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**Making and Unmaking Difference: A Study of  
Expatriate Women's Relationships with Domestic  
Workers in Singapore**

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**Doctor of Philosophy  
(Migration Studies)**

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**[September 2013]**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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**Submitted for D.Phil in Migration Studies**

**Making and Unmaking Difference: A Study of Expatriate Women's Relationship  
with Domestic Workers in Singapore**

**Summary**

This thesis is based upon ethnographic research conducted in Singapore between September 2008 and October 2009 and over a decade of observation and experience as an expatriate woman. It explores the *relationship* between two migrant women, an expatriate woman and a migrant domestic worker (MDW), focusing on interrelated processes shaping migrant subjectivities. The relationship between 'upper circuit' transnational elites and 'lower circuit' migrants is an area of transnationalism that has received little attention. Yet, expatriates and MDWs routinely live together. I consider how overlapping transnational fields impact how both groups of women deal with class, racial and cultural differences and how they negotiate versions of femininity in their domestic interactions. I argue that the women's dual migrant status renders visible coexisting and competing forms of power that are often overlooked in studies of domestic work. A crucial aspect of my research design is that I include the perspectives of both expatriate women and MDWs as well as those of expatriate men. Most studies of domestic work focus on either the employer's (usually female) or the employee's (usually female) viewpoint and overlook male influence on household dynamics and the shaping of domestic femininities. My approach allows for a richer analysis of how class, racial/ethnic and sexual positionings (among others) both motivate and constrain how individuals identify themselves vis-à-vis 'others' across national, racial, class and cultural divides.

My findings are organised along four dimensions. First, I examine how shared migrant status is utilised by expatriate women and MDWs in their respective distance-making processes. Second, I explain how through performing domestic labour both groups of women are 'doing' different versions of femininity that are simultaneously accomplishments of class and racial identities. Third, I focus on how sexualised and racialised discourses about migrant women's bodies permeate expatriate women's and MDWs' relationships. Finally, I link my study of the micro-politics of migrant women's relationships with the larger context of increasing transnational migration and globalisation.

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## **Abbreviations**

AWA	American Women's Association
ANZA	Australian New Zealand Association
BA	British Association
DP	Dependant Pass
EP	Employment Pass
FDWP	Foreign Domestic Worker Permit
MDW	Migrant Domestic Worker
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
PR	Permanent Resident
TWC2	Transient Workers Count Too
WSN	Women's Social Network

## Currency Conversions

As of March 2013

British Pound to Singapore Dollar	GBP 1.00 = SGD 1.965
Singapore Dollar to British Pound	SGD 1.00 = GBP 0.509
Euro to Singapore Dollar	EUR 1.00 = SGD 1.644
Singapore Dollar to Euro	SGD 1.00 = EUR 0.608
United States Dollar to Singapore Dollar	USD 1.00 = SGD 1.254
Singapore Dollar to United States Dollar	SGD 1.00 = USD 0.797

## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale

*Sarah was born in 1980 in a village in Luzon, Philippines. Her parents owned a farm but their income was insufficient to meet their family's needs. To assuage her family's financial difficulties, Sarah came to Singapore to work as a domestic worker for a Chinese Singaporean family. After paying her debts to employment agencies, Sarah sent most of her earnings home. Over the years, she had paid for her younger brothers' educations as well as for mobile phones and motorcycles managing to save little for herself. Although the employment agency fees for transferring employers had been over three months' salary, she considered herself 'lucky' to now work for an American expatriate family who she said was less 'strict' and who gave her every Sunday off work. Her sister was now also working in Singapore and was contributing to supporting the family; although she sent less money to their parents because she had her own son to support. Sarah loved fashion and dreamed of having her own clothing store. When I met Sarah family emergencies had prevented her from saving much money. Nevertheless, she felt 'old' and her mother thought it was time that she come home to get married. Sarah speculated that she would probably need to return to Singapore to work in the near future but had conceded that her mother was right; she was planning to quit her job in six months' time.*

*Mandy was born in Tulsa USA in 1974. She met her husband Todd at university and worked as an elementary school teacher, switching to substitute teaching when their first child was born. Todd worked in manufacturing and when an opportunity arose for him to transfer to his company's head office in Peoria the family relocated to Illinois. Mandy was pregnant at the time and took a break from teaching to focus on settling into a new community. When their second child started school, Mandy returned to teaching. Unexpectedly, Todd was nominated to head a project in Singapore. The job was a promotion and was 'only' for 3 years. Mandy and Todd had never lived overseas although they had been to the Caribbean several times. Mandy explained that they had decided that living in Asia would be a 'great experience' for their family. Initially, Mandy had thought that she might continue working in Singapore but the American School did not have any vacancies and her migration status as a 'dependant' did not permit her to find work elsewhere. Mandy found adjusting to Singapore challenging and reluctantly decided to hire a 'maid' from an employment agency that her Australian neighbour recommended to make her daily routine easier by doing household cleaning, grocery shopping, most cooking and some babysitting. Mandy said at first she was uncomfortable having someone on call 24/7 but now understood why so many expatriates believed that employing a 'maid' was essential—she provided leisure time for Mandy and helped to make the home an orderly sanctuary from work for Todd.*

As Sarah's and Mandy's stories intimate, Singapore is heavily reliant on both 'skilled' and 'unskilled' migrant labour. The relationship between what Yeoh et al. (Yeoh, Charney and Kiong 2003:5) refer to as 'upper circuit' transnational elites (i.e. highly-skilled professional, managerial and entrepreneurial workers) and 'lower circuit' migrants (i.e. construction workers, domestic workers and other low paid workers) is an area of transnationalism that has received little attention. Yet, expatriates and migrant domestic workers (MDWs) routinely live together and experience similar tensions as a result of being migrants. Both groups are transnational subjects who live in, and connect with, several communities simultaneously, both at 'home' and 'away'; their identities and performances are not limited by location (Leonard 2008:47). In this interplay of the multiple sites of migrants' lives, especially fluid forms of subject positions and states of 'between-ness' may be created (Lawson 2000). For example, a MDW who is categorised by Singapore migration policy as 'unskilled' might have been a pharmacologist in the Philippines and is now a landlord as a result of working overseas as a MDW. Or an expatriate woman who is classified as a 'dependant' might have been a physician in France and is now an 'expat wife' in Singapore who fundraises for an orphanage in Cambodia or she might have been a 'stay at home mom' in Australia who managed the local Saturday farmer's market but who lacks any professional qualifications and would be classified as 'unskilled' by Singapore migration authorities. Far from conceptualising identity as fixed and immutable therefore, the approach adopted here acknowledges this fluidity of identities and meanings, and that place and space are highly implicated in their productions (Massey 1999; Silvey and Lawson 1999).

Clearly, however, the freedom to make identity choices in different places is constrained by the power geometries at play across different global spaces (Massey 1993). For many expatriate women being shown a 'maid's room' is their first exposure to social boundaries and inequalities that many perceive as alien and serves as a starting point from which they begin to conceptualise differences between migrant women. Racialised and class boundaries are constructed and reproduced through the application of norms, etiquette and spatial rules that orchestrate personal interaction (Glenn 2002:12). Apartments and houses generally have a 'maid's room' located near the kitchen with an adjacent toilet, basic shower and sink for MDW's use.<sup>1</sup> These spartan rooms, normally just large enough for a single bed mattress, usually with

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<sup>1</sup>These areas often appear in floor plans as 'yards' or 'household shelters'. See Appendix Four.

barred windows and no air-conditioning are designed to contrast sharply with the rest of the home. The two migrant women's experience of residential space illustrates the major condition of their relationship: MDWs work and live under the jurisdiction of employers. This requirement is emphasised in countless procedural and informal ways such as when an employer, not her MDW, receives a copy of the MDW's mandatory six month medical check-up, or when condominium rules prohibit MDWs from using swimming pools or other facilities or when a passerby or neighbour chides an employer about her MDW's behaviour, clothing or demeanour and insists 'you should control your maid better.'

Globalisation in Singapore brings together the lives of Sarah and Mandy, along with those of many other women from different countries and diverse backgrounds. There are 203,000 MDWs primarily from the Philippines and Indonesia working in Singapore (Transient Workers Count Too 2012); all are women. Officially, they range in age from 23 to 52.<sup>2</sup> Some are university graduates; others have little formal education. Some come from major cities; others from tiny villages. MDWs work overseas to escape poverty and stress at home; they also embark on a journey to expand life horizons. Employing a live-in MDW is commonplace in Singapore and affordable for many expatriates. The Western expatriate women I spoke with ranged in age from 20s to 70s with the majority in their 30s and 40s. They came from urban and rural backgrounds; some had lived in multiple countries, some had never been overseas before relocating to Singapore. The vast majority had no previous experience employing a live-in domestic worker. These women had varied professional backgrounds: nurses, teachers, human resources, psychologists etc., but overwhelmingly they had not been their household's primary earner prior to relocation. The majority of expatriate women relocated to Singapore because of their husbands' careers in industries such as finance, manufacturing, oil, technology, education and biotechnology.<sup>3</sup>

The central theoretical issue addressed by any study of domestic employment relationships is how to conceptualise the relationship between women on either side of the labour question. I focus on how the overlapping transnational fields of expatriate women and MDWs impact how both groups of women perceive, deal with and manage class, racial, cultural

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<sup>2</sup>There are frequent cases of underage women, particularly from Indonesia, with incorrect documentation working as MDWs.

<sup>3</sup>Homosexual and unmarried couples are not given the same legal status as married heterosexual couples. Singapore's preference for heterosexual married couples is explained in Chapter Four.

and legal inequalities and how gender identities mediate these tensions in their daily domestic interactions. Domestic employment has historically brought members of different ethnicities, classes, and nationalities together within the private spheres of the dominant socio-economic group (e.g. Gill 1994; Ozyegin 2001). Today, however:

‘...in an intensely connected world, globalisation processes at the transnational scale have strengthened the claims of powerful actors (such as global corporations, global financial markets and international institutions), often at the expense of the vulnerable, including the poor, women and minorities who find themselves pushed into casualised and flexibilised work such as transnational domestic work’ (Yeoh, Huang and Rahman 2005:14).

The increased commodification and globalisation of domestic work have enhanced axes of asymmetry—primarily race, nationality and class—in intersection with gender (Lan 2006:9). Colen (1990) contends that ‘globally, household work emerges from, reflects, and reinforces some combination of hierarchical relationships of class, gender, race/ethnicity, migration and/or age’ (1990:90). I maintain that most expatriates’ newness to and often conflicting feelings about participating in an extremely hierarchical domestic employment relationship present a vantage point for examining how differences between two groups of migrant women are constructed.

My study is unusual because both employer and employee are migrants, positioned differently in the global economy, but nonetheless both are transnationals situated amid the increasingly accentuated hierarchies of nationality, class and gender that Lan (2006), Colen (1990) and Yeoh et al. (2005) identify. Both migrant women construct identities in a host country while simultaneously ‘back-linking’ with their country of origin whether this is in terms of rituals, practices and values, relationships and family ties or even in the ‘idea’ of the country that is carried overseas (Thapan 2005:15). However, the fluidity of migrant identities is regulated and structured to a certain extent by the state and other social institutions (ibid). I explore how in the context of larger structures and institutions such as the state, patriarchy and family which impinge on their everyday personal experience, these different migrant women who reside together draw on their relationship with each other in defining and (re)constructing their respective identities.

This employment relationship compels attention because it is not only personal or even country specific but the outcome of much larger global social, economic and political processes

(Dickey and Adams 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2001a, 2008a). A growing number of Westerners are migrating to Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Lan 2011) initiating interactions between women previously separated by boundaries of nationality, class and culture. Hansen (2000) argues that ‘the problematic of domestic service does not arise where it is most obviously looked for: in the private household but is deeply embedded in local and worldwide economic and political inequality’ (2000:286). Building on Hansen’s analysis, I assert that a transnational domestic employment context in which differential rights are assigned to different categories of migrants magnifies issues of racial, class and geographic inequality.

In Singapore, both groups of migrant women are minorities (racial/ethnic and/or cultural and national) and members of the subordinate gender, albeit differently positioned. I argue that the women’s dual migrant status renders visible coexisting and competing forms of power that may be overlooked or are not present in relationships in which the employer is a national of the country in which employment takes place. I contend that seemingly mundane daily household relationships embody social practices and discourses and that these shape both groups of migrant women’s lives in ways that inflect their experiences of work, class, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality and community. While MDWs’ marginal legal and social position is much more pronounced and overt, the status of most expatriate women is also subsidiary. For a variety of reasons which I explain in Chapter Four, many expatriate women do not engage in full-time employment and are classified as ‘dependants’ of their Employment Pass holding husbands. As ‘dependants’ they are subject to restrictions that circumscribe their legal agency. I assert that expatriate women’s increased dependency on husbands impacts their identity construction and relationship dynamics not just with husbands but with MDWs.

In the following sections I argue that there is not yet sufficient theorisation about the relationship between two migrant groups whose close interactions can yield insight into the negotiation of boundaries and the formation of gender, ethnic/racial, class and cultural identities. In the first section I contend that bringing expatriate employers and MDWs into a single frame of analysis addresses a gap between sets of literature that separately study MDWs and expatriate women without exploring the significance of their relationship in relational identity processes. Domestic work is the anchor of the women’s relationship—without the domestic employment

relationship there is no relationship—and the household is its primary setting. Therefore, in the second section I clarify how I approach ‘domestic work’ and explore dichotomies frequently drawn between private/public and labour/love. In the conclusion I summarise my central arguments and list my primary research questions. Finally, I provide an outline of the remainder of this thesis.

## **1.2 Bringing expatriate women and MDWs into the same frame of analysis**

Expatriates are not hermetically sealed from their surroundings. As Beaverstock (2011) notes: ‘Even the “talented” expatriate has to survive the rigours of everyday life in a foreign place’ (2011:710). Expatriate literature has insightfully examined how expatriates’ construction, maintenance, and transgression of boundaries characterises their relations with nationals in destination countries (Beaverstock 2002, 2011; Fechter 2007; Leonard 2008, 2010; Walsh 2005). In practice in Singapore, as in Hong Kong, this often entails expatriates learning how to navigate around ‘foreign elements’ (Knowles 2005:94). Expatriates tend to be concentrated in certain areas of Singapore and even in specific apartment complexes and shopping malls (Beaverstock 2002). Expatriate boundary making practices often aim to produce social distance between expatriates and locals (Fechter 2007b:61). Expatriates often bemoaned living in a ‘*bubble*’ or ‘*gilded cage*’ in which daily activities and social contacts were narrowly circumscribed within the expatriate community but, tellingly, usually made little effort to broaden their experiences. Expatriate ‘advice’ literature, expatriate women’s organisations, and relocation specialists provide information on adjusting to expatriate life in Singapore (i.e. where to find Western products, where Westerners and even particular nationalities tend to live, which schools particular nationalities attend, which medical clinics and dentists cater to expatriates). Taking a step back, it becomes apparent that none of this information is about living in Singapore per se but rather about navigating around Singapore and Singaporeans.

