singaporean media framing of migrants as criminals). Spatial and social immobilities extend to intersectional immobilities of their gender and cultural identities, reinforced by stigmatization of use of the Vietnamese language and consumption of ethnic cultural materials.

Second, this article departs decidedly from the academic and public discourse that positions these women as vulnerable, powerless victims in need of rescue. Instead, we see agency in the acts of resistance and resilience that emerge as performances of an essentialist nature that intersect their gender and cultural (racial and ethnic) identities. With the migrant body being the site of regulation, domination, and subjugation in a global chain of reproduction, these foreign brides reassert the rights to their feminine bodies, their strength of child bearing and caregiving, and their cultural heritage. In response to the marginalization that produces gendered, racialized, and classed immobilities, marriage migrants respond with an intersecting array of strategies that span their feminine, wifehood, motherhood, and Vietnamese identities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Dance practice.

We further note that performativity of essentialism as cultural production and communication mobilities is related to social positioning and rhetorical space (Skeggs, 2004). The reappropriation of the female body from one that is immobilized to one that celebrates beauty and culture in public and virtual forums is a political act seeking redress—that is, a rebalancing of the scales of mobilities justice (Cook & Butz, 2015; Lin et al., 2017; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cultural performance.

At a superficial level, these acts of resilience and resistance can be viewed as a feeble instrument for challenging the deeply embedded political power of the state. However, Skeggs (2004) argues that gender identity politics are based in the experience of marginalization, which is necessary to understand oppression. We observe the hesitant, wary, and cautious performance of culture in safe spaces, both physical and virtual, away from the public gaze, conducted as a means of symbolic resistance and to influence close others. This is further complicated by the fact that many acts of cultural expression occur in clandestine spaces or via secretive practices. Rather than viewing confrontation in the immediate here and now, we argue that a temporal view of mobilities would consider these acts as preliminary stages toward a longer term resolution. Vietnamese foreign brides categorize and prioritize their sources of immobilities, moving outward in concentric circles of influence from the family to broader society, eventually, one hopes, to influencing the policies of the state.

        Third, we note the inordinate influence of new mobilities (Sheller & Urry, 2006) in the form of modern information and communication technologies that allow for performance of identity in virtual spaces (see Figure 3) in providing the freedom that the emancipatory ideal of mobilities promised.

Figure 3. Sharing performance clips via mobile device.

Mediated communication practices provide a degree of (restricted) agency for the women to carve out their own space, ameliorating their (im)mobility amid asymmetrical power relations at personal, familial, and social levels. The mobile phone, therefore, creates a private space for the women to access, express, and self-represent while the cultural product created is distributed publicly via social media to a selected audience. Further investigation is required into the parsing of psychological and social effects of mobile mediation, although these might be parallel and symbiotic processes. Relatedly, the unpacking of affordances in a tool (mobile media) that embodies a range of prior media requires deeper insights.

        We must caution, nonetheless, against adopting exclusively a celebratory view of communicative mobilities, as these simultaneously demonstrate insulating and isolating effects for both groups and individuals (see Figure 3). The social dependencies arising out of the coethnic bubbles created when enacting essentialist strategies online potentially restrict the bridging of cultural connections to the host country and hinder access to a plethora of opportunities to layer upon essentialist identities. Within this context, we must remind ourselves that communication technologies allow for surveillance by external actors, such as corporations and governments. Further research is required to examine coercive and surveillance affordances in terms of mobilities and immobilities (Hannam et al., 2006).

        In conclusion, this study reveals the complexity of intersectional marginalization and identity resistance facilitated by communication technology experienced by marriage migrants facing spatial and social immobilities. We discuss ambivalent and oppositional meanings in the discourse around (im)mobility, illustrating the multifaceted emergence of marginalized communities engaging in restricted

agency, or the celebration of essentialist gendered and cultural identities as subtle spaces for resistance and negotiation.

The adoption of an essentialist identity as a means to gender and cultural equality has implications for postcolonial scholarship on identity by rejecting the inherent view of equality as merely improved livelihoods and political participation. The immobilities experienced by these Vietnamese foreign brides potentially represent the lived experiences of many other marginalized migrants. Revisiting the longstanding discourse on feminism and inequality, we put forth essentialist identities as a form of restricted agency within the Asian context. In instances of complex intersectionalities of oppression, this notion challenges, and reveals the need to reconsider and reformulate, existing perspectives concerning gender, technology, and (im)mobilities.

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