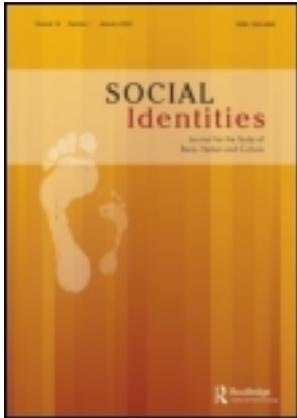


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## Sensing cities: the politics of migrant sensescapes

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This paper explores the sensory misconduct of foreign workers in Singapore as identified by local residents in neighborhoods across the island city. Urban bodies and sensory differentiation form the focal point of discussion, given that complaints about sensory disturbances are sociocultural expressions of rejection which are connected to power relations in the city. I focus on two cases that have been identified from my research on Singapore newspaper archives dating between the 1800s and the present-day context. Employing the notion of transnational urbanism, the paper deliberates upon urban sensory politics in Singapore and shows how urban spaces are sensorially politicized by different groups through content analysis of media reports. By considering both historical and contemporary transnationalism, the paper contributes to further understandings on urbanity, migration, and sensory studies.

**Keywords:** senses; Singapore; local-foreigner dynamics; transnational urbanism; foreign workers; sensescapes

### Introduction

For the past two years, there has been a big construction site behind my house with a United Nations of workers: Indian nationals who play their music really loud, Thais who shout at night, and Chinese who sing at the top of their voices. The noise has been a nuisance, and the occasional stench of stale sweat wafting over has been disconcerting. Whenever I go out, I avoid meeting their gaze because, yes, I have heard all those stories about construction workers who lose all senses at the sight of a woman. Yes, I do wonder about possible criminal intentions. I am not proud to admit to these crazy, unfair thoughts. (Tan, 2004)

The above reportage is a poignant reflection of sensory disagreement. Disapproval comes about because there has been an excess in sensory behavior that is deemed unacceptable. More importantly, such behavior stems from foreign bodies which are regarded in odious terms, thereby inviting negative sensory evaluations. In these assessments, encounters between two groups of social actors – locals and foreigners – exemplify the tension that exists in Singapore, a cosmopolitan city which has seen its fair share of multi-level migrant inflows occupying different strata in the workforce (van Grunsven, 2011). How can one make sense of these inter-sensorial encounters in urbanity? What are the sociocultural implications of such steady flows of foreign labor, and how have Singaporeans as citizens reacted to their palpable presence in

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various urban spaces in the city? How would an appraisal of sensory (mis)conduct shed light upon claims on (sensory) space?

These research queries will be addressed through an examination of two case studies that pertain to ‘problematic’ sensory behavior. The paper accords a glimpse into the urban fabric of multicultural Singapore that has resulted from transnational mobilities. In particular, I explore the idea of differences in the city proposed by Bridge and Watson (2000, pp. 251–252), who contend that difference is ‘constituted in all spatial relations’. For them, differences may be found across many dimensions including race, class, age, and gender. Such differences are also socially and spatially constituted, thereby bringing about polarization and ‘zones of exclusion and fragmentation’. Similarly, Sennett’s (1994, pp. 25–26) exploration of the body in the city within the context of Western civilization also indicates the pertinence of city life, bodily differences, and the complex social life that these presences engender:

The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers. All these aspects of urban experience – difference, complexity, strangeness – afford resistance to domination.

Through the lens of the senses, urban bodies and sensory differentiation form the focal point of discussion, given that complaints about sensory disturbances are sociocultural expressions of rejection. In order to deliberate upon the sensorium in urbanity, I focus on two cases that have been identified from my research on Singapore newspaper archives dating between the 1800s and the present-day context. This is similar to Steward and Cowan’s (2007, p. 3) proposal on studying the sensory environment of the city by referring to various texts such as travelogues, letters, and diaries which are based on ‘perceptions of difference’. I am also in agreement with Smith (2001, p. 6) who draws attention to the ‘consciousness, intentionality, everyday practices, and collective action’ of ‘ordinary women and men’ so as to critique the ‘social construction of urban life’.

The cases presented here elucidate upon perceptions of residential territories being sensorially invaded. The perceived ‘invasion’ arises from divergent uses of senses in space, where such ‘different orders of reality’ (Elberfeld, 2003, p. 479) account for local-foreigner tensions. In other words, one needs to pay attention to sensorial terrains and how they are talked about through the perspectives of both local residents and foreigners. Invasion, stemming from different sensory behaviors that clash, also implies the existence of a ‘sensory order’ that social actors subscribe to. While Howes (1991) and Geurts (2002) define sensory order as a particular repertoire of senses (including the number of senses, their importance and use) as context-dependent, I follow, for present purposes, Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk’s (2012, p. 127) notion of a sensory order which refers to ‘normative aspects of the interaction order that concern the human sensorium’. Specifically, such an order is premised upon three features encompassing intensity, context, and aesthetics/morality (Vannini et al., 2012).