However, there is one foreigner, the ‘maid’ or ‘helper’, who is implicitly included in the expatriate ‘bubble’ albeit not as an equal participant—so much so that she is rarely mentioned as more than an enabler of expatriates’ lifestyle enhancement. This is many expatriate women’s closest relationship with a non-Westerner but it has been largely overlooked. Expatriate literature’s treatment of the presence of MDWs in expatriate homes in Southeast Asia and the Middle East is usually cursory. Despite their ubiquity in places like Singapore, Dubai and Hong

Kong, MDWs are not even considered in human resources literature examining the process of adjustment undergone in overseas relocation (e.g. Schell and Solomon 1997; Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley and Luk 2001). Yet, the amount of time expatriate women spend talking about MDWs strongly suggests that the relationship is an important part of their migratory experience. Glimpses such as that provided by Walsh (2008) in her account of how MDWs are included in expatriate women's 'surrogate' families in the absence of husbands and relatives support this contention (2008:75). Pascoe (2003) who has written several 'advice' books on aspects of international relocation, for example, indicates a powerful relationship when she cautions that while relocation to certain countries offers the opportunity to employ live-in help: 'there's not a woman I've met who didn't have a power struggle with a helper at some point' (2003:133) but she does not elaborate on relationship dynamics.

Likewise, studies of domestic workers overlook the relationship dynamics of when both an employer and employee are foreigners in a host country. Numerous studies focus on MDWs' transnational experiences (e.g. Anggraeni 2006; Asis, Huang and Yeoh 2004; Ball and Piper 2002; Chang 2000; Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Chin 1997, 1998; Constable 1997; Gamburd 2000; Huang, Yeoh and Rahman 2005; Parreñas 2001a, 2008a). Authors explain why women feel compelled by economic need, family pressures, gender role or class position to seek work overseas in an occupation that is often difficult, degrading and highly stigmatised. However, employers tend to be mentioned only through descriptions of rules and disciplinary regimes. A multifaceted portrait of relationship dynamics is lacking in most studies.

A crucial aspect of my research design is that I incorporate the perspectives of both expatriate employers and MDWs. Most literature about domestic work is based only on interviews with domestic workers. Studies that consider the viewpoint of both employer and employee are relatively rare. Pioneer studies were conducted by Rollins (1985) and Cock (1989); Rollins (1985) juxtaposed the expectations of workers with those of female employers in the US and Cock (1989) compared how female employers and domestic workers in apartheid era South Africa evaluated their relationship. While located between nationals of the same country, these studies are informative examples of how issues of race and class in intersection with gender roles are perceived differently by both women. Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2007) analysis of relationship dynamics between employers in Los Angeles and domestic workers is

exceptional in juxtaposing employers' and employees' views of each other and their different expectations of proximity and distance.

Advancing integrated employer/domestic worker studies, Lan (2003, 2006) provides a rich account of how economic disparities, immigration policies, race/ethnicity and gender interconnect in the relationship between MDWs and their Taiwanese employers. Lan's (2006) research demonstrates how juxtapositions of class, nationality and ethnicity in the domestic space inform employers' and MDWs' subjectivities. Lan (2006) pays particular attention to how the women she studies identify themselves in relation to 'others'—whether they be of different classes, nationalities, ethnicities or educational levels. In order to demonstrate contrasts as well as similarities between migrant groups, I will present my analysis with a twin-track comparison between expatriate women and MDWs, at times incorporating the perspectives of expatriate men.

A burgeoning ethnographic literature focuses on the lives of MDWs in specific Asian countries.<sup>4</sup> These studies explore how intra-Asia migration creates and consolidates inequalities among Asian women (Huang, Yeoh and Rahman 2005). In a similar vein, my study considers how differences are consolidated between different 'types' of minority migrant women—one Southeast Asian and one Western and generally white—in the context of Singapore's majority ethnic Chinese society.<sup>5</sup> I explore how expatriate women's and MDWs' respective experiences of intra-Asian and extra-Asian migration influence their relationship dynamics. White women's experience of racialisation as a result of migrating to Asia is a relatively new area of study (Leonard 2008, 2010; Willis and Yeoh 2002, 2008). I investigate how expatriate women's experience of racialisation is influenced by living with an Asian MDW.

In her PhD thesis on expatriates and Indonesian MDWs in Singapore, Rosslyn von der Borch (2006) placed the reflections of a small group of MDWs and expatriate employers within Singapore's broader 'maid culture'. My focus is different; I do not discuss instances of MDW physical abuse, MDWs' experiences with recruitment agencies in their home countries or evaluate Singaporean or expatriate employment practices. These issues are certainly important

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<sup>4</sup>For example, studies have been conducted on MDWs in Hong Kong (Constable 1997; Wee and Sim 2005); Singapore (Gee and Ho 2006; Huang and Yeoh 1996; Stevens 2007; Yeoh and Huang 2000, 2004a, 2010); Malaysia (Chin 1998); Taiwan (Lan 2006); Thailand (Toyota 2005); and India (Raghrum 2005).

<sup>5</sup>The government of Singapore classifies citizens and PRs by ethnicity: Chinese; Indian; Malay; Other. Those identifying as Chinese form 74% of the population (Statistics Singapore Census of Population 2010)

but have been explored elsewhere (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2005; Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005). I am interested in how expatriate women's and MDWs' mutual status as migrants influences issues of identity and power in their relationship.

### **1.3 Locating both migrant women in the home**

The persistence of the ideology of women's domesticity, in the labour market, in the family, and in migrant communities shapes women's experiences of migration across barriers of class, race and nationality (Parreñas 2008a:9). Immigration policies are imbued with value judgements based on stereotypical gender roles in societies and these stereotypes are embedded in administrative practices concerning the control of migration flows (Sobritchea 2007:178). Thus gendered occupational stereotypes are perpetuated by immigration policies that stipulate that migrant women perform 'women specific tasks'; examples of which include domestic work and nursing (Huang, Yeoh and Rahman 2005; Mukhopadhyay 2006; UN Development Fund for Women 2005b). Singapore's immigration policies facilitate both groups of migrant women assuming highly gendered roles (Silvey 2006:71). For example, only foreign women (not men) are eligible to work as MDWs and, until 1999, it was assumed that all non-working accompanying spouses were wives as it was not possible for a woman primary earner to sponsor a 'dependant' husband (Ng 2005:102).

Scholars have written extensively about how Singapore's gendered migration and labour policies are entrenched in the daily experiences of MDWs (Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007; Huang and Yeoh 1996; Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005; Yeoh 2006; Yeoh and Huang 2010, 2000, 1998a, 1998b). At the other end of the migration spectrum, Yeoh and Khoo (1998) explored how Singapore's migration and labour policies act as barriers for expatriate women seeking employment. Western expatriate women's migration is often framed within the ideology of women's domesticity with husbands' occupations usually precipitating relocation (Beaverstock 2002; Coles and Fechter 2008; Hardill 2002; Willis and Yeoh 2002).<sup>6</sup> Within most expatriate households there is a sharpened gendered division between productive and reproductive labour (Fechter 2007a; Hardill 2002; Leonard 2010).

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<sup>6</sup>As Fechter (2008) observes there are an increasing number of women in their late twenties and early thirties who seek to work overseas for international experience. Of course, there is also a minority of older married women whose careers provide the impetus for family relocation. Still, the number of professional women pursuing international careers remains considerably lower than is the case with male professionals (Andresen, Hristozova and Lieberum 2006:143).

Like privileged women throughout the world, many expatriate women delegate reproductive labour to less privileged women of a different class, race/ethnicity and/or nationality (Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Hansen 1989; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, Lan 2006; Oishi 2005). However, unlike most middle and upper-middle class women who work full-time outside the home and delegate cleaning and childcare, many expatriate women do not work outside the home. It is in this context of primarily non-employed female employers and MDWs that I consider the relative meanings and values that both groups of women attach to being perceived as 'working' or as productive beings and explore the strategies both groups of women employ to validate their domestic labour.

#### **1.4 Defining domestic labour**

Domestic labour has been a central issue for Western feminists since the 1960s because it has been 'primarily and sometimes solely' associated with being performed by women (Yeoh, Huang and Rahman 2005:1). What exactly constitutes 'domestic labour' is difficult to define. Anderson (2000) suggests that 'rather than a series of tasks, domestic labour is better perceived as a series of processes, of tasks inextricably linked, operating at the same time' (2000:11). Does it encompass walking the dog, helping with a child's homework, washing the kitchen floor and cooking? Our understanding of domestic labour is further complicated when we ask is reading a bedtime story, scrubbing the bathtub or taking the garbage out market or non-market activity? Is this labour a commodity or not? Who performs the labour? Is it paid or unpaid? Does its location in the home inform our characterisation? Whether these activities are viewed as a commodity is contextual, not activity based.

The notion of 'work' as something set apart from the rest of life is a peculiarly modern and Western idea (Daniels 1987; Nippert-Eng 1995; Pateman 1988). In modern industrialised society, the commonsense understanding of 'work' is something we do for which we get paid (Daniels 1987:403). Daniels (1987) argues that 'any recognition of an activity as work gives it a moral force and dignity—something of importance in society...payment signals the belief that somehow society needs something to be done' (1987:404). This understanding is associated with activity in public labour markets as opposed to activities in the private home and personal relationships. Feminist scholars have long highlighted the gender division between public and private spheres, with the first reserved for men and the second for women (Davidoff and Hall

1987). The home was constructed as an idealised centre for emotional life, in contrast to the capitalist economy, in which the burden for caring for and nurturing others was placed on women who were constructed as innately domestic rather than as workers (McDowell 1999:76). Because housekeeping was seen as relying on women's 'natural' skills and was unpaid, it was correspondingly devalued (McDowell 1999:73).

While lip service is paid to the importance of work outside the market economy, it is clear that work in the private sphere is conventionally regarded as less important (Lutz 2007:187-89). Since housewives traditionally did domestic work for no pay, domestic work is viewed as having little economic value. Because of its association with unpaid domestic work paid domestic work is devalued and denied the benefits of labour law (Silbaugh 2005:366). Huang and Yeoh (1996) argue that the Singapore government's refusal to accord MDWs the same protection under the Employment Act as other employees disregards both the domestic worker as a 'real' employee and the realm of domestic work as 'real' work (1996:486). Singapore's regulatory stance is not unique; in the US, for example, domestic workers are exempted from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), Occupational and Safety Health Act and to some extent almost all workers compensation statutes (Silbaugh 2005:364). Refusals to regulate domestic work are based 'on public policy grounds' and hesitancy to interfere with 'private' domestic arrangements (Banks 2003:123).

This refusal to view paid domestic work as 'real' work further obscures domestic labour that is unpaid (Boris and Parreñas 2010:8-9; also Daniels 1987:406). Marxist inspired feminists helped render domestic work theoretically visible by arguing that domestic work produces labour power itself which is essential to the reproduction of the capitalist economy (Silbaugh 2005:338). Reproductive labour is the work of sustaining the productive workforce (Glenn 1992:4). Reproductive labour is 'invisible labour' in part because much of it is difficult to conceptualise in market terms (Daniels 1987:406). Illich (1981) uses the term 'shadow work' to refer to that 'form of unpaid work which industrial society demands as a necessary component to the production of goods and services' (1981:99-100). This work includes caring, feeding,

teaching and nurturing individuals so that they may have the facilities and abilities to be productive in society (Glenn 1992; Parreñas 2008a).<sup>7</sup>

Domestic work includes multiple components that are often divided into two broad categories: subsistence or physical labour—maintaining household cleanliness (e.g. dusting, vacuuming, cleaning windows, doing laundry etc.) and social reproduction—socialising children, providing care and emotional support for adults and maintaining kin and community ties (Colen 1995; Devault 1999; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Lan 2003). Subsistence domestic labour is often diminished as ‘menial’ or ‘unskilled’ whereas labour associated with social reproduction is valued as ‘spiritual’ or as a ‘labour of love’ (Macdonald 1998). This stratification helps enable one class of women to enter the workforce and maintain their feminine domesticity by performing aspects of social reproduction while delegating other ‘menial’ aspects of domestic labour to another woman (Colen 1995; Glenn 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). Thus while women may perform the bulk of domestic labour their relationship to domestic work is different (Glenn 1992:28). Domestic labour is ‘accomplished differentially according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status and that are structured by social, economic, and political forces’ (Colen 1995:78).

However, these divisions are artificial because in practice ‘spiritual’ or care labour is often performed by hired workers (Macdonald 1998). Rather than conceptualise domestic work in the constructed oppositions of public/private and labour/love, I follow Nippert-Eng (1996) and Boris and Parreñas (2010) among others, in viewing the spectrum of domestic labour as a continuum. Nippert-Eng (1996) contends that: “‘Home’ and ‘work’ are inextricably, conceptually defined with and by each other’ (1996:4). She suggests that we see the variety of ways we conceptualise and juxtapose ‘home’ and ‘work’ as a continuum with structural continuities across the public/private divide rather than as dichotomous entities (Nippert-Eng 1996:5). A ‘home’ becomes a ‘public’ workplace for MDWs who are outsiders to the family. MDWs face dilemmas of how to perform their job and keep a certain social distance from their employers

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<sup>7</sup>A distinction is sometimes drawn between ‘work’ and ‘labour’. For Radin (1996) work is partially commodified but has a non-commodified aspect whereas labour is entirely commodified (Radin 1996:107). For workers ‘there is a non-market or non-monetized aspect of human interaction going on at the same time’ whereas ‘laborers are sellers: fully motivated by money, exhausting the value of their activity in the measure of its exchange value’ (1996:107). In my discussion I do not draw a distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’.

while living with their employers. Employers also struggle to maintain a degree of social distance. They want MDWs to care for their children or pets but they are uneasy about MDWs becoming too attached to their families.

In my analysis I argue that how the labour of various members of transnational households is valued and understood by household members informs the women's relationship dynamics. I consider how domestic work ideologies such as mothering and homemaking ideals, influence the gender and racial performances of both expatriate women and MDWs. For MDWs, mothering is often both an aspect of their job and a long-distance role within their own families. The emotional labour required of MDWs, expressing affection in childcare, for example, illustrates how gendered behavioural expectations in the private sphere are interconnected in a job description. Emotional labour, according to Hochschild (2003), refers to 'a form of face-to-face labour in which one displays certain emotions to induce particular feelings in another' (2003:11). Delegating care-giving tasks to a paid employee creates tensions because some care activities like bathing children, feeding children, or making coffee for a husband at breakfast could be constitutive of mothering or wifely roles but could also be part of a MDW's job. A commoditised form of domestic labour breaks down the distinction between home and workplace and the public and private spheres. What delineates the line between expatriate women as mothers and household managers and MDWs as not mothers (of their employers' children) and not household managers? In this thesis I argue that boundary work is a continual and often contested process.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This thesis investigates the relational processes through which expatriate women and MDWs negotiate and (re)construct their racial/ethnic, gender and class identities through their daily interactions. It illustrates that the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs is informed by government policies and social and cultural contexts that foster tensions along the axes of race, gender, class and nationality between differentially positioned categories of migrant women. It considers how class, national, racial and sexual positionings (among others) both motivate and constrain how individuals identify themselves vis-à-vis 'others' across racial/ethnic, class and cultural divides. Concentrating on the *relationship* between expatriate women and MDWs allows a focus on the mutual constructions of identity and especially on the

processes of differentiating self and other. This thesis explores how through performing domestic labour both expatriate women and MDWs are 'doing' different versions of femininity that are simultaneously accomplishments of class and racial identities. It investigates how ideals of 'good' mothering and nurturing practices are usually integral to the identities of women in both migrant groups, especially to women who have children. It explores how migration influences both groups of women's sense of appropriate roles and behaviours and how both groups of women draw comparisons between their own ideals and practices and those of the other group (as they perceive them) in constructing their own identities. It suggests that MDWs seem to simultaneously try to conform to ideal images of mothers and nurturers in their self portrayals and to challenge these ideological restraints.