According to the authors, *intensity* refers to sensory excess such as smells that are either too pungent or not sufficiently fragrant. With regard to *context*, Vannini et al. (2012, p. 132) note: ‘... we are more or less sensitive to odor depending on whether we perceive sensations as appropriate to the context’. The third feature of aesthetics and morality has to do with sensory evaluations that are either positive or negative.

In concert, these three features are negotiated so as to arrive at a sensory order that comes with sensory norms and appropriate sensory conduct. In this respect, sensory behaviors of foreign bodies infract local sensory orders, and hence are interpreted as transgressive conduct. To restore sensory order, then, is to keep such sensory excess in check so that how foreigners conduct themselves sensorially will be regulated. The examples below demonstrate how sensory excess takes place, as well as how sensory order is then negotiated. The paper thus deliberates upon urban sensory politics in Singapore and shows how urban spaces are sensorially politicized by different groups through content analysis of media reports.

### Sensing cities

Theoretical deliberations on the sensual character of urbanity are neither new nor recent. In their edited collection on *The City and the Senses*, Steward and Cowan (2007) note that Simmel's works on the metropolitan city, an essay on the sociology of the senses (see Frisby & Featherstone, 1997), and his *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 1978[1907]) reflect upon the links between the senses, social interaction, and urban culture. The urban consciousness that Simmel talks about has to do with locating the senses as significant modes of sociation. Other scholars who have contributed important approaches to sensory urbanism include Walter Benjamin who located the effects of capitalism and modernity on Parisian visual urban culture in the nineteenth century, J. Douglas Porteous (1990, 1994), who has written on a geography of the senses and argued how an interplay of the senses structure space and define place, as well as scholars who have focused on cities in France (Corbin, 1986; Laporte, 2002; Pinkney, 1958), the UK (Degen, 2008; Jenner, 2000; Otter, 2004), and the US (Manalansan, 2006).

Research on Asian societies may be found in the scholarship of Chen (2005), Cohen (1988), Low (2009), Pinney (2008), and Sasaki (2000), among others. Broadly, these studies demonstrate how the senses are important modalities which further our comprehension of the physical and built environment (Howes, 2005) in relation to the different groups that inhabit urban spaces. By regarding the sensorium as a 'relevant component of analysis' (Bendix, 2011, p. 213), these works address sensory conditions of everyday urban life and the impact on identity formation and place-making. Adams and Guy (2007, p. 136) likewise argue that it is time to 'promote the sensory turn in studies of the city' as multi-sensual experiences of urbanity are tied to urban policy, consumption, identity, and governance.

Furthermore, one of the directions in the field of urban studies reflects a concern with spatiality, which includes examinations of how spatial and cultural activities of mobile bodies have influenced the production of urban spaces and the attendant meanings associated with such locales (Steward & Cowan, 2007). In their study on migrants in Hong Kong, for example, Chung and Leung (2011) analyze the sociospatial behavior of migrants in relation to configurations of social relationships that transpire. Critiquing limitations of the assimilation, pluralist, and heterolocal models of spatial behavior in urban sociology, the authors offer an alternative paradigm. They consider the networks, group memberships, relationships of trust, and varied other social ties, so as to account for sociospatial behavior with regard to residencing choices. In doing so, Chung and Leung (2011, p. 61) depart from 'conventional theories that regard migrants as a homogeneous, ready-made group'

and instead consider them as ‘heterogeneous social agents’ in explaining their location patterns in the city. I expand upon existing urban sensory studies to analyze how sensory engagements in the city shed light on processes of contestation, exclusion, and othering in the migrant landscape of Singapore. In order to do so, a point of departure would be to locate the sensorium within the context of transnational urbanism, where the discussion below will focus on local-migrant sensory relationships.

### **Transnational urbanism and sensory politics**

An increasingly globalized world implies that cross-cultural sensory encounters are unavoidable alongside flows of labor, goods, ideas, and practices. Such flows affect the ways in which everyday urban life is lived and experienced. In these mobilities, I have, in an earlier work (Low & Kalekin-Fishman, 2010) suggested the notion of sensory transnationalism to critically appraise meeting points of dissimilar sensory knowledge and use among different groups of social actors. This notion would be able to highlight differences that reveal how varying communities both acknowledge and contest such sensory differentiation. Demographic changes in the population – by that I mean a constant inflow of foreigners into the city – therefore require a rethinking of how urban spaces are sensorially inhabited and perceived by different groups of people living in Singapore.