Sexuality is an important component of both expatriate women's and MDWs' identities. Domestic work literature tends to focus on sexual stereotypes of MDWs, sexual abuse by male employers and on the legal restrictions host countries place on MDWs' sexual expression. The influence of competing discourses of feminine sexuality on domestic employment relationships is largely overlooked. I show that expatriate women's and MDWs' relationship is situated amid the fluid and contested terrain of sexualised discourses emerging from racial, national, class and gender differences. I explain how migrant women themselves utilise sexual stereotypes in negotiating difference. I argue that discourses about migrant women's sexuality and femininity influence how expatriate women and MDWs negotiate asymmetrical household relationships.

Most studies of domestic work overlook the primary earner's (usually male) influence on household dynamics and the shaping of domestic femininities. By incorporating the perspectives of expatriate men, my research addresses this gap. I contend that the particular characteristics of expatriate masculinity help sustain and maintain traditional gender roles. As Massey (1995) has argued, 'deeply internalised dualisms...structure personal identities and daily lives, which have effects upon the lives of others through structuring the operation of social relations and social dynamics, and which derive their masculine/feminine coding from the deep socio-philosophical underpinnings of western society' (1995: 492). Recognising that the socio-economic, spatial and cultural changes associated with migration place pressure on masculine identities (as well as on feminine identities) and that expatriate men participate directly and

indirectly in household dynamics allows for a richer examination of how gendered identities are lived and constructed in transnational households.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Singapore between September 2008 and October 2009 and over a decade of observation and experience as an expatriate woman in Singapore, I explore the following questions in this research:

- How do differential migratory processes influence relationships between different categories of migrant women? (Chapter Four)
- How does shared migrant status in Singapore influence expatriate women's and MDWs' processes of alignment and difference-making? (Chapter Five)
- How do MDWs and expatriate women negotiate their gender identities in response to the ideological constraints imposed by the continuum of domestic labour? What influence do expatriate men have over household dynamics and in the shaping of domestic femininities? (Chapter Six)
- What identity investments do both groups of women make in valuing and devaluing particular domestic duties and roles? (Chapter Six and Seven)
- How are expatriate women and MDWs 'doing' gender, class and race/ethnicity while they divide domestic labour? (Chapter Six and Seven)
- How are ideas of mothering and childcare impacted by both women's transnational positionality? How are quasi-familial relationships between expatriate women and MDWs influenced by their mutual transnational positionality? (Chapter Seven)
- How do discourses about migrant women's sexuality and femininity influence the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs? (Chapter Eight) The domestic employment relationship is characterised by its location in the emotionally

loaded private sphere; domestic work, therefore, is linked to intimacy and identity issues. I argue that these issues are magnified and have unique permutations when both employer and employee are migrant women in a host country. I suggest that the domestic employment relationship between two differentially situated migrant women produces a particularly clear context where uneven power relations and stratification reveal themselves. Focusing on the interrelated nature of expatriate women's and MDWs' experiences provides new insight into

how issues of power, gender, class, race/ethnicity and nationality are negotiated within and between migrant group categories.

## 1.6 Outline of thesis

**Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework** explains my intersectional theoretical approach. Gender relations are always mediated by other socially constructed categories such as race/ethnicity, class and nationality. Conceptualising these categories provides a framework for subsequent chapters' analyses of the strategies, principles and practices both migrant women use to create, to modify and maintain boundaries.

**Chapter Three: Methodology** explains my research methods, focus and scope. It reflects on my own positionality in relation to my research subject.

**Chapter Four: The Singapore Setting** situates my study in Singapore's socio-legal framework. It provides an essential framework for contextualising subsequent chapters' discussions of negotiations of gendered identities and household roles. It explains how Singapore's legal, political and social terrains operate to compel asymmetries of power favouring the constraints of particular gendered roles and preventing others. It illustrates how Singapore's differential migration system contributes to discourses about the relative worth of migrants engendering relations of inequality between women.

**Chapter Five: Constructing Difference** considers how their shared migrant status influences how expatriate women and MDWs frame their relationship. It illustrates that in making their respective evaluations of cultural alignment or distance in relation to each other and in relation to Singaporeans, both expatriates and MDWs draw on national, cultural and racial stereotypes. Despite conflicting perceptions of cultural alignment and distance in relation to each other, both groups of migrant women engage in parallel, sometimes intersecting, discourses producing a national and racial hierarchy of 'better' and 'worse' employers of MDWs. This chapter discusses how these discourses are employed to further different psychological and practical ends. It also argues that MDWs' greater experience in Singapore relative to newly arrived expatriates can lead to increased influence over working conditions and a more assertive role in relationship dynamics.

**Chapter Six: Interconnected Labour** explores how labour is variously valued and characterised by differentially positioned members of transnational households. It discusses

predominant gender roles among expatriates and associative labour practices illustrating expatriate men's influence over household dynamics and in the shaping of domestic femininities. It connects MDWs' much researched role as their families' primary earners (e.g. Anggraeni 2006; Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2005; Tyner 2009) with MDWs' previously unobserved tendency to indentify with expatriate, generally male, primary earners. It contends that this identification impacts their evaluations of household labour practices. It explores why expatriate primary earners generally fail to recognise parallels between their familial economic role and MDWs'.

**Chapter Seven: Mothering, Childcare and Quasi-Familial Relationships** examines a specific aspect of household labour; namely, childcare. It argues that 'mothering narratives' are used by expatriate women and MDWs to situate themselves in relation to 'home' norms, to their own migrant communities and to each other. It contends that for both women a function of narratives of 'good' mothering is to provide a socially acceptable voice for a more general set of dissatisfactions, insecurities and vulnerabilities produced by relocation. It argues that quasi-familial relationships between MDWs and expatriate women and their children are influenced by expatriates' awareness of shared transnational positionality.

**Chapter Eight: The Influence of Discourses about Migrant Women's Sexuality on Expatriate Women's and MDWs' Relationships** explores how racialised and sexualised discourses about groups of migrant women influence how expatriate women and MDWs perceive each other. It argues that when migrant women live together these discourses form part of the cultural context that impacts their relationship. It considers the strategies that both groups of women employ to counter negative aspects of stereotypes and to accentuate other aspects of stereotypes.

**Chapter Nine: Conclusion** returns to the initial aims of this study and draws together the issues and findings which were developed in previous chapters. It also suggests areas of study for further research.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Introduction

It is now widely accepted in the social sciences that ‘identities are complex, multiple and fluid, continuously (re) produced and performed in different arenas of everyday life’ (McDowell 2008:491). I adopt a social constructionist approach to qualitative inquiry. Social constructionism refers to ‘constructing knowledge about reality, not constructing reality itself’ (Shadish 1995:67). It assumes that our understandings are ‘contextually embedded, interpersonally forged, and necessarily limited’ (Neimeyer 1993:1-2). Meaning is derived within value frameworks not from objective ‘fact’ (Guba and Lincoln 1990:44). Identities are not objects but processes constituted in and through power relations (Brah and Phoenix 2004:77). The multiple dimensions of identity do not just intersect, they interact—we cannot understand how a specific aspect of identity is formed or experienced without simultaneously referring to other dimensions of identity (Holloway 2000:198). Gender, for example, operates at various levels at which it intersects with other aspects of identity such as class, ethnicity, race, nationality and sexuality to produce and reproduce an intricate web of inequalities between and among women and men (Marchand and Runyan 2000:8).

Gender, class and racial/ethnic differences are often closely associated with one another—so much so that subjective experiences of these tend to be inseparable (Sayer 2002:2.1). McDowell (2008) notes that the challenge for feminist researchers is ‘the theorization of the complex inequalities that result from connections between gender, class, ethnicity and other dimensions of identity in the making of subjects’ (2008:491). One way to articulate the need to take into account multiple levels of analysis without positioning oneself within a theoretical framework which might privilege gender over class or race over culture or nationality is an intersectional theoretical approach (Nash 2008:2). I believe an intersectional theoretical approach is crucial in order to capture the complexity of the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs in which axes of asymmetry—primarily gender, race, class and nationality— are continually (re)negotiated. In the first section of this chapter I explain my intersectional theoretical framework which I use in conceptualising the interrelationships of gender, class, ethnicity and other dimensions of identity such as nationality and what Ong (1996) terms

‘cultural citizenship’ (1996:738). In the following sections I elaborate on my analysis of these social categories.

## **2.2 Intersectional theory**

In recent years, intersectionality, the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, class, gender and sexuality, has come to be seen as a research paradigm for examining the intersections of an array of social divisions (Valentine 2007:10). As a theoretical tool, intersectionality underscores the ‘multi-dimensionality’ of marginalised subjects’ lives (Crenshaw 1989:139). When people are categorised as belonging to a particular race, gender, class, nation, age group or profession what is being talked about are social and economic locations, which at each historical moment, have particular implications vis-à-vis the grids of power relations in society (Yuval-Davis 2006b:199-200). The theory of intersectionality in research was developed by Crenshaw (1989) to problematise the law’s purported colour blindness by de-stabilising race/gender binaries to reveal the various ways race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s experiences. Crenshaw (1989) illustrated that studying multiple interlocking categories of experience is crucial to explaining inequalities. As a way of conceptualising identity, intersectionality provides a vocabulary for exposing intra-group differences; for example, destabilising the notion of a universal ‘woman’ by showing that ‘woman’ is itself contested and fractured terrain (Nash 2008:3).

Despite the emergence of intersectionality as a major research paradigm there has been confusion about what intersectionality means in practice (Choo and Ferree 2010). This relative uncertainty has been explained by the difficulty of crafting a method attentive to ‘the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis’ (McCall 2005:1772). Yet, despite this difficulty, some scholars have developed intersectional methodologies. I have adopted the approach favoured by McCall (2005) called ‘inter-categorical complexity’ which compels researchers to ‘provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions’ (2005:1773). This methodological approach ‘...begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of the analysis’ (McCall

2005:1784-85). 'Inter-categorical complexity' highlights dynamic forces more than categories—racialisation rather than races, economic exploitation rather than classes, gendering and gender performance rather than genders—and recognises the distinctiveness of how power operates across particular institutional fields (Glenn 1999). Yuval-Davis (2006a) argues that the strength of this methodology is that it illustrates that 'social divisions are about macro axes of social power but also involve actual concrete people' (2006a:198).

However, its downside is that it employs the very categories or cumulative approaches to identity (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, class etc.) that intersectionality works to disrupt (Nash 2008:6). Intersectionality struggles with questions like: do marginal subjects use multiple identities to interpret the social world or is one identity in the foreground? (Collins 2000:299). Some scholars have criticised intersectional methodology for underscoring the ways patriarchy, racism and heterosexism buttress each other but ignoring the ways in which subjects might be both victimised by patriarchy and privileged by race or in which subjects might take some pleasure in patriarchal power (Nash 2008; Wacquant 1997). Understanding the conflicting dimensions of inequality also demands studying the unmarked categories where power and privilege 'cluster' (Choo and Ferree 2010:133) such as masculinity (Connell 1995) and whiteness (Frankenberg 1993). In a critique of black studies' tendency to elide differences among blacks, Walcott (2005) suggests that intersectionality abandon 'a regime that trades on myths of homogeneity' and consider differences, for example, conceptualising black womanhood as its own 'contested messy terrain'; in this way intersectionality 'can consider differences between black women, producing a potentially uncomfortable disunity that allows for a richer and more robust conception of identity' (2005:93). In my analysis of social interactions I have tried to consider social categories as social processes which inform each other but which operate in distinct and particular ways.

Intersectionality acknowledges that place and space are highly implicated in the production of identities and meanings (Yuval-Davis 2006a; Valentine 2007). Constructions of social difference—whether based on race, class, nationality or gender—are produced and maintained through practices that operate at and across different spatial scales (McDowell 2008:496). Pratt and Hanson (1994) contend that understanding the spatiality of social life—"the ways that places can veil or heighten awareness of differences and varying axes of

difference’—provides vantage points from which to see certain aspects of identity and social difference (1994:8). I argue that the transnational relationship between expatriate women and MDWs provides such a vantage point. Throughout this thesis, different spatial scales are linked to the construction of identities.

One of the issues in the literature on intersectionality is how many social divisions are involved and which ones should be incorporated into the analysis of the intersectionality process. Lutz (2002) lists 14 ‘lines of difference’: gender, sexuality; ‘race’/skin colour; ethnicity; nation/state; class; culture; ability; age; sedentariness/origin; wealth; North-South; religion; stage of social development (2002:13). Lutz sees this list as ‘by no means complete’ (ibid). Yuval-Davis (2006a) suggests:

‘In specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions that are more important than others in constructing specific positionings. At the same time, there are some social divisions such as gender, stage in life cycle, ethnicity and class that tend to shape most people’s lives in most social locations’ (2006a:203).

In other words, social distinctions are not just categories of social location but also have a certain positionality along an axis of power higher or lower than other such categories (Yuval-Davis 2006a:199). When framing an intersectional analysis, Yuval-Davis (2006a) advises focusing on the social divisions that most affect subject groups (2006a:203). Accordingly, I concentrate on the social divisions that my research indicated tended to be most influential in the lives of expatriate women and MDWs in Singapore. This does not mean that other social divisions are not important, indeed, in specific chapters, social divisions such as age, sexual preference and mother/non-mother status are highlighted. However, my analysis of social divisions focuses on gender, race/ethnicity, class and nationality.

### **2.3 Discourse and narrative in identity construction**

Given the myriad ways the term ‘discourse’ is employed across academic fields and its various meanings it is essential to establish what I mean by ‘discourse’ before discussing the specific social divisions I am focusing on. There are many definitions of discourse but it can be understood as referring to:

‘...a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Thus the term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representation and the way that

knowledge is institutionalized, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play' (du Gay 1996:43).

Discourse includes not only language but also what is represented through language (e.g. ideas, beliefs etc.).<sup>8</sup> In this context, discourse is a social and cultural phenomenon; language users engage in discourse to accomplish social acts and participate in social interaction (van Dijk 1997:2).

Discourse is used to denote manifestations of language that are determined by social influences from society as a whole, rather than by individual agency (Fairclough 2001:24). Because the form that discourse takes cannot be solely the product of individual choice, the word entails a meaningful ambiguity between generality and specificity (ibid). Language users engage in discourse not only as speakers, writers, readers or listeners but also as members of social categories; they interact as women and men, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, employers and employees etc. mostly in complex combinations of these social and cultural roles and identities (van Dijk 1997:3-4). Conversely, by accomplishing discourse in social situations, language users at the same time actively construct and display such roles and identities (ibid).

Discourse constructs social identity by defining group's interests, their position within society and their relationship to other groups (ibid). Social identity acts as an interpretive frame for social action by indicating to people what they should think about a particular issue or group of people and in doing so, it functions as a mechanism through which collective group interests are played out in the social practices of individuals (van Dijk 1997:7). Through discursive strategies of group definition and differentiation, social identity is constructed through position and relation to other groups:

Discourse about others is always connected with one's own identity, that is to say, with the question 'how do we see ourselves?' The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one's own group and simultaneously a separation from the 'others'. (Wodak 1996:126)

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<sup>8</sup>While discourse most often denotes an instance of language, discourse is not necessarily a linguistic phenomenon; it can also be conceptualised as inhabiting a variety of other forms, such as visual and spatial (Fairclough 2001:22).

Social differences such as gender, race, class and nationality are understood as embodied identities constructed in discourse. They exist in concert and people experience different types of social identity simultaneously such as gender, race and class. Discourse functions as a powerful tool through which linguistic conventions, social and political beliefs and practices, ideologies, subject positions, and norms can all be mediated (van Dijk 1997). I view discourse as an ongoing process accomplished through social interaction, particularly language and communication.

Throughout the ethnographic chapters of this thesis I interpret not only social discourses but the personal narratives of various research participants. Narrative can be conceived of 'as the telling (in whatever medium, though especially language) of a series of temporal events so that a meaningful sequence is portrayed—the story or plot of the narrative' (Kerby 1991:39). Narrative provides human lives with a sense of order and meaning within and across time. Coates (2004) explains that narrative is 'an immensely flexible technology, or life-strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with the most fascinating of all serials, "The Story of My Life"' (2004:94). Self-narration continues throughout one's conscious life with continuous editing, reinterpreting and redeveloping the definitions of our own stories. The stories of individuals are imbued with social and collective practices of narration. Barthes (1982) concludes that an individual's own narrative identity is drawn from 'the centres of culture' and that individual narratives amount to nothing but 'a tissue of quotations' (1982:293). While theorists debate the uniqueness of individual experience, the construction of personal meaning in individual narratives can be understood as a 'bricolage' of inherited cultural forms—words, images, behaviours—which become personalised in use offering the researcher insight into the personal experiences of the subject as well as into their larger cultural context (Rapport and Overing 2007:324).

## **2.4 Gendered identities**

How gender identities are negotiated in transnational contexts is an area of growing scholarly interest (George 2005; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Walsh 2008). Gender is viewed as 'the social and cultural ideals, practices and displays of masculinity and femininity which construct roles, relations and hierarchy' (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:2). Gender is understood not as a static structure but as an ongoing process. Conceptualising gender as a process, as one of

the many ways that humans create and perpetuate social differences, Mahler and Pessar (2001) contend, 'helps deconstruct the myth of gender as a product of nature while underscoring its power dimensions' (2001:442). Gender performances are 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman 1991:14).

In this thesis I am interested in how and in what ways the gender performances of expatriate women and MDWs are relational. I suggest that the notion of gender 'performativity' is a useful conceptual tool when considering the different gender roles adopted by expatriate women and MDWs. Emphasising that situational/interactive nature of gender, West and Zimmerman (1991) argue gender is 'something that one *does*, and does recurrently; in interaction with others' (1991:27). Butler (1999) argues that, like other social differences, gender requires a performance that is repeated: 'repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' (1999:177). Femininity and masculinity are mutually but also multiply constituted, variable and relationally constructed rather than separate and unvarying (Butler 1999:33-39). Butler (1999) claims that gender identity is actually an ongoing process of 'citing' gender norms that permeate society, mediated by a heteronormative discourse that describes masculinity and femininity as stable, natural, and mutually exclusive:

'Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and punishments that attend not believing in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness' (1999:178).

For Butler (1999) gender performance is regulated within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (ibid). By performativity, Butler (1993) does not refer to voluntaristic self-conscious acting but practices that serve to enact and reinforce sets of regulatory norms (1993:2). A gender identity only seems to naturally emanate from the subject, while what is actually occurring is an ongoing reiteration and performance of gendered comportment that never fully achieves the gender ideal (Butler 1999:179). In this view, gender is a continually negotiated process of situating oneself in relation to cultural norms. It is a process not wholly conscious but accessible to consciousness. It involves the interpretation of a cultural

reality which is laden with sanctions, taboos and prescriptions (McNay 1993:72). The subject is 'done' by gender; it is the effect rather than the cause of a discourse that always pre-exists it. Butler (1999) explains:

'the 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity (1999: 33).'

Thus gendered identity is not 'grounded' but a 'stylized configuration' which is context dependent and temporally specific but always embedded and produced within the dominant representations of heterosexuality (Butler 1999:179).

Scholars have noted that heterosexuality features implicitly as a taken for granted framework for the organisation and experience of marital, familial or romantic relations in migration (Walsh, Shen and Willis 2008). Butler (1999) argues that highlighting discontinuities in gender performance exposes the fiction of heterosexual coherence (1999:173). I consider how some MDWs and expatriates whose gender performances deviate from the heteronormative expectations of their respective migrant communities adapt in the context of these expectations. Seeking out participants whose gender performances push the boundaries of social acceptability within expatriate and MDW communities helped expose the vocabulary of gender normalcy in these communities.

#### **2.4.1 Gender and social location**

In studying gender across transnational spaces, I have been guided by Mahler and Pessar's (2001) intersectional conceptual model entitled 'gendered geographies of power' which is intended to capture the understanding that 'gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g. the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains. It is both within the context of particular scales as well as between and among them that gender ideologies and relations are reaffirmed, reconfigured, or both' (Mahler and Pessar 2001:445). Migrants, away from 'home' and situated within a different cultural and social context are required to respond to the normative gender expectations of their transnational community and the host society while simultaneously interacting with the normative expectations of their 'home'

society. A Philippine woman, for example, might seek to improve her family's economic wellbeing by working overseas as a domestic worker—a low status, sometimes characterised by host societies as a morally dubious occupation—which enables her to elevate the status of her family. However, her role as her family's primary earner might conflict with the conventional feminine gender role expectations of her 'home' society.

Feminist theorists recognise that systems of difference are constructed in place and different systems are constructed in different places (Pratt and Hanson 1994). The analytical construction 'social location' is another component of Mahler and Pessar's (2001) model; it refers to: 'persons' positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors' (2001:446). Pratt, for example, recalls that it was while living within the violently sexist culture of a town in South Carolina, 'in a town where R&R stood for rape and recreation', that 'I felt myself to be, not theoretically, but physically and permanently in the class of people labelled woman: and felt that group of people to be relatively powerless and at the mercy of another class, men' (Pratt and Hanson 1994:8). In the above example, Pratt finds herself situated within power hierarchies, irrespective of her own efforts, that she has not constructed. Similarly, married expatriate women, who on relocation often withdraw from the workforce and assume the role of full-time caregiver while men assume the role of primary earner (Coles and Fechter 2008; Hardill 2002; Leonard 2008; Yeoh and Khoo 1998), might find themselves, like Pratt, trying to adapt to an unfamiliar social location in tandem with negotiating their understanding of their social location 'back home'.

#### **2.4.2 Gender and agency**

The next component in 'gendered geographies of power' is the type and degrees of agency people exert given their social locations. 'People's social locations 'affect their access to resources and mobility across transnational spaces as well as their agency as initiators, refiners and transformers of these conditions' (Mahler and Pessar 2001:447). Massey (1994) explains that some individuals 'initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are on the receiving end of it more than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it...' (1994:149). Studies of domestic work tend to focus on oppression, often over-emphasising the passivity and powerlessness of the worker as well as the dominating power of the employer. Power is viewed too simplistically

and one-dimensionally. It is understood as emanating from the employer's superior class position, often reinforced by issues of race and citizenship. According to this view, 'the difference results from the participants' unequal power which enables the employer to issue commands more often than the servant can choose not to obey' (Hansen 1989:11). I do not deny this overall imbalance but I believe that this approach ignores other coexisting and competing forms of power. Power is affected not only by extra-personal factors but also by an individual's personal characteristics. Individuals' interactions are continually concerned with negotiating conflicting interests and striving to define the employment relationship to their own advantage.

My approach has been influenced by ideas about power drawn from 'everyday' modes of peasant resistance (Scott 1985) and 'non-confrontational' forms of struggle (Haynes and Prakash 1991). These studies challenge the assumptions that relations of power are uncontested except in moments of great social upheaval (e.g. revolutions, rebellions, riots and organised political movements) and that in 'normal' times, the cultural practices and identities of the dominated remain firmly grounded in territory mapped by the dominant (Haynes and Prakash 1991:1). Scott (1985) identifies everyday forms of resistance, most of which stop short of outright collective defiance, as 'the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups' and gives examples of 'foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on' (1985: xvi). Power is depicted as 'constantly being fractured by the struggles of the subordinate' (Haynes and Prakash 1991:2). A MDW can, for example, seemingly unintentionally undermine her employer's self-esteem by saying *'Ma'am you look so healthy, so much better with more weight.'* The social structure of the employment relationship is a 'constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes' (Haynes and Prakash 1991:2-3). Power and resistance coexist and constantly reassert themselves against each other: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power (Foucault 1978: 95-96). I aim to situate both expatriate women and MDWs within the field of power not as equal but as co-participants. I try to show how both groups of women wield certain forms of power even as they are dominated by others.

Studying the performance of gender across transnational spaces involves analysis of people's social agency given their own initiative and 'positioning within multiple hierarchies of power across many terrains' (Mahler and Pessar 2001:447). My approach tries to capture the particular circumstances that expatriate women and MDWs experience and to analyse how their respective transnational social locations intersect, conflict, complement and interact with each other. On a more general level, I contemplate how their different migrant groups are located vis-à-vis macro-level processes such as globalisation and increased commercialisation of domestic/care-giving work.

## **2.5 Class practices**

Intersections of class and gender, McDowell (2006) contends, are of key significance to understanding the widening of class inequalities *between* women (2006:828). Many migrants' relocation is accompanied by class mobility; some expatriates experience temporary upward class mobility (Fechter 2007a; Leonard 2010)—a key feature of which is often employing a MDW; whereas MDWs often experience downward class mobility (Anderson 2000; Lan 2006). Class is a socio-economic category; an individual's class positioning can change throughout the course of their life and not all members of an ethnic group share the same class status (Balibar 1999:326). Coole (1996) defines class as a type of 'structured economic inequality which often correlates with cultural differences in values, perspectives, practices and self-identity but which is not primarily produced by cultural distinctions'(1996:17).

Theorisations of class have moved beyond a focus on economic inequalities constituted in the sphere of production to look at discursive representations of class and at class behaviours in other spheres of social action, as well as the moral basis of class identification (e.g. Sayer 2005). Bourdieu (1984) argues that members of the 'dominant' class share distinctive tastes and lifestyles that act as status markers and facilitate integration into this group. Their tastes are defined by largely cultivated dispositions and the ability to display an adequate command of high culture (1984:258). According to Bourdieu (1984) outsiders who have not been socialised into these aesthetic dispositions at an early age in life cannot easily become integrated into high status groups as they are often excluded due to their cultural style. Sociologists have emphasised how educational and occupational attainment is related to the display of cultivated dispositions and to familiarity with high culture (e.g. DiMaggio and Mohr

1985). Markers of class identification, such as weight, accents, intonations and gestures, are used to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable class specific performances (McRobbie 2004; Skeggs 2005). Class differences are also spatialised. McDowell (2006) argues that 'spatial containment' has become a strategy of the white middle-classes in protecting their interests and properties from a range of urban "others" (2006:838). As illustrated in Chapter One and elaborated on in Chapter Four, in Singapore spatial boundaries are used to demarcate status differentials between categories of migrant and between migrants and citizens.

In migration, Lan (2006) coins the term 'transnational class mapping' to demonstrate the articulation between class and nation on two levels. The first refers to the structural process of class positioning. Globalisation prompts the movement of people for work and marriage. National disparity, Lan (2006) argues, is converted into class hierarchy in these relations of production and reproduction (2006:18). The second level refers to the durability or mutability of class boundaries: 'International migration has created a range of subject positions to allow individuals to negotiate multifaceted class identities across national boundaries and social settings' (ibid). I investigate how 'transnational class mapping' operating on both intra-group level and inter-group levels impacts expatriate women's and MDWs' relationships.

Parreñas (2001a) observed that many Philippine MDWs experience a simultaneous increase and decrease in class status. On the one hand, moving overseas entails performing low status, low pay labour which is often categorised as 'unskilled.' On the other hand, increased earnings and purchasing power usually translate into increased status in the Philippines. I contribute to this discussion by considering how MDWs relate their own experience of what Parreñas (2001a) calls 'contradictory class mobility' to their non-employed female employers' experience of migratory class mobility (2001a:151). I also explore how the status MDWs' attribute to different types of employer (e.g. Singaporean, Western expatriate, non-Western expatriate) contributes to nuances in status distinctions between MDWs.

Smith and Favell (2006) have argued that the divide between professional and labour migration glosses over stratification within and across these categories. The category of 'skilled' migration actually entails a variety of occupations and status hierarchies. Leonard (2010) and Fechter (2007a) rightly point out most expatriates are not members of a transnational upper-

class. Transnational upper-classes have the option to exploit differences between locations (Weiss 2005:714). Their social autonomy is ensured by the acquisition of several citizenships or a well-accepted one (as opposed to carrying passports requiring lengthy visa processes and security checks); they are educated in global and prestigious places and take care that their children incorporate dominant (Western) habitus (Ong A. 1999). They are described as 'a transnational group of globetrotting high-skilled, highly paid professional, managerial, and entrepreneurial elites who circulate in a series of career or business moves from one city to the other in response to global competition for skilled labour' (Yeoh, Willis and Fakhri 2003:209). They possess cultural capital (e.g. attendance at private schools, 'old' universities and familiarity with global cities such as London, Hong Kong and New York) which is recognised across nations (Leonard 2010:6-7).