In order to provide a conceptual framework for the ensuing discussion, I employ the notion of ‘transnational urbanism’ borrowed from Smith (2001, 2005). Smith (2001) argues that transnational flows of migration are indubitably embedded in locality and everyday practices. By using transnational urbanism as a cultural and not a strictly geographic metaphor, Smith is interested in pinpointing the various criss-crossing of ‘local, translocal, and transnational social practices’ that transpire within particular urban contexts. More importantly, such practices do involve a ‘contested politics of place-making, the social construction of power differentials, and the making of individual, group, national, and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference’ (Smith, 2001, p. 5). The way to investigate these practices, Smith suggests, is to analyze the intentions and actions of urban social actors, as well as the meanings that are associated with such praxis. Together, these point to the utility of transnational urbanism as an ‘agency-oriented urban theory’ that examines the daily lives of urban actors against the backdrop of capitalist logics in the global economy.

Features of transnational urbanism provide the necessary focal points in my analysis of urban sensory politics. They include attention to what it means to ‘live in an interconnected, topologically complex world’ and to explain this connectivity without an over-reliance on ‘abstract or grand narratives of global transformation’ (Conradson & Latham, 2005, p. 227). There is therefore an emphasis on the significance of place and locality. Place-making is

shaped by conflict, difference, and social negotiation among differently situated and at times antagonistically related social actors, some of whose networks are locally bound, others whose social relations and understandings span entire regions and transcend national boundaries. (Smith, 2001, p. 107)

The above relates to how mobile bodies are ‘socially and spatially situated subjects’ (Smith, 2005, p. 237) emplaced in urbanity, and how such corporealities and their interaction require further analysis towards appreciating the everyday practices of transnational mobility. Everyday textures of migrant sensescapes in urban settings are therefore important avenues through which more nuanced appraisals of streams of migrants and their impact may be undertaken. Subscribing to a transnational frame of reference consequently avails an ethnographic grounding of what ‘place’, ‘identity’, ‘community’, ‘family’ and ‘nation’ imply as they are regarded meaningfully by social actors (Yeoh, 2005). Overall, the goal of employing transnational urbanism as an optic is to evaluate how ‘place-making’ occurs in ‘transnational times’ (Smith, 2001, p. 8) by uncovering the sensorial realities of urban life.

Applying the notion of transnational urbanism to the case of Singapore requires a return to its colonial contexts. The historical context of transnational practices and flows is important for contextualization, as well as to avoid perceiving transnational communities as ‘timeless cultural wholes’ (Smith, 2005, p. 238). This is because such actors are still embedded in specific historical milieu as raced, classed, and gendered mobile bodies. In addition, casting a historical lens as a point of departure is useful in distinguishing present-day transnationalism from earlier contexts of transnational migration and the relevant political-power relations that are formulated in such varying contexts. Yeoh (2001, p. 457) also notes:

Not only are the ‘colonial city’ and the ‘imperial city’ umbilically connected in terms of economic linkages as well as cultural hybridization, but their ‘post-equivalents’ cannot be disentangled one from the other and need to be analyzed within a single ‘postcolonial’ framework of intertwining histories and relations.

Given that Singapore during the time of colonialism already experienced substantial flows of diverse groups of migrants coming from the region and beyond, transnational encounters have been taking place since the British came to the island. In the colonial history of Singapore (which would form the context for my first case), sensorial tensions between different ethnic groups of migrants are evident. European residents often complain about other races such as the Chinese, who have been deemed as a ‘perpetual source of annoyance to the European residents in this island’ (‘Odors’, 1875).

Apart from being assailed by odors for which the Chinese were responsible due to their use of manure to cultivate gardens (‘Odors’, 1875), they have also been held culpable for other sensory breaches that included noise generated by the ‘banging of gongs and tom-toms’ in the district of Tanjong Katong (‘Chinese District’, 1912). Similar to the stench emanating from Chinese gardens, gong banging had been interpreted as a willful and intentional act meant to cause ‘great annoyance to protesting Europeans residing a few yards away from the “music”’ (‘Chinese District’, 1912). Such sensory intensity that occurs in this context (compare Vannini et al., 2012) is unwelcomed as it disrupts the sensory order of residential space. Furthermore, sensory breaches engender highly charged emotions (compare Smith, 2006), thereby rendering overt discrimination against such sources of breach. For example, and coming back to the instance of Chinese ‘music’, the complainant opined:

The house may be untenable, life made unbearable and murder in one's heart, but there is nothing to be done, other than to close the house and go away to some more favored spot, until it may please the Chinaman to remove himself and his music. ('Chinese District', 1912)

Such emotions provoke a further step – that of intentions geared towards 'taming' if not removing these undesirable sources of sensory disturbances. What is more pertinent in the above stories is how certain spaces, marked as residential spaces (*viz.* European colonial living quarters), are therefore linked to an assertion of one's rights as resident without having to tolerate sensory transgressions of varying kinds. Urban spaces such as residential areas are therefore delineated based on permissible sensory behavior. This thereby illustrates how migrant populations are regarded discriminatingly due to perceived poor and/or excessive sensory conduct. In view of sensory violations, then, (sensory) order must be reinstated. A solution would involve the removal or separation of foreign bodies from spaces of inhabitation occupied by the Europeans (note that both groups are foreign inhabitants in colonial Singapore, and are not indigenous to the city). In sum, European and colonized others' sensibilities simply do not 'smell nose to nose', or 'hear ear to ear', in departing from ocularcentrism (compare Drobnick, 2006).