Conversely, most expatriates' mobility, particularly those relocating with families, is due to specific employment circumstances. Conradson and Latham (2005) argue that a result of globalisation has been the emergence of 'middling transnationalism'; a downward 'massification' of international migration through the middle classes (2005:229). Expatriates occupy a diverse range of positions in a broad range of industries—most are not senior executives. Expatriates' mobility is often contingent on corporate 'packages' which pay for rent, school tuition, a car allowance and a host of other variable items, relative currency valuations and favourable taxation policies (Conrad and Latham 2005; Fechter 2007a; Leonard 2010; Smith 2005). Some expatriates are 'stepping into the privileges' of the transnational upper-classes for only a few years only to be 'thrown out' when they are repatriated (Leonard 2010:8).

I argue that a primary way that newly privileged expatriates confirm their class status is through the employment of MDWs. I show that employing or not employing a MDW is part of how expatriates draw lines of inclusion and exclusion within expatriate communities. The expatriate community in Singapore is large (see Appendix One). Even among national groups, expatriates are far from homogenous; levels of income, of education and of cosmopolitanism vary greatly. Leonard (2008) quotes an expatriate woman in Hong Kong stating that 'we never had a maid' as a means of positioning herself on the margins of the expatriate community (2008:53). Studies have demonstrated that having a 'maid' heightens an individual's sense of their social position (Oishi 2005:21; Tan 2004:14). For many expatriates, relocation

discombobulates national, regional and local class hierarchies (Fechter 2007a). Having a 'maid' or 'helper' facilitates inclusion in some circles, especially if one does not have a car (cars are approximately three times more expensive in Singapore than in the UK), because she can be sent on a variety of non-air-conditioned errands leaving her employer free to socialise and to wear clothing more suited to an air-conditioned environment than to the heat of the tropics. Social status is subtly indicated by carefully manicured hands and smooth sandal ready feet with perfectly polished toe nails. Fastidious grooming signals that a woman does not do manual household tasks. Interestingly, as Chapter Five explains, MDWs also often pay close attention to polishing their nails thereby somewhat diffusing a 'ma'am's' efforts at status differentiation.

The effects of temporary upward mobility on expatriate identity have not been fully articulated. Expatriates negotiate 'several, sometimes contradictory identities, enabling subjects to assume a variety of shifting identities at different times and places' (Barker and Galasinski 2001:126). I argue that the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs allows us to explore the fragility of these new social identities and the resulting impact on the making and articulation of difference. The superior status of expatriate employers can be challenged by MDWs who recognise commonalities and discontinuities in their own and their employer's class positioning. It has not been previously noted, for example, that MDWs are cognisant of expatriate "ma'ams'" shifting class positionality and that this knowledge impacts MDWs' perceptions of the two migrant women's relative positionality.

Bourdieu's class theory has been criticised for its holistic and structuralist scheme that presupposes an overall systemic social structure and fails to incorporate 'the complexities of multicultural situations tied to complex, market-oriented social formation' (Hall 1992:258). Identity formation in the contemporary era of globalisation cannot be understood within the limited scope of a single country (ibid). We have to take into account international hierarchical differences based on which economic and cultural resources are unevenly distributed. My study explores the dynamic process of class formation at the cross-cultural encounter between expatriate women and MDWs.

## **2.6 Racialised identities**

'Race' is no longer accepted as a pre-determined category defined by biological imperative or fixed across time and space. Byrne (2006) suggests that 'race', like gender, can

be understood as the product of a range of discourses and practices which construct how people see, understand and live difference as racialised subjects within specific contexts (2006:15). Race is an ideological and relational category; it is crosscut by gender, class, nationality and so on. Social differences are co-constructual in that 'gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constructed identities' (Butler 1999:3). According to Balibar (1999), there is a constant relation of reciprocal determination between 'class' discrimination and 'ethnic racism': 'each produces its effects, to some effect in the field of the other and under the constraints imposed by the other' (1999:331). Throughout this thesis, I argue that differential processes of racialisation are pivotal in shaping MDWs' and expatriate women's relationships. In the first subsection I explain what I mean by racialisation and trace the concept's discursive evolution; in the following subsections I demonstrate its relevance in interpreting MDWs' and expatriate women's respective experiences of racialisation in Singapore.

### **2.6.1 Racialisation and racial classification**

The concept of 'racialisation' is used to describe social processes of categorisation and otherisation (Miles 1989:75). These processes essentialise differences by making group relations appear as if they were natural and unchangeable (Miles and Torres 1999:5). By constructing racialised hierarchies, groups impose meaning on their world—often through the construction of binary oppositions such as we/they, self/other, white/black (Torres, Miron and Inda 1999:5). These binary constructions are hardly ever neutral; 'there is always a dimension of power between the end points of such oppositions' (Torres, Miron and Inda 1999:7). Thus identity is imbued with racialised meanings and material consequences 'through complex social relations whereby privilege and disadvantage are differentially distributed among groups' (Smith and Feagin 1995:4). All members of society have racialised identity, even when not consciously constructed (Deliofsky 2010:15).

'Race', Byrne (2006) argues should be understood as produced through a particular discursive history. Bonnett (2000) contends that 'the modern idea of "race" is the product of European naturalist science and European colonial and imperial power' (2000:8). Linke (1999) claims that whiteness is both unmarked and invisible in the West and yet is the mark of domination and superiority in the construction of racialised hierarchies:

In the Western scholarly imagery, white skin is designated a discursive construct. Unmarked, unseen and protected from public scrutiny, whiteness is said to be deeply implicated in the politics of domination. Viewed as a location, a space, a set of positions from which power emanates and operates, white political practice appears to be thoroughly disconnected from the body. Corporality then has been removed from the politics of whiteness. Dissociated from physicality...whiteness is perceived as a normalising strategy which produces racial categories (1999:27).

Through a complex interplay of imperialism, colonialism, slavery, capitalism and European cultural practices, including science, religion and law, Europeans came to occupy 'positional superiority' (Said 1994:8) on a world scale. Race scholars have examined how 'whiteness' or being 'white' was specifically created as a special property interest unique to European people (see Allen 1994; Frankenberg 2001; Roediger 1994; Saxton 1990). 'Race', Frankenberg (2001) argues, 'emerges as an awful—make that awe-ful—fiction, arguably the most violent fiction in human history' (2001:72). This racial category 'became a legal category for determining who could *own property* and who could *be property*, who could own a business, who could vote and who could ride a bus' (Deliovsky 2006:19).

Historical accounts of white racialisation by Bonnett (1998), Jacobson (2000), Twine and Gallagher (2007) and Roediger (1994) illustrate that the boundaries for inclusion and exclusion into whiteness shift and are not self-evident. Bonnett (1998) connects how in the nineteenth century the working class in Britain 'became white' to the colonial project and the creation of settler societies: whiteness was idealised in the colonies as an 'extraordinary, almost superhuman identity' but initially it was solely 'an identity developed for and by the bourgeoisie' (1998:318). As colonial discourses were disseminated within Britain and national sentiment flourished, working class British shifted into the white racial category: 'In this new British social formation national identities once centred on the elite became available to the masses' (Bonnett 1998:329). Steyn (1999) contends that non-white peoples were marked in colonial discourse as the antithesis of whites; based on myths of superiority and civilisation whites constructed themselves as the group who 'provided order, government, leadership' (1999:267-68).

In the US, Jacobson (2000) traces the boundaries of whiteness showing how whiteness was reconfigured through the inclusion of former 'in-between' European people to construct a more unified group identity. This, he argues, positioned the Celts, Jews, Slavs and

Mediterraneans as 'superior' to Africans, Asians and Aborigines although they were still considered 'inferior' to Anglo-Saxons (Jacobson 2000:204). Likewise, McDowell (2007, 2009) illustrates how some European in-migrants to Britain find themselves differentially valued and excluded or included from the 'white' category at different times in part depending on the demand for labour and the availability of different categories of workers. In her examination of relations between different nationalities of in-migrants, McDowell (2007) observes that 'not all white skins clothe equally valued people' (2007:86). Whiteness is a relational concept rather than a singular unvarying category; it is constructed by the way it positions others at its borders, as excluded and inferior (Linke 1999:28).

Racial imagery involves the identification and separation of various visually identified somatic features: skin tone, eye colour, hair colour and texture; nose, eye and ear shape; body shape etc. These multiple (and flexible) visual signs are then characterised into types and slotted into racialised hierarchies (Guillaumin 1999:40). However, the narrations that produce 'race' are not solely visual but linked to socio-cultural traits (ibid). While ideas of 'race' linking physical characteristics with attributes of intellect and behaviour still persist, scholars recognise a turn towards 'cultural racism' (Torres, Miron and Inda 1999:8). Balibar (1991) explains:

'it is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions...' (1991:21)

In other words, 'racism is no longer directed against a group on the basis of phenotypical characteristics (a 'race') but against a group on the basis of culture (an 'ethnic' group)' (Castles 2000:172). The main difference is that ethnicity uses the rhetoric of cultural content, whereas race uses the rhetoric of descent, however, 'these are rhetorical tendencies, not fixed conceptualizations' (Goldberg 1993:76). The results of the process of racialisation are usually the same whether we are speaking of a supposedly biological racism or cultural racism; the hierarchy does not really change—those who are non-members of the dominant social group remain lower in status (Torres, Miron and Inda 1999:10).

Overt racism may be less frequent than in the past, but the discriminative tendencies associated with it remain deeply embedded in traditions and cultures (Castles 2000:172). Castles (2000) cautions that racism is still part of the 'common sense': 'the accumulated, taken-

for-granted and often contradictory set of assumptions used by people to understand and cope with the complex social world around them' (2000:173). No matter how convinced we are, theoretically, that our identities are constructed and not 'natural', Ang (2001) argues that at the level of experience and common sense identities are generally expressed and mobilised politically because they *feel* 'real' and natural (2001:151). 'For better *and* worse', Clifford (1998) observes, 'claims to identity—articulations of ethnic, cultural, gender and sexual distinction— have emerged as things people across the globe and the social spectrum care about' (1998:369).

Ethnicity is not something primordial but is understood as the product of social organisation and forms of consciousness as well as an important way of calculating political differences (Roosens 1989:10). According to Yuval-Davis (1999), ethnicity relates to the politics of collectivity boundaries, 'dividing the world into "us" and "them", usually around myths of common origin and/or common destiny and engaging in constant processes of struggle and renegotiation' (Yuval-Davis 1999:112-113). Ethnicity, according to this definition, is 'primarily a political process which constructs the collectivity and "its interest"—not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity in relation to other collectivities, but also as a result of the specific relations of those engaged in "ethnic" politics with others within that collectivity' (ibid). Ethnicities, Roosens (1989) argues, are animated around the political landscapes of social disadvantage, and this is usefully seen as one of the mechanisms producing ethnicity: 'In the dialogues between ethnic selves and the political landscapes animating them we derive important clues about *whose* experience counts and *how*' (1989:13). Class, gender, sexuality, age and political differences among others mean that individuals are positioned differently within the collectivity.

### **2.6.2 Racialised boundaries and migrant classification**

In the context of international migration, migrants—outsiders to the politico-cultural community—become targets of racialisation (Lan 2006:16). However, and importantly, not all foreigners are subject to the same degree or kind of racialisation. McDowell (2008) argues that migrants from different parts of the world are judged and placed within given schemas of racial difference, civilisation and economic worth which substantially restrict their labour market opportunities (2008:499). The notion of 'cultural citizenship' is useful for gaining a sense of

which migrants are viewed by states and their citizens as desirable. Ong (1996) differentiates citizenship, as defined by the laws of each nation-state, from cultural citizenship. The former embodies and indexes the regulatory and taxonomic power of governments, whereas the latter views citizenship as 'dialectically determined by the state and its subjects' (Ong 1996:738). Ong (1996) points out that criterion for migrants' belonging or not belonging is shaped by hegemonies of relative race, civilisation, and market behaviour' (1996:737). Migrants from different parts of the world are assessed within given schemes of racial difference, civilisation and economic worth. Although migrants come from a variety of class and national backgrounds, there is a tendency in daily institutional practices towards interweaving of perceived racial difference with economic and cultural criteria; this produces an implicit racial and cultural ranking often along national lines. The construction of racialised boundaries reflects the cultural imagination of the other in a given society; 'some foreign "others" are more readily accommodated than others in host communities' (Lan 2006:16). Singapore's state vision, for example, includes only educated high earning foreigners not the vast majority of migrant workers. As Singaporean journalist Asad Latif explains: 'it extends upwards, not sideways. The Americans, Japanese, Chinese, Europeans and Australians whom we Singaporeans reach out to belong to the classes of success we replicate in our own society' (quoted in Yeoh 2004:2438).

Lan (2006) uses the concept of 'stratified otherisation' to emphasise the relational construction of racialised boundaries; she argues that 'racialisation creates plural categories of ethnic others associated with stratified layers of cultural imagery' (2006:16). Host states tend to favour or disfavour migrants of particular nationalities or ethnicities to uphold diplomatic interests or maintain the ethnic status quo; immigration policy contains class bias as it usually grants different rights and benefits to foreign professionals and blue collar migrants (Oishi 2005:50-54). Regulations on immigration and citizenship not only delineate a boundary between migrant and citizen but also stratify migrants along lines of occupation and nationality. The process of racialisation is structurally tied to class stratification and the division of labour in the world system (Lan 2006:16). In Singapore, for example, the migrant classification 'foreign worker' refers to only manual labourers from poor Asian countries, excluding other significant groups such as Koreans, Chinese, Europeans and North Americans. Likewise, 'migrant worker'

conventionally refers exclusively to both male manual labourers from poor Asian countries and to female domestic workers. Lower-skilled migrant workers are typically distinguishable from higher-skilled migrant workers by their darker skin tone.<sup>9</sup> This correlation reflects and reinforces societal associations of dark skin with backwardness (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005:242). Conversely, the migrant classification Employment Pass (EP) holder and the government policy term ‘foreign talent’ are applied only to high-skilled foreigners—the vast majority of Western/white expatriates are EP holders. High-skilled foreigners tend to object to being classified as ‘migrants’ perceiving the term to have low-skill, low-value connotations that are at odds with their possession of highly valued transnational cultural capital (Weiss 2005).

In Chapter Four I explain more fully how Singapore’s migration policies draw racialised boundaries between migrant groups by stratifying migrants according to perceived economic desirability. Throughout this thesis I argue that a migration policy determined framework of class differentiation and national disparity inflects the racialised vocabulary of expatriate women’s and MDWs’ daily interactions.

### **2.6.3 Racialisation and MDWs**

Significant scholarly attention has focused on the racial and ethnic stereotyping practiced by the employers of MDWs towards their employees. Globally, MDWs are often characterised by their employers as uncivilised, passive, docile, childlike, unmannered or overly emotional, to justify their restrictive working conditions and to bolster their employers’ sense of racial or class superiority (Anderson 2000; Chin 1998; Colen 1995; Hansen 1989; Parreñas 2001a; Pratt 1997; Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). Such stereotypes are widely observed among non-white employers in high income Asian countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea (Constable 1997; Lan 2006; Teo and Piper 2009; Yeoh 2004; Yeoh and Huang 1998, 2010) and among Arab employers in the Middle East (de Regt 2008) who deploy racialised essentialisations about MDWs from the Philippines, Indonesia and other low income Asian and African countries. Employers and MDW employment agencies construct hierarchies of MDW groups according to national and/or ethnic origin ranking groups according to racialised notions of each group’s cultural traits or moral values.

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<sup>9</sup>Indian migrants are an exception since they are numerous in all migrant categories. The racial prejudices dark skinned high-skilled Indian migrant workers experience would be a good topic for future research.

However, racial stereotyping is not exclusively practiced by dominant groups; MDWs in Asia, for example, have been shown to use such stereotypes against their employers (Constable 1997; Lan 2006; Paul 2011). Paul (2011) investigates how Philippine MDWs in Hong Kong use processes of racial distancing to construct their racial self-identity as morally superior to that of local Chinese employers in Hong Kong and Singapore and how MDWs highlight similarities between the cultural and moral traits of expatriate Western/white employers and themselves. I delve deeper into MDWs' assertions of cultural—specifically of 'Western' cultural affiliation—with expatriate employers by exploring the contested boundaries of 'Western' inclusion or exclusion.

Like Paul (2011) I am interested in MDWs' processes of racial distancing and alignment. However, I suggest that a more complex dynamic underlies MDWs' relational processes of racial self-identity construction. I argue that both MDWs and expatriate employers use practices of racial distancing to construct their respective self-identities as morally superior to Singaporean Chinese employers. Furthermore, through the exchange of stories about 'Chinese' employers both groups communicate expectations of behavioural standards to the other as well as enhancing their mutual sense of moral superiority over the dominant racial group. I show that MDWs also use racial distancing processes in constructing a self-identity that is conceived of as innately more feminine than white women. Yeoh and Huang (2010) observed that Singaporean Chinese employers' fear of the sexualised danger/threat posed by MDWs (who are mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia) is primarily rooted in their physical proximity in the home whereas suspicions of study mothers from China tend to stem from their racial proximity to Chinese Singaporeans. I explore how Western/white expatriate women and Philippine and Indonesian MDWs are positioned in a different comparative framework—one shaped by sexualised and racialised Orientalist discourses. In Chapter Eight I explore how MDWs draw selectively on sexual stereotypes of Asian women circulating in Singapore in constructing a gender and racial self-identity that characterises them as more feminine and more desirable than Western/white women.

#### ***2.6.4 Racialisation of Western/white expatriate women***

The Western subject is marked out as different from the Oriental not only in terms of appearance but also in terms of political organisations, systems of government, religion,

clothes, and popular customs (Schirato 1994:45). Migrant intellectuals, such as the ethnically Chinese Indonesian-born and European-educated Ien Ang, examine the processes of inclusion and exclusion that are integral to the experience of 'living in translation between Asia and the West' (2001:4). Ong's (1996,1999) research, for example, considers how affluent Chinese migrants in the US seek to convert economic capital into Western cultural capital in their negotiation of cultural and racial boundaries. In theory, if not always in practice, the acquisition of Western capital facilitates social acceptance. Carrier (1992) warns of an essentialistic reading of both ethno-Orientalism and ethno-Occidentalism arguing that these categories should be understood as shifting and fluid (1992:198). Similarly, Ang (1994) theorises that:

'Chineseness should not be seen as a fixed racial and ethnic category, but as an open and determinant signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora' (1994:75).

Likewise, I suggest that what it means to be 'Western' and 'white' varies from place to place, moulded by local circumstances.

The contemporary migration of whites, with the notable exceptions of Leonard's (2010) study of white professionals in Hong Kong, Knowles' (2005, 2009) research of British migrants in Hong Kong and Fechter's (2005, 2007a) analysis of the experience of whiteness in Jakarta, has received little attention. Yet, white Westerners are increasingly seeking their livelihoods in countries where they have neither numerical nor political power (Lan 2011:1671). Steyn (2001) points out that the economic, cultural and psychological interdependence of people of European origin with their 'others' in territories they now cohabit is a reality in the contemporary world; she suggests that it is also 'a reality that in post-colonial times relationships between such groups have been, and still are undergoing realignments' (2001:xxii). Steyn (2001) argues that the South African experience is affiliated to larger global dynamics which increasingly challenge the privileged position of 'whiteness'. Post-colonial Singapore engages in discourses that are critical of Western values and culture and the financial stewardship of Western governments. Ang (2001) observes that the rise of East and Southeast Asian economies has made the Western world 'extremely nervous and jittery' (2001:5). 'For the first time in modern world history the West, "symbolically at the heart of global power" (Keith and Pile 1993:32) faces the prospect of "being outperformed by the East"' (Ang 2001:6). In Hong Kong, Leonard (2010) notes that

hyper-competition in the global marketplace is slowly challenging Western dominance in multinational corporations (2010:76).

In white-dominated societies, whiteness specifies the cultural construction of what Frankenberg (1993) characterises as a structural position of social privilege and power. Whiteness has been identified as a core set of racial interests often obscured by seemingly neutral words, actions or policies (Hartigan 1997:496). 'The phrase *white culture* is proffered to convey the material relations and social structures that reproduce white privilege and racism in this country, quite apart from what individual whites may feel, think, and perceive' (Frankenberg 1993:197). Fechter (2005) observes that even when white expatriates are daily and directly confronted with the fact that 'whiteness' is not an unmarked universal category, they refuse to accept the notion that whiteness is one racial category among others (2005:89). Frankenberg (1993) explains that white people's inability to grasp and name their own cultural positioning reflects how 'whites are the non-defined definers of other people' (1993:197). To be white is to be non-ethnic. Dyer (1997) explains that, 'the privilege of being white in white culture is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one's whiteness' (1997:11). Dyer (1997) states:

'White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation etc...to be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled) is to be white. White people in their whiteness, however, are imagined as individual and/or endlessly diverse complex and changing'(1997:12).

In her study on American 'white' female identity, Frankenberg (1993) observes that 'the self when part of a dominant cultural group, does not have to name itself' (1993:197).

Frankenberg (1993) calls this 'power evasiveness' and it is this power that allows people classified as 'white' to remove themselves from issues of race and consequently choose not to see the complex power relations embedded in race relations (1993:157).

While whiteness operates as an ideological and relational category, it is also cross-cut by gender, class, sexuality, nationality and so on. 'Whiteness is co-constructed within a range of other racial and cultural categories' (Frankenberg 1993:236). In other words, the subjective experience of whiteness can vary based on one's gender, class, sexuality, regional location, etc; also, whiteness can be culturally signified and expressed in different classed and gendered ways. Historically, while white heterosexual men have been imagined at the pinnacle of

civilisation and racialised privilege and culture, the positioning of white women has been more ambiguous (Byrne 2006:24). Frye (1992) argues that 'being white does not save women from the "condition of woman"' because white is a masculine expression of power to which white women have tentative and conditional access (1992:60). Dyer (1997) argues that within racialised discourse, whiteness is 'something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal or racial' (1997:14). However, there is a tension and contradiction between a disembodied whiteness and an embodied femininity (Deliovsky 2010:28). Rafael (2000) observes that whiteness becomes most apparent when 'yoked to a feminized body subjected to the gaze of colonized others' (2000:65).

White women do not have the same relationship or subjective experience of whiteness that men do. In contemporary Asia, Fechter (2005; 2007a) and Leonard (2008; 2010) point out, that just as men and women experience migration differently, whiteness is also experienced differently. However, little attention has been paid to the precise ways that white women as signifiers are employed in Asia (Kelsky 2006:188). In her study of how racialised and sexualised meanings adhere to the male white body in contemporary Japan, Kelsky (2006) illustrates how the white male signifies modernity, cosmopolitanism, egalitarianism, individualism, financial gain and upward mobility standing in contrast to Japanese men who are portrayed as 'backward' and traditional (2006:128-29). However, white women are not seen as 'gatekeepers' to all that white men signify, rather white women are sexually objectified in advertisements and in other media as 'interchangeable simulacra' functioning merely as a vehicle for the authority of white men (Kelsky 2006:189-90). In popular discourses white women are regularly represented as ungainly, unattractive, desperate and bossy (Kelsky 2006:239).

For many Western expatriates, the overwhelming majority of whom are white, relocating to Singapore is their first experience as a racial minority. When whiteness is constructed as the racialised norm its relational positioning, constructed through opposition to that which is 'other', is not noticed by those classified as 'white'. Considering the experience of whiteness as a minority category helps make 'whiteness' theoretically visible as a 'contingent, socially constructed category' (Hartigan 1997:497). Leonard (2008) observed that the emotional, bodily feeling of foreignness which 'hits' newly arrived British expatriates in Hong Kong may be unsettling for white British, disrupting their sense of self-control and superiority (2008:48). The

power dynamics involved in seeing race and racialised positioning also encompass gender and class differences (Bryne 2006:23). I am interested in how expatriate women utilise ideas of culture, nationality, gender, class and race in the construction and performance of their identities. While many of my expatriate participants were unable or unwilling to recognise themselves as racialised subjects, I argue the experience of 'whiteness' was nevertheless important in their self-identity processes and in their relationships with MDWs.

While racialised differences feature throughout my analysis, Chapter Eight focuses on expatriate women's ambiguous experience of how whiteness can be signified in different classed, gendered and sexualised ways in relation to South East Asian women. This chapter took shape due to the frequency with which white expatriate women research participants talked about feeling unattractive and invisible as sexual subjects in Asia and expressed fears that husbands may be tempted to stray by Asian women. In China, Willis and Yeoh (2002) observed white women's discourses of Asian women as more attractive and sexually available than white women (2002:562). Contemporary Orientalist motifs tend to feature young, nimble, and eager to please Asian girls longing to be rescued from abject poverty by a white man (Constable 2003; Manderson 1997). Culturally predominant sexualised discourses juxtapose white women who are characterised as comparatively undesirable against Asian women in competition for white men (Constable 2003; Kelsky 2006).

The influence of contrasting racial and sexualised discourses on white employer/Southeast Asian MDW relationships has not been considered. Nor has the psychological impact of contemporary Orientalist motifs on white women's experience of living in Asia been adequately explored. I show that both expatriate women and MDWs are well aware of the circulation of sexual and racial stereotypes and utilise these for their own purposes. I argue that discourses about migrant women's racialised sexuality influence how the two groups of migrant women perceive each other and that when migrant women live together these discourses form part of the cultural context of their relationship.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explained my theoretical framework and core concepts. A constructionist intersectional approach provides a vocabulary for explicating the complex multivalent nature of self-identity processes and provides a framework for articulating how these

processes interact in a migratory setting. As Ong points out (1996), 'migration produces a particularly clear context where uneven power relations and stratification reveal themselves' (1996:738). Throughout this thesis, I consider how both expatriate women's and MDWs' experience of foreignness is mediated in important ways by gender, race, class and nationality. I show that becoming 'ma'am' and 'maid' are dynamic performances of gender, nationality, race and class scripts reinforced by the evocation of discourses which support the respective performances.

Domestic employment is a critical domain for constructing social boundaries in which two categories of women, marked by racial, class and national differences, have interactions with each other at a home setting. Both expatriate employers and MDWs actively participate in the enactment and reproduction of symbolic boundaries, based on which they identify themselves and exclude others. Symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont and Fournier 1992:9). They are relational constructs constituted in three major levels: First, they are cognitive tools that people use to identify themselves and distinguish themselves from others. Second, these categories are enacted and reproduced in social processes of symbolic interactions among individuals. Third, social classifications mark power hierarchies in the institutional realms where economic and political resources are unevenly distributed along the lines of social boundaries (*ibid*). My analysis focuses on the interactive level. Both groups of women are constantly engaged in 'boundary work' that consists of 'strategies, principles and practices they use to create, maintain and modify cultural categories and social distinctions (Nippert-Eng 1995:7). Domestic employment, as Chapter One elucidated, is a significant arena that reveals gender inequality as well as hierarchical differences among women. Despite having different social locations, expatriate women and MDWs both develop strategies and identities to reconcile structural and ideological constraints imposed on them. The ethnographic chapters of this thesis explore how women perform multiple identities of femininity in relation to other women who are marked by differences in class, race and nationality. In the next chapter I discuss my methodology and reflexivity—introducing my participants and articulating my own positionality.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

Ethnography is the most popular research method used for much recent work on expatriates and domestic workers. Ethnography is:

‘a rather amorphous and ill-defined set of practices undergirded by multiple and contested epistemological foundations and assumptions. At its broadest it has been held to encompass all forms of qualitative methods, while in its most traditional “pure” form it refers to intensive fieldwork involving participant observation’ (Alexander 2006:399).

Ethnography involves the study of people in their own ‘natural’ setting, with a focus on capturing and re-presenting the subject’s own understanding of their world (Alexander 2006:400). It is increasingly seen as a means by which to access and analyse larger scale macro-processes such as globalisation and migration (Alexander 2006:402). Leonard (2010) suggests that studying the everyday lives of transnational migrants, for example, offers a valuable way of gaining insight into the ways in which globalisation is lived and experienced, as well as how this is differentiated by factors such as race, gender and class (2010:36). In this chapter I explain my ethnographic research process and describe my research locations.

Postmodern scholars have challenged the interpretive authority of the ethnographer by revealing the cultural and social situated-ness of research and writing (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:86). Haraway (1991) argues that all knowledge is marked by its origins, and insists that to deny this marking is to make false claims to universally applicable knowledge which subjugate the specific and partial (1991:190). A reflexive analysis of research relations as power relations not only deconstructs the ethnographic authority but also reveals the larger historical and social contexts in which researchers and participants are located (Groves and Chang 1999). The world is seen ‘from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent; siting is intimately involved in sighting’ (Rose 1997:308). Rose (1997) explains that reflexivity entails looking both ‘inward’ to the identity of the researcher, and ‘outward’ to her relation to her research and what is described as the ‘wider world’ (1997:309). According to Haraway (1991), feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge which allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints (1991:188). The researcher’s own race, gender, class, age and nationality impacts field relations (Wolf 1996:10). My own social positioning and

biographical background framed my epistemological lens of observation and understanding (What did I see? How did I know?) and channelled the inflow of data mediated by my interactions with my participants (How did they perceive my positions and respond to my questions?).

Numerous vignettes in my research process demonstrated that my ethnographic knowledge and interview data are embedded in ‘the micro-politics of the research and the macro-politics of societal inequality’ (Lal 1996:197). McDowell (1992) exhorts researchers that ‘we must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and *write this into our research practice*’ (1992:409). My experiences in the field echo the overarching theme of this thesis, making and unmaking difference at transnational encounters, exactly because I came across multiple social boundaries in the fieldwork and such a subject position allowed me to observe, experience, and reflect on these issues. When writing-up my research I drew on literature, outlined in Chapters One and Two, to comprehend these issues in depth.