Furthermore, urban spaces in the city are also contested spaces that bring about social exclusion of migrants in new forms (Rigg & Wong, 2011) such as through sensory differentiation, exemplified in the opening quote of this paper. Everyday experiences of the senses take on an emotional character, where heightened feelings become apparent in the encounter between sensory selves and sensory others. In the colonial examples, the differentiating factors which set Europeans apart from the Chinese are that of race and class. More pertinently, such discourses that emerged during this historical context have to be understood as a colonial representation, given that a colonial city is 'apparently a colonial product', as King suggests (2006, p. 17). In this respect, the sensory differentiation that took place during colonial times stems from the binary of colonialist/colonized. That said however, I propose that the case study below – which will be culled from contemporary Singapore – seems to exhibit colonial judgment on foreign others as an extension of such power inequality contingent on race, nationality and class hierarchies. In other words, the contemporary polarity of Singaporean/foreigner is operative, but this dichotomy comes with a colonial indexing that evaluates foreign others in relation to sensory/embodyed incivilities (compare Anderson, 1995; Quinlan, 1996).

Yeoh (2001, p. 460) sums it up by positing that the postcolonial city

traces continuity rather than disjuncture from its colonial predecessor in the nature and quality of social encounters, which are shot through with notions of 'race' and 'culture' as markers of difference and bases for interaction.

Granted that the rapidity and intensity of transnational migration and its impact on urban life are different from colonial periods, there seems to be an inheritance of a colonial mindset when it comes to citizenry reactions to foreign presences in the city. Such a response needs to be contextualized within the economic and legislative parameters of Singapore's growth as a global hub that therefore requires foreign labor as part of its path towards maintaining economic competitiveness (Low, 2012). Furthermore, I show later that the local/foreigner dichotomy is not a simple polarity,

as categories of ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’ are also different in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds and nationalities. In other words, I do not treat these categories as homogeneous given the heterogeneous nature of local/foreigner relations. Instead, attention should be paid to how different groups of locals and foreigners relate to one another. This is in line with Chung and Leung’s (2011) stance that migrants – to which I add locals – are social actors with heterogeneous backgrounds as iterated above. Discriminatory attitudes therefore interweave class and nationality differences that account for the heterogeneity which I have indicated.

Official statistics on the contemporary migrant context in Singapore indicate that one in every three workers is a foreigner (Ministry of Manpower, 2012). Contributing to the various work sectors of professional, semi-skilled and unskilled labor industries, foreigners possess a visible presence in the urban landscape of the country. Burgeoning complaints of overcrowding and disruptive conduct from foreign labor occupying the lower income brackets have been raised through media reportage in the last two decades. Noise and smell pollution, together with unhygienic behavior, have been sources of concern for Singaporeans who live alongside foreign workers in different parts of the city. Examples include the noise and presence of (Filipino) bargirls (*‘Is Changi Village jolly’*, 2009), Vietnamese prostitutes operating in Joo Chiat that has seen the mushrooming of pubs, bars, massage parlors, and where ‘noise, fights, drunks . . . [and] solicitation’ may be found at the bars’ back alleys which also form the side streets where residents live (*‘Battlefield’*, 2006), and an emerging African community in Little India comprising traders in the second-hand goods market hailing from Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Cameroon and other places, who form the source of ‘excessive noise, drunken behavior, fights and crime’ (*‘Little Africa’*, 2006). As one African coffee shop stallholder says in response to such behavior: ‘We Africans talk loudly when we get excited. Others who aren’t used to it think we’re quarrelling or fighting, and they call the police’. In addition, a Nigerian soccer player narrated his experience of being regarded as olfactorily questionable:

Mr Matthew Okonkwo, 24, a Nigerian footballer who has been in Singapore for three weeks, recounted an instance when a woman pinched her nose and shot him a dirty look as they passed each other on the street. He said: ‘She could not have smelled me from that distance, and besides, I had just showered!’

These various examples demonstrate that residents claim urban spaces which ought to be demarcated from foreign others. Such space is also assumed to come with a measure of sensory order instead of disturbances emanating from foreigners. This sentiment is captured in a report on Thai workers congregating at Golden Mile Complex:

While we recognize that these foreign workers need a place to mingle with their friends, we must not forget that the residents also have a right to a safe, clean and peaceful living environment. Despite the signs reminding people not to litter and urinate, this area still reeks of urine and rubbish. Some of the foreign workers would also cook, have picnics and play loud music there. (*‘Litter, noise’*, 2009)

In order to develop the notion of sensory rights that residents attempt to enforce vis-à-vis foreign presences, my second case study is an account of government plans

to convert an unoccupied school – Serangoon Gardens Technical School – into a temporary dormitory for approximately 1,000 foreign workers who work in the manufacturing and service sectors ('Foreign workers?', 2008). The school is located in Serangoon Gardens, a 'gentrified landed housing area with popular eateries and its very own country club' ('Wake-up call', 2008). Serangoon residents had expressed grave concerns over this initiative, as they feared that 'low-skilled foreigners will soil their parks, clog up their streets as well as violate their children and womenfolk'. Some measures were subsequently taken to ease such concerns and to cushion the (sensory) impact that foreign workers would bring to the neighborhood. They included constructing a new access road between the dormitory and the neighboring housing estate so as to minimize congested traffic within Serangoon, the closure of an existing entrance at Burghley Drive 'so that noise nuisance is minimized', housing 'just 600 workers' instead of the rumored 1,300, and cancelling plans to construct sports facilities as part of the dormitory's facilities near the aforementioned entrance in the interest of reducing noise pollution as well ('Dorm gets the go ahead', 2008).

The dormitory officially opened at the end of 2009, where around 100 foreigners from such countries as India, China, Bangladesh and Malaysia moved into what is now known as the 'Central Staff Apartments'. Amenities comprising a canteen, a provision shop, and a barber shop have also been incorporated as part of the living quarters ('Serangoon Gardens dorm', 2009). In this self-contained facility, stringent measures have been legislated so as to put in place the various sensory buffers. For example, workers who litter or smoke in non-smoking areas would be accountable to a demerit point system. They would eventually be asked to leave should they 'chalk up too many points for offences'. In addition, the amenities also mean that 'workers will have little reason to leave it' ('Serangoon Gardens dorm to go ahead', 2008). Other noise-control measures include a reduction in the site area, which meant a greater distance away from residential homes along Burghley Drive, thereby offering 'an additional buffer from noise'. In all, these measures were meant to 'keep the workers from disturbing the estate's residents'.

Lasting over two months, with debates transpiring between residents together with their representative Minister of Parliament Lim Hwee Hua and other politicians, the Serangoon workers' quarters case reflects upon the everyday realities of migration that is tied to space and sensory evaluations. In this instance, such space becomes an arena of contestation. Serangoon Gardens is not merely a residential space. It also functions as a space for family life and for social groups who are accepted within such a locale. In a separate study, I discussed how employment regulations in Singapore operate on the basis of differentiating foreign labor pertaining to income, education, and skills qualifications. Skilled professionals – termed as 'foreign talents' – are regarded as elites who are encouraged to settle down in Singapore, whereas 'foreign workers' who engage in low-waged menial labor are perceived as a temporary work force (Low, 2012). This thereby leaves no room for transient workers who by legislation are not allowed to set up families in Singapore (see Abdullah, 2005). There are therefore these broader frames of exclusion that are at work, which have been through the dormitory case, magnified vis-à-vis sensory ways.

Returning to the first case on the dichotomy of the colonialist/colonized where race and class mattered, other media reports also shed light on a similar discriminatory attitude that indicates the implication of nationality and class in

the enactment of sensory differentiation. Take, for example, the African case. It has been reported that while Singaporeans have previously complained about Indians, Bangladeshis, and Filipinos who congregate extensively in Little India and Lucky Plaza, the attention is now turned to Africans who are 'being targeted for alleged unruly behavior' ('Be fair', 2006). Further to this, the writer of the article then reasoned:

Like Africans, Caucasians here, too, congregate in certain places and do get drunk, make noise and get involved in brawls. But Singaporeans are more tolerant towards them. I suspect the complaints against Africans have more to do with their nationalities than the problems they purportedly generate. . . Singapore is a global city. There are many nationalities here. Singaporeans should learn to accept this diversity.