### **3.2 My positionality**

I come from an upper-middle-class Anglo-Canadian family. Growing up in Vancouver in the 1980s and early 1990s, I was situated in an increasingly diverse cultural environment—albeit Pacific Rim focused. I attended a private girl’s school where many girls came from Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, India, Philippines and Iran (mainly either second generation immigrants or new arrivals). As a boarder, I lived with roommates from Hong Kong and Tokyo. First with my family and school, and later for personal, educational, career and volunteer reasons I have travelled extensively and continuously. After high school, like many of my classmates, I attended a liberal arts college in the US. I spent my third year at Oxford University and returned to the UK after graduating from Smith College to complete an MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art then returned to the US for law school. My field of practice was international art law. I was beginning my legal career when my husband, who works in finance, was transferred from New York to Singapore.

My introduction to expatriate life was not pleasant. As a 26 year old attorney I sought employment at US firms in Singapore but none were interested in hiring a junior attorney with an unusual practice interest. Despite my becoming a Permanent Resident in 2001, rules

governing the practice of foreign attorneys in Singapore (at the time) made it impossible for me to practice at a local firm. None of the international associations offered career services for expatriate women back then. I recall talking to a cheerful woman at the American Women's Association office about failing to find work. Her response was typical of the reactions I encountered: *'Why would you ever want to work here? There's so much to do. You'll be too busy to work.'* A Canadian/American woman in her 50s who worked part-time for our relocation agency took charge of me and brought me to welcome mornings, craft sales in women's homes and on cultural outings. I felt isolated and depressed because the women were all years older than me, family focused and did not share my desire to pursue a career or my bitterness at having, in my view, given up a life and an identity that I had worked hard for and loved. The Western expatriate community struck me as racially homogenous (i.e. white) and oddly, given the international setting, parochial. I never managed to achieve a sense of belonging in the expatriate community. Throughout my first 6 years in Singapore I maintained contact with the Western expatriate community through activities at the American club and a few friends. Mainly, I focused on studying Mandarin at the National University of Singapore. Through dog walking I became acquainted with numerous MDWs. Most expatriates do not walk their own dogs so I got to know several MDWs quite well. Because of a combination of ethical concerns, a belief that I did not require live-in domestic help and privacy issues, I never considered employing a MDW; I used a cleaning service.

In 2008 when we returned to Singapore from the UK (where I had completed a MSt. at Oxford in Women's Studies and commenced this degree) changed circumstances prompted me to re-visit the question of employing a MDW. When planning this study, I had not intended to employ a MDW. However, having three dogs (at the time), dreadful kennel experiences and a large house caused me to reconsider. For me, the deciding factor was being able to provide a MDW with her own self-contained apartment and entrance and establishing a framework for employment. I set working hours (8am to 5pm weekdays; 8am to 10am Saturdays), give public holidays off as well as every Sunday and limit her tasks to cleaning and some laundry. We each prepare our own meals. Except when we are away, my husband and I take care of the dogs. My employee's accommodation and schedule is highly atypical.

Employing a MDW has enriched my perspective and deepened my understanding and empathy for the struggles MDWs face. Personal experience and listening to other employers accounts of their relationships with MDWs has caused me to believe that mutually satisfactory reciprocal relationships can exist despite a highly asymmetrical legal and social macro-framework. While relationships remain hierarchical they can be negotiated in ways that maintain both parties' dignity. Despite her volunteering repeatedly, I did not interview my employee because doing so would have raised ethical concerns. She is familiar with my research and keen to discuss the treatment of MDWs generally as well as her background, family dynamics, friends and social life and her hopes for the future. Her insights, experiences and resiliency have shaped my perspectives and thus permeate my research. Whether I sought to include her or not she is a valued contributor to my study.

### **3.3 Field research**

As Chapter One explained, my goal was to analyse how two migrant women from very different backgrounds, expatriate women and MDWs, relate to each other in the context of domestic employment relationships. My fieldwork, carried out from September 2008 to October 2009, consisted of two major parts. First, I combined the methods of participant observation and open-ended interviews to explore the experiences of expatriate women and MDWs. Second, I interviewed migrant oriented activists, expatriate men and collected relevant materials such as historical accounts of domestic work, statistical surveys of migrant workers, newspaper editorials, magazine articles and newsletters. I spent the first months collecting data from expatriate women and migrant oriented activists. As I explain in the following sections, it was logistically easier to begin my fieldwork with expatriates than with MDWs. My initial interview questions were drawn from domestic work literature, participant observation and personal experience—even though I did not employ a MDW during our first stay in Singapore, MDWs are an extremely popular topic of conversation. My questions were open-ended and intended to initiate rather than direct conversation. For example, I often asked 'why did you decide to employ a domestic worker?' or 'what's it like working for an expatriate?' I wanted to ensure that participants were able to speak about any issue they pleased so that they would hopefully provide me with an abundance of information on the ways in which they understood and expressed their understanding of the social relations and structures that affected their lives.

Participant demographic questions which provide the survey data in Appendix Two remained part of my interview format throughout. While broad biographical and situational similarities are unavoidable, all names mentioned in the text are pseudonyms. All interviews were recorded with permission.

After conducting participant observation and a few interviews, I noticed frequently repeated topics and themes (some of which I had predicted) which gave me a better idea of the topics my participants tended to care about and identify as important aspects of their experience with the other migrant group and/or in Singapore generally. After conducting an interview, I would make notes of my impressions and of the main topics of discussion then I would transcribe the interview and using colour coding to indicate which themes were prevalent in the interview. For example, I used a green pen mark on the top of interview transcriptions and beside relevant sections to indicate that the participant had raised moral concerns about MDWs and/or Asian women; an orange pen mark if sexual insecurities were mentioned etc. I would file the transcript under the predominant theme or, if it was especially insightful on a few topics, in a special file of 'good' multi-topic interviews. By the end of my field research I had several 'good' files which were organised by predominant theme or themes. I applied a similar system to organising my field notes which documented participant observation and my ongoing reflections on the research process.

When I began interviewing MDWs I further tweaked my interview strategies and focal topics. I used the same system of organising interview transcriptions and participant observation notes. However, to avoid confusion, I kept MDW and expatriate women interview files in separate locations. I found that while MDWs tended to focus on the same themes as expatriate women, unsurprisingly, they had a very different take on many subjects. MDWs also discussed other subjects seemingly not directly related to their relationship with expatriate employers such as their perceptions of the behaviour of Chinese Singaporean employers, the discriminatory treatment of MDWs in Singapore and their sensitivity to negative stereotypes about MDWs. I recognised that these issues influenced how MDWs characterised working for Western expatriate employers and added new colours to my organising system to indicate when these topics were raised. An advantage to conducting open-ended interviews was that it gave me the flexibility to explore nuances in the attitudes and behaviours of my participants as they

arose. My research questions, stated in Chapter One, gradually emerged as I noticed that certain topics and tensions were reoccurring throughout interviews and in participant observation.

### **3.3.1 *Researching the expatriate community***

Much has been written on the relative merits and demerits of whether the researcher is considered an insider or an outsider within their study group (e.g. Bennett 2002; Dowling 2000; Edwards 1990; O'Connor 2004; Wolf 1996; Zavella 1996). Among the documented advantages of being an insider are: greater ease in establishing a rapport with the study group and greater reliability in data interpretation because of a shared outlook or knowledge with the group (O'Connor 2004:169). Insiders are thought less likely to be duped by informants who create cultural performances for their own purposes, and are less apt to be distrusted by those they study (Zavella 1996:139). Some insiders creatively use their special standpoint or double consciousness. Krieger (1982), for example, discusses how being an insider in a lesbian community enabled her to see how interviews were reflections of community norms, and her personal interpretations are sources of sociological insight. Conversely, the very familiarity that comes with being an insider could potentially diminish the researcher's interpretive ability; insider status might lead to the concealment of information or might lead to over-identification and merging and a resultant lack of privacy (Wolf 1996:15). Familiarity might lead to the researcher making presumptions about what is being said when an outsider would ask for clarification (O'Connor 2004:169).

However, a number of feminist researchers reject this simplistic dichotomy of insider-outsider (e.g. McDowell 1992; Narayan 1993; Ong 1996; Williams 1996; Zavella 1996). As Dowling (2000) points out: 'overlapping racial, socio-economic, ethnic and other characteristics' mean that the researcher is 'never simply an insider or an outsider' (Dowling 2000:33). Despite identifying as a Chicana woman from a working-class background, Zavella (1996), for example, became aware that the Chicana women cannery workers she was studying recognised important differences between themselves and her—namely her privileges as an educated woman. She observed that implicit in her research questions were feminist notions about racism and sexism which challenged the values of some of her more socially traditional participants and 'led to some awkward moments' making her outsider status 'glaring' (Zavella 1996:143). As

an expatriate woman studying expatriate women and MDWs, I have been mindful of the heterogeneity of identities among both groups and tried to engage in critical reflexivity throughout this project so that my positionality in relation to my participants is problematised and not presupposed.

Re-entering the expatriate community in September 2008 was fortuitous as September is when international organisations host welcome events, orientations and programmes on how to adjust to expatriate life. I joined a variety of expatriate organisations: American Association; American Women's Association (AWA); British Association (BA); Australian New Zealand Association (ANZA); Canadian Association; Friends of the Museum; Women's Social Network (WSN); PrimeTime. With these groups I possessed cultural capital that enabled me to be readily accepted. I also belong to a variety of alumnae associations and to the American Club. All interviews were conducted in English so my contact with Western expatriates was restricted to those conversant in English. This was not a significant impediment because as English is a national language of Singapore and much business is conducted in English many expatriates from non-English speaking countries speak it.

The expatriate community is notoriously transient; most of the women I had known during my first stay in Singapore had left; however, the few who remained were extremely helpful in introducing me to friends willing to participate in my research, many of whom introduced me to other friends. One of the key advantages of referred introductions, O'Connor (2004) observes, is that its mutual acquaintance system provides a platform upon which rapport with a potential participant can be established (2004:173). Like O'Connor's, (2004) my negotiations to secure participants were conducted in a 'milieu of implied insiderness because referral signified a tacit acceptance within an acquaintance network' (ibid). Several women with children at various international schools ran notices about my research and my need for participants in school newsletters. These notices highlighted the fact that I was an expatriate woman doing research on expatriate women—thus effectively endorsing my insiderness. The Canadian International School, American School and Australian School all placed such notices for me. Most employed and primary earner expatriate women came to me as a result of school newsletters or through the professional women's organisation PrimeTime. Professional women were accepting of me because I was 'working'. With these women, to secure acceptance I

framed myself as a lawyer (i.e. fellow professional woman) who was now pursuing a PhD. My research generated lots of interest among expatriate women so I had no shortage of volunteers.

Although the majority of Western expatriate women who employ MDWs are white and are not employed full-time, I wanted to collect data from as diverse a group of expatriate women as possible. I included women who were employed full-time in my research and women whose race or sexual preference challenged the homogeneous character of the expatriate community which, as Chapter Four explains, is overwhelmingly white and heterosexual. I found that those on the margins of the expatriate community contributed insight into prevailing norms and prejudices and experienced different conflicts in their relationship with MDWs. I also included participants from across the expatriate socio-economic spectrum. In an effort to explore how expatriates' relationships with MDWs evolve over the course of an expatriate's stay in Singapore I included women who had recently arrived and those who had been in Singapore or elsewhere overseas for a number of years.

Beginning in November 2008 and ending in August 2009, I conducted 74 interviews with expatriate women; their demographic information, along with that of MDWs, is in Appendix Two. Interviews averaged about 90 minutes and were recorded with permission. Unlike some expatriate studies which focus predominantly on one nationality's experience, I sought to include women from each of the major Western national groups in Singapore so that I could see whether nationality influenced how women approached their relationship with MDWs. Unlike expatriate studies which focus on women affiliated with a single industry (e.g. the diplomatic service or military) I sought women whose household incomes were derived from a range of industries (e.g. academic, scientific, financial, oil and industrial). I wanted to see whether socioeconomic standing impacted expatriate's women's relationship with MDWs. I had set a rough target of 50 interviews reasoning that this number would give me a decent sample of women from each of the major Western countries (Australia, US, UK) and a sampling of women from less represented ones. However, I did not stop at 50 because as I became better connected I was able to target women who filled specific demographic gaps such as Philippine American women or women whose opinions, such as being vehemently opposed to hiring MDWs, placed them outside the expatriate mainstream. These perspectives revealed aspects of the expatriate

experience and relationship with MDWs that were absent in the accounts of more mainstream expatriates. Also, not all interviews were useful.

As I mentioned, I had several questions and topics that I wanted to cover in interviews, however, I allowed each interaction to develop in a relatively unstructured way. The downside to this approach was that women spoke about an array of not always relevant topics. I did not impose a time limit which made transcription a long and tedious process. However, this approach worked in that it took longer with some women to establish a rapport; some of the most interesting material was mentioned towards the end of interviews. I noticed that women who came to me on the premise of having a story to tell tended to be rather disappointing. Numerous women contacted me with stories about MDWs' misconduct. While some of these stories, especially first-hand accounts, revealed intriguing relationship dynamics, most were the sorts of accounts of MDW misconduct that perennially circulate within the expatriate community. Others were looking for an opportunity to gossip; these interactions provided insight into stereotypes of expatriate women, Asian women and the expatriate lifestyle.

The possibilities for doing participant observation were virtually unlimited: grocery stores, cinemas, theatres, malls, parks, my neighbourhood, restaurants, the American Club, as well as organised events, all presented opportunities to observe expatriates and often MDWs. Mentioning my research at coffee mornings or lunches usually generated conversation; women became animated and talked freely, often passing my contact details to friends who they thought would be interesting for me to talk with. For interviews, I either met participants at their homes or for coffee or lunch at various locations. I always split the bill with my expatriate participants. I did not invite participants to my home.

I was cognisant that insiderness was not an absolute positionality; insiderness and outsiderness were 'neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive positionalities but rather they could simultaneously co-exist and alternate within the same interactional event' (O'Connor 2004:175). I experienced shifting positionalities and engaged in critical self-reflection throughout my fieldwork and in the writing-up process. As Leonard (2010) points out, 'being a white researcher does not grant you unfettered access to all things white' (2010:38). Fechter (2007a) and Walsh (2005) note that studying privileged migrants may represent a case of 'studying up' for many anthropologists. I was aware of how differences in power can distort perceptions and

skew interpretations (Wolf M.1992:6). My own quandary was that in many cases I was 'studying down'. Leonard (2010) notes that expatriate women are most comfortable socialising with those in comparable socio-economic bands and/or with those whose husbands work in similar industries and that this can make it difficult to access people who are not like yourself (2010:38). I was conscious of how my own elite socio-economic position could potentially influence participants and sought to minimise (most of the time) its impact.