Another social category that warrants emphasis pertaining to discrimination has to do with different class statuses. In comparison with foreign bodies from developing countries who occupy residential zones, the local residents themselves come from a different and more privileged socioeconomic background. This therefore led to arguments presented through the media that such discrimination against foreign labor stemmed from class snobbery, not unlike the colonialist/colonized paradigm mentioned earlier. It has been suggested that some newly-rich or 'comfortably middle-class' Singaporeans lack empathy towards the laboring class in spite of having just emerged from the poverty facing the latter, about four decades before ('Foreign workers and compassion', 1997). As a separate letter also records: 'It's snobbish. It's downright discrimination, because it's targeted at a specific group of people who, by virtue of their nationality and class, are not welcomed' ('Discrimination against maids', 1998). Finally, class consciousness as an issue also arose, leading to a potential cleavage; this time, between Singaporeans of different socioeconomic statuses ('Wake-up call', 2008):

Some Gardenites called for the dormitory to be moved to the HDB heartlands, while public housing residents recoiled at the idea of their neighborhoods being considered somehow less worthy of regard. And those Singaporeans expressing disgust at the xenophobia on display were promptly labeled as hypocrites by the embattled Gardenites.<sup>1</sup>

While Serangoon residents were invested in the entire episode, the incident also escalated into a 'national debate of sorts' where residents alongside other Singaporeans were in support of keeping foreign workers away from 'population centers'. Such segregation represents tensions of an underlying issue that has been circulating in the country – that of how many migrants do we need or want, and how do we accommodate their presence in both physical and cultural ways? Then there were also other Singaporeans who felt that this attitude of separation was indicative of discrimination. In spite of the 'noise, smell, hygiene and other nuisance problems', 'foreign workers play an important role in our economy. They are also human beings who deserve decent accommodation too' ('Foreign workers need proper accommodation', 1992).

In the same year that the Serangoon incident occurred, the government announced plans to utilize 10 sites across the island for the erection of temporary foreign-worker dormitories that were to house 20,000 people ('Town of their own',

2008). Prior to this announcement, various housing estates in Singapore had already seen their share of foreign workers inhabiting residential spots alongside Singaporeans, such as those in Toa Payoh, Woodlands, Chai Chee ('Foreign workers cause problems', 1995), Jalan Kayu, Jurong ('Voice of reason', 2008), and Tiong Bahru ('Illegal dorms', 2009). Apart from issues that have to do with sensory disturbances and moral concerns, other facets connected to migrant presences relate to (1) legal factors pertaining to whether they are housed illegally or legally; (2) urban zoning and planning; and (3) possibilities of sharing a 'common space'. Such diversity in urban spatialities, arising from globalization and streams of migration therefore require what Glick Schiller and Caglar (2008) call 'urban rescaling' in structural and cultural ways. While not everyone shares similar sentiments towards exercising an accommodating regard for foreigners, it is also interesting to note that sensory invasions which have been identified have also been met with sensory disciplining, as I next discuss.

### **From sensory invasions to sensory demarcation**

The cases presented here are mirrored in other studies such as one which looked at female foreign workers as 'invaders' in the residential areas of Penang, Malaysia (Sirat & Ghazali, 2011). Through interviews conducted with these workers, local residents, and representatives of the residents' association, the authors argue that the presence of these foreign female labor represent an 'invasion'. This invasion is opposed to the 'invasion-succession model' that is employed in urban geography literature to refer to the emergence of residential segregation resulting from neighborhood change. It is instead taken as an infiltration by substantial numbers of these female workers that result in their dominance in residential blocks. Resentment towards them has therefore been expressed, given that 'they were a noisy lot; they stole from their neighbors; they were unhygienic... and they were of loose moral values and character (because they allowed members of the opposite sex to enter their residential units and/or cohabit)' (Sirat & Ghazali, 2011, p. 188). Overall, the authors attempt to locate the 'potential impact of housing a large number of foreign contract workers concentrated in one or two residential areas', given that locals are concerned about their presence in relation to 'security issues through to moral transgressions and noise pollution' (2011, pp. 196–197). Such transgressions are therefore not peculiar to either Singapore or Malaysia as well, since the general sentiment that indicates locals' attitudes towards foreign bodies as troublesome and in need of (sensory) management thereby explain why they have been perceived as invaders in the urban residential landscape.

Urban mores, in the context of such Asian cities as Singapore and Malaysia, also relate to sensory mores that distinguish locals from foreigners, given that the latter group is regarded as a source of sensory disapprobation. I have argued elsewhere (Low, 2009) that sensory transgressions such as the presence of body odors relate to moral violations. Furthermore, unhygienic practices and other forms of excessive sensory behavior, similar to those discussed above, reflect upon a perceived lack of both social and moral probity that thus account for prejudicial attitudes. Locating these local-foreign dynamics through the lens of the senses consequently avail fresh perspectives on the meaningfulness of urban spaces and the moral dimensions of the senses. The importance that is vested onto spaces which need to be sensorially

guarded becomes reflective of both historical and contemporary urban politics in face of migratory flows. The notion of transnational urbanism has thus been useful for bringing to the fore sensory encounters taking place between groups of different national origins and class backgrounds. These sensory ‘clashes’ then elevate the ways in which urban spaces are deemed sacrosanct for citizens and not transient workers.

It should be clear by now that there is a need to restore order that is place-specific from the vantage point of residents. Such place specificity becomes all the more important when citizens or residents feel that there is an encroachment of their ‘rightful’ zones of residence by foreign bodies. As Friedmann (2002, p. 55) argues, transnational migrants are often regarded as strangers whose ‘very presence poses a threat to the way of life and sense of self/identity of the host society’. The spaces that they live in cannot overlap with spaces that are occupied by citizens. Following this, cultural and practical responses from locals then emerge through sensory demarcations – foreign workers as an undesirable group smell, sound, and look different from us (cultural response), and since they ‘encroach’ upon our space, they need to be removed or relocated somewhere else (practical) where they do not invade our (sensory) spaces of inhabitation.

One resident lamented about an escalation of foreign workers living in his block of flats and the nearby blocks, pointing out that these workers were ‘not professionals’ and were mostly ‘males and live in groups’ (‘Foreign workers destroy ambience’, 2006). Sensory violations have been documented as follows:

They leave their front door open most of the time and they disturb the adjacent families as they are very rowdy and talk loudly till past midnight . . . They dirty the corridor by spitting . . . They hang dirty clothes along the corridor, and throw cigarette butts all over the place. They also make a lot of noise when they get drunk . . . As if that was not bad enough, they walk around half-naked, in and around the flats.

The resident then went on to importune for a separation of living space for locals and foreigners:

Is it not possible to designate whole HDB blocks for the housing of foreign workers, rather than have them live beside families in the same block? I am not totally against foreign workers, as they contribute to Singapore’s economy, but when they destroy the ambience and threaten the security of the block, I hope that measures could be put in place to make my block a safer and more conducive place to live in.

Sensory demarcation of urban space then represents boundary-formation between ‘us’ citizens and ‘them’ foreigners. Sensory incorporation of these migrants is not possible given that they are perceived as inherently different from locals in terms of their sensory, moral, and sanitary ways of being. Foreign workers are perceived as laboring bodies in the main, and not as neighboring bodies. Migrant mobilities thus provoke a reconstruction of urban spaces because of increasing contestation between different segments of a population (Bridge & Watson, 2000).

Apart from the views of residents, it is also pertinent to look into what foreign workers have to say about the charges laid on their (sensory) conduct. Says Alauddin, a foreman working in a shipyard company who comes from Bangladesh (‘I feel lucky’, 2008):

I feel lucky to be working in such a nice country with nice people . . . Some . . . foreign workers have bad habits. They drink too much and don't care about others. But I am not like that. I am a Muslim, so I don't drink. I also don't go to void decks to make noise.

Another foreign worker, Wichaya from Thailand who works as a house painter, is also pursuing a university degree through distance learning. Living in the red-light district of Geylang where he shares a walk-up flat with 24 other Thai and Indian workers, Wichaya mentions that instead of being intrigued by the temptations of his neighborhood, he and his flatmates would rather get together to share rice whisky and home-cooked food 'laid out on newspapers on the floor and . . . chit-chat late into the night' ('We're not all drinkers', 2006). Documenting these home parties through photos, Wichaya remarks: 'I want to show a bit about Thai life in Singapore. People think Thai men all drinkers only, Thai women all prostitutes. But there are good people also. Not all bad'.

The responses of foreigners such as Alauddin and Wichaya indicate a re-assertion of their individual identities vis-à-vis nationality, religion, culture, and occupation that needed to be distinguished from those who were often chastised for poor conduct. In effect, their clarification also stands as a rejection of undesirable sensory behavior of their fellow countrymen and/or other foreigners. It is clear that sociocultural/sensory differentiation need also to be taken into consideration, and how heterogeneous categories of foreign bodies subscribe to different sensory scripts as transnational bodies in Singapore. Meanings of space – be it in the public (void decks) or private (flatshare) domains – in urbanity therefore reflect upon crucial differences in sensory behavior that add to the complexity of appraising the everyday politics of urban living.

### **Disciplining sensory misconduct through the senses**

While Singapore is a global city that experiences immense traffic in the form of human flows and others, spatial boundaries that are expressed vis-à-vis sensory judgments are still very much evident in everyday experiences. The fluidity with which people of a wide-ranging scope of nationalities inhabit neighborhoods does not necessarily translate into urban spaces that are harmoniously shared nor clearly demarcated. As a result, sensory disharmony arises and, as mentioned, sensory regulation is put in place to mitigate or remove transgressions. For instance, the use of light has been featured in recent media reports, employed as a visual tool for the dark alleys in Geylang, famous as a red-light district that usually attracted streetwalkers and foreign workers, which was effective as they no longer hung out at these alleys. Minister of Parliament, Dr. Fatimah Lateef was responsible for Geylang's 'light-up campaign' ('Bright idea', 2009). Lateef believed that 'to effectively drive out sleaze, you will need not just bright lights but a tempo of activities too'. Visual regulation came in the form of '96 new lamp posts installed in those alleys', and activities such as line-dancing have been encouraged by Lateef to her residents so as to occupy these alleys and eliminate foreign presences. In an earlier report, residents have also banded together to 'deny prostitutes the space to operate and claim back territory' ('Geylang residents', 2008). Residents have also thrown parties and organized other community events such as a lion dance performance in their bid to 'keep prostitutes in their space' instead of filtering out to residential areas.

Collectively, these methods of sensory controls represent a ‘ring-fencing strategy’ (‘Geylang residents’, 2008) which differentiated residential spaces from non-residential spaces that foreigners such as prostitutes ought to be occupying. This renders a distinction not only in spatial terms, but in community and moral manners that have been achieved through the employment of the senses and accompanying embodied methods. One resident who was interviewed for her response to the new lighting, said: ‘You don’t have to be scared. Without the lights, you always have to look behind you.’ In sum, sensory excess or disturbances were in effect, extirpated through the use of sensory modalities including the visual (light), the sonic (sounds and noises from activities), and the embodied presence of people engaging in such activities. Only through such sensuous disciplining can cleanliness – in both literal and moral ways – be made ‘visible’ (Low, 2009). In other words, sensory policing is correspondingly indicative of moral and sanitary policing. Such forms of policing are put in place so as to handle sensory violations of cultural expectations towards restoring sensory order.

In the event where removal of such sensory defilement is not immediately possible, individual residents have also ‘blocked out’ foreign sensory conduct as follows: ‘An Indian resident said that she kept her door and windows shut on Sunday evenings to block out the noise. Others said they made sure that their children remained indoors when the foreign workers gathered in the area’ (‘Noise and crowds’, 1991). These responses came from residents living in Little India reacting to the throngs of Indian foreign workers who congregate there on the weekends. These workers have been identified as encroaching on residential spaces: ‘The men sit on the staircase [outside our flat], and then recently they started coming up and walking along the corridor . . . They even come upstairs to pass urine, and every Monday it’s really smelly’. In connection to the earlier discussion on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, blocking out foreign sensory conduct also indicates how such marginalization does not exist in a social or spatial vacuum (Rigg & Wong, 2011). Instead, the ‘patterning of exclusion in each urban context requires us to relationally “place” the migrant’ (Rigg & Wong, 2011, pp. 23–24), as the above examples reflect. ‘Placing’ the migrant and his/her sensory conduct is therefore exemplary of the maintenance of both physical and social distance (compare Manalansan, 2006).

### Concluding remarks

Research on urban-migrant experiences needs to take sensory encounters into consideration as a central part of these social processes. The case studies demonstrate that colonial and postcolonial migratory flows impact upon urban environments in sensory and moral ways. City living is about (disciplining and regulating) embodied encounters taking place within the landscape of multi-sensual urbanism that denote space in sensorially differentiated ways. In such spaces, migrant sensory behavior becomes a source of unsavory sensescapes, for which residents’ sensory relationship to the city, or more specifically, to their zones of residence, requires ‘protection’ from migrant sensory overload. This is because differences in city life are expressed not only through social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Bridge & Watson, 2000), but also, as addressed in this paper, through sensory aspects. Urry rightly points out that ‘[i]nvolving the senses challenges much of our understanding of city life’ (2000, p. 395). The local-migrant relationship in urban Singapore is thus further analyzed

through embodied aspects, throwing light on everyday instances of how migrant mobilities and presences are regarded. Migrant bodies are not merely disciplined through legislative and economic regulations, but the responses of the locals indicate that such bodies also need to be regulated in terms of their sensory (mis)conduct.

In doing so, communities of locals and of foreigners are formulated, to borrow Gupta and Ferguson's (1997, p. 13) words, through the 'various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness' with respect to place. Such 'otherness' also represents a relationship of moral, social, and economic asymmetry that is evident in local-foreign encounters. By considering both historical and contemporary transnationalism, the discussion and analyses herein contribute to further understandings on urbanity, migration, and sensory studies with close attention paid to the ethnographic character of urban life. The symbolic role of the senses relates to expressions of community dynamics or social coding of citizens versus foreigners, and in turn brings about a spatial logic of discrimination that reflects upon sensory territorialization. Urban relations of discrimination and exclusion therefore emerge through the confluences of different sensory scripts that are adhered to by different categories of locals and foreigners.

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### Note

1. 'HDB' stands for Housing Development Board, with reference to government public housing.

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