I found that expatriate women participants divided into two broad groups: those who approached me in my 'expatriate' capacity and those who approached me in my 'student' capacity. Women tended to behave differently depending on how they contextualised me. Those who volunteered to speak with me after seeing my notice in a school newsletter, for example, approached me primarily as a student researcher. I encouraged being seen as 'student' by carrying my 'school bag' and dressing down. Some of these women were less considerate in their treatment of me than were women who associated me with being an 'expatriate'. For example, I was kept waiting for lengthy periods of time and a couple of women forgot we were supposed to meet. With these women I had the impression that they assumed I was 'studying up'. This provided insight into how the position of the researcher influences research dynamics. Several women bragged about their social position at their children's schools, where they stayed on vacation, the luxuriousness of their homes in Singapore and told me how others were 'jealous' of them. I assume they behaved this way because they had assigned me 'outsider' status. Yet, because of our shared gender and 'Western-ness' they felt comfortable sharing their insights. This allowed me to observe discourses of expatriate hierarchies without pressure to participate.

In contrast, expatriate women who I met through organisations that I belonged to or through friends, accepted me as part of their general group and tended to view my research as a 'little project' that I was doing on the side. These women referred to 'we' and made collectivistic assertions. Some said that they thought it was good that someone who 'really' understood 'us' was writing about 'our' experiences. I was rather uncomfortable at this assumption that I was going to produce research entirely sympathetic to expatriate women or advocating their viewpoints. I repeatedly explained that my research was academic (i.e. not a memoir or exposé) and was a comparative analysis but my impression was that this usually fell

on deaf ears. These instances reminded me that one of the recognised pitfalls of being an insider is being accountable to the community studied (Zavella 1996) or at the very least having to interact with the community post-project.

Reflecting on 'we' and 'our' drew my attention to the uneasy ambivalence around inclusion and exclusion. 'Who is figured in the unquestioned first person plural "we" in possession of its own ways and assumptions?' (Kang 1993:5). Judgment and discretion were important because of class divisions within the expatriate community; stereotypes of particular sorts of expatriate women attach to certain neighbourhoods, groups and clubs. I did not discourage feelings of camaraderie; however, I was something of a social chameleon. 'A person may have many "threads of culturally tangled identity" available, so that strands may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight' (Narayan 1993:675).

As I mentioned, I aimed to include as broad a socio-economic segment of expatriates who employ or would be likely to employ MDWs as possible. However, as Walsh (2005) and Leonard (2010) observed, women in the upper socio-economic spectrum of expatriate communities tend to be less accessible; I found that I only achieved access by positioning myself accordingly. AWA fashion shows, certain luncheons and teas and some groups such as the 'Oil Wives Association' required gender and class performances that matched those of their membership. These groups provided access to senior executive's wives and senior diplomatic wives. Given the level of Western public anger towards the financial industry in 2008-09, my impression was that financial industry wives would only speak to one of their own—of which I am one.

As a married woman I fit in. Not having children impeded my ability to relate to certain aspects of our conversations, particularly with women who self-identified primarily as mothers. My child-less state provoked some to elaborate on the joys of motherhood (an effort to recruit me to the mothering camp) which provided me with insight into the centrality of motherhood to their identities. However, the fact that I have family responsibilities in caring for my now four dogs, my husband and occasionally for my mother helped counter differences because I was perceived as also being tied to a care-giving domestic role.

I found that most women were keen to talk about themselves and that, apart from certain cliques, establishing myself as a generic Western 'expatriate' was sufficient to gain

acceptance. Canadians were the only nationality that being a 'generic' Westerner posed difficulties interacting with. Self-perceptions of insiderness were contested by my participants. Having spent my entire adult life outside of Canada, I was not perceived by those who strongly identified themselves as 'Canadian' as a 'real' Canadian. I could not relate experientially to cultural ties like curling (a popular sport) or ice hockey or eating poutine (chips or fries covered in gravy with cheese curds) nor was I judged fluent in Canadian current events. In a few instances, efforts to determine my Canadian-ness were distracting but provided insight into the construction of national boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; a strongly bounded relatively small segment of the expatriate population encountering someone who 'should' belong but who, it determined, did not quite belong (e.g. my accent is 'wrong', I lack cultural reference points etc.) rendered visible questions about criteria for cultural/national membership.

Because of the somewhat distracted nature of expatriate life (women are always preparing for a school break, a weekend away, an extended trip or for visitors) it was easy for me to float in and out of various groups. Friendships often revolve around a shared activity; if I dropped an activity or attended events less frequently, I noticed that most women forgot about me. I did not encounter difficulties separating my research from my personal relationships. Because my research occupied most of my time and I have friends in Singapore, it was rare for me to cultivate friendships with participants.

Expatriate men were more difficult to access than women. I decided to include expatriate men in my research because they are so often an absent presence in studies of expatriate women. Likewise, in most studies of domestic work, male employers are barely mentioned. Yet, as the conversation at any expatriate women's coffee morning will demonstrate, husbands are tremendously influential in domestic relationships and, crucially, in women's relationships with MDWs. Including men enabled me to better contextualise the two women's relationship and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence it. Most men were dismissive of my research. Even those who I know personally tended to laugh and make comments like *'oh they'll give degrees in anything these days'* or *'why on earth would you want to study maids and expat women—there's nothing to study.'* Participant observation and informal social interactions were my main methods of including the perspectives of primary earner expatriate men in my study. Dinner parties, restaurants, events,

the American Club and shopping malls all provided me with ample opportunities for observation and some interaction. Like expatriate women, hearing about my research prompted discussion among expatriate men. Most men declined to be interviewed explaining that they did not have time. I designed an anonymous survey on Survey Monkey targeting primary earner expatriate men and enlisted the help of my husband and several expatriate acquaintances' husbands to distribute the link (see Appendix Three). Of course, I cannot be sure that everyone who completed it fit my target group but I attempted to minimise the risk of others pretending to be expatriate men by distributing the link through trusted contacts. I was surprised by the acidity and abrasiveness of some of the comments I received in response to what I had assumed were fairly neutrally worded questions such as 'What was difficult for you and for your family about relocating to Singapore?' I was told that it was *'none of my business'* and that I was *'out to do a feminist hatchet job on expats'*. This prompted me to think about gender roles and different parties' interests in maintaining or challenging the status quo. Non-employed expatriate men were generally much more open to participating in my study; through ANZA's 'Secret Men's Business' group for male accompanying spouses, I interviewed 6 non-employed men but did not chart their information because with such a small sample they would have been identifiable.

### **3.3.2 Researching MDWs**

Since my research centred on expatriate women's relationship with MDWs, I targeted MDWs working for or who had worked for expatriates. This meant that the vast majority of MDWs I interviewed were from the Philippines (see Appendix Two).<sup>10</sup> Having established relationships with several MDWs and conducted participant observation, I interviewed 59 MDWs from April 2009 to October 2009. Interviews took place at employers' homes (when employers were overseas), in cafes (I usually paid the bill as a 'thank you' for their time), at Lucky Plaza (a mall popular with Philippine MDWs), AIDHA (a school for MDWs), a Bible study group and basketball games. Initially, I had a goal of 30 MDW interviews. My MDW target was less than my expatriate target because with MDWs I did not have to account for as much variation in nationality or in circumstances in Singapore. Nevertheless, I ended up conducting more interviews because as I developed relationships with MDWs I was introduced to women who had a diverse range of experiences. Interviews with MDWs usually ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and were recorded with permission. Generally, MDWs had other commitments on their weekly day off and did not talk for as long as expatriate women. Most MDWs spoke English moderately well but grammatical mistakes, such as misused tenses and gender pronouns, were prevalent during interviews. For the sake of clarity, some quotes from MDWs have been slightly modified though I have been careful not to change the substance of the quotes.

I decided early on not to interview MDWs who were volunteered by their employers. I wanted to avoid the unethical dynamic of having someone feel compelled to talk to me. On a couple of occasions, before I developed a sense of how to handle these situations, MDWs were called to chat with me while their employers left the room. These interactions were uncomfortable; MDWs were hesitant to share their opinions assuming I was a friend of their employer's. These encounters showed me that positioning myself as an 'expatriate' would not encourage candid participation from MDWs. In a couple of instances, I unwittingly interviewed employer/employee pairs. The tendency of MDWs who work for expatriates to socialise together led to my meeting MDWs who I only later realised worked for expatriate women I had previously interviewed. I kept these connections private.

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<sup>10</sup>In Chapter Four I explain expatriates' preference for employing Philippine MDWs.

While my identity with expatriate women was not problematic (I was accepted as either a student or an expatriate woman with a somewhat unusual 'project' on the go) my identity with MDWs was more of a curiosity. MDWs did not know how to place me: Was I an employer? An expatriate? A journalist? A government spy? A student from the UK working on some kind of project? Some combination? Being a woman facilitated my interviews with MDWs but was not always enough to break the ice. Wolf (1996) argues that power is discernible in three interrelated dimensions: (1) power differences stemming from different positionalities of the researcher and the researched (race, class, nationality, life chances, urban/rural backgrounds); (2) power exerted during the research processes, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange and exploitation; (3) power exerted during the post-fieldwork period (Wolf D.1996:2). She speculates that the first dimension of power difference cannot be altered if one is studying marginalised or poor peoples (ibid). However, a researcher can use methods that 'give research subjects more power' (Cancian 1992:627). I had to discover the conditions under which MDWs could speak most comfortably; in the presence of a MDW's employer was obviously not an appropriate setting. Parks, cafes, at home while an employer was overseas, the basketball court, at AIDHA and shopping malls were all good venues. I found that I had to relax and let my participants take the lead. It took a few weekends for me to realise that time spent just socialising with groups of MDWs talking about subjects not relevant to my work and often listening to conversations that were not in English was not wasted. My instincts of wanting to pin down meeting times, question inconsistencies and seek clarification inhibited my participants. I had to 'go with the flow' which was against my nature.

June to August was an interesting time to interview MDWs because many expatriate employers were on extended 'home leave' so MDWs had more free time; some invited me to their employer's homes to 'hang out' with them and their friends. While these encounters were informal they greatly enriched my research. Most MDWs assumed I was a visiting researcher and did not ask me personal questions so I employed the same strategy of selective information sharing that I used with expatriates. With both groups of migrant women, I interacted with far more women than I eventually interviewed.

Social hierarchies were more difficult to navigate with MDWs than with expatriate women. Staeheli and Lawson (1995) point out that when 'Western feminists enter developing

settings, they cannot escape the power relations that exist between those societies or between themselves as academics and their research subjects, even when they wish to do so' (1995:332). An overt reminder of omnipresent asymmetrical power relationships was numerous MDWs referring to me as 'ma'am' despite my introducing myself as 'Barbara' and asking to be called 'Barbara'. I noticed that MDWs tend to refer to all middle or upper class women over 30 years old as 'ma'am' regardless of their relationship with the MDW or their race. I asked several MDWs about this and was told that it was in recognition of higher social status and that it was customary in the Philippines and Indonesia to recognise social hierarchy in forms of address. Nevertheless, it was slightly awkward. Those who did not call me 'ma'am' variously explained that since they considered me to be a UK researcher I was outside Singapore social hierarchies or that they reserved that term for their employers or for 'old' women or that it was antiquated and that they addressed their employers either as 'Mrs' followed by surname or by their first name. In one instance, a dog walking MDW friend of mine scolded another MDW for saying 'good morning ma'am' to me. She explained to me and to the other MDW that 'we are all just humans' (I wondered if this exchange was for my benefit). For her, not displaying social deference outside of the workplace (she called her employer 'ma'am' to her face but referred to her by her first name) was a mark of emancipation from and a subversion of entrenched social hierarchies.

Oakley (1982) suggests that a hierarchical researcher and participant relationship can be minimised when 'the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship' (1982:41). I tried to minimise hierarchical differences through being approachable, empathetic, listening closely to participants and acknowledging and respecting participants' feelings and experiences. I attempted to build a rapport through humour, common popular cultural references and shared experiences—as women, as people who have lived away from 'home' for a long time etc.—with participants.

I reached MDW participants through multiple venues to maximise variation in the sample. Initially, friends from dog walking were invaluable at introducing me to their friends. As with expatriate women's networks, one introduction usually led to several others. For example, one participant suggested I attend Philippine league basketball games on Sunday afternoons at a community centre and through basketball I met a number of women. Other women invited me

to join them socialising in Lucky Plaza on Sundays and at a weekly evening Bible study. MDW social groups have their own nuances of language use and social association; it took time for me to gain a sense of who associated with whom and why. Not all of the MDWs I met worked for Western expatriates so socialising gave me contact with women who I was not targeting but whose perspectives improved my understanding of the broader context of MDW employment. Because I was an outsider, the MDWs who helped me network were indispensable in my gaining access to MDW groups. These gatekeepers vouched for me with their friends acting as facilitators, often explaining in Tagalog after I had explained in English what my research was about, assuring participants that I was trustworthy, that they did not have to tell me their name, and that employers, agencies and the government would not find out what they had said.

The positionality of some of my MDW participants shifted and alternated from being participants, to gatekeepers, to advocates for my research. Some MDWs took on a sense of ownership over my project viewing it, much as some expatriate women had, as an outlet for their viewpoints and experiences. However, unlike most expatriate women participants, some MDWs expanded their positionality beyond that of 'the research' to that of 'empowered collaborator' (O'Connor 2004:175) actively suggesting topics that I should pursue more fully (and those I should drop), providing me with detailed background information and advising me to ask questions less directly. Some MDWs seemed to feel empowered as a result of our collaborative efforts—helping me appeared to give some MDWs a sense of control over how they were represented. MDW gatekeepers were aware that meaningful access for me to their communities could only come through them.

Whereas relationships with expatriate women were easy to establish, it took time and patience for me to build relationships with MDWs. I took it as a compliment when a couple of women told me that I was '*much more down to earth*' and '*normal*' than most Westerners. However, I remained an outsider. An incident that illustrates the omnipresence of this boundary was an afternoon when I was talking with a friend who I regularly meet when she walks her employer's Doberman. We were standing around chatting when her employer drove by. She seemed distracted so I asked what was wrong and she said '*oh I'm not supposed to chit chat with friends while I'm walking him.*' I asked if she would get into trouble and she said '*No, not for talking with you. She's going to wonder what one of hers was doing talking to me.*' Boundary

making determines 'one of hers' from 'one of ours'; the landscapes of inequality which this thesis explores through the prism of the two migrant women's relationship are characterised by processes of making or unmaking difference. However, like insider and outsider positionality, boundaries are conditional, fluid and contested.

### **3.3.3 Migrant advocacy groups**

MDW advocacy groups were very helpful. I kept in regular contact with some groups, and observed or joined their educational or advocacy activities for migrant workers. AIDHA, in particular, was extremely supportive of my research. AIDHA, founded by American Dr. Sarah Mavrinac in partnership with Unifem, teaches computer skills, money management, effective communication and business planning. AIDHA estimated that 90% of its students worked for Western expatriates and were Philippine. I interviewed both expatriates and MDWs who volunteered at AIDHA including executive director, Dr. Mavrinac. AIDHA provided me with a private interview room on numerous Sundays. AIDHA's volunteers were extremely helpful; they assisted in explaining my research and encouraged MDW students, if they felt like it, to talk with me. I was presented as a researcher from a UK university studying expatriate women and MDWs. Being from a foreign university as opposed to NUS was important to MDWs as they believed that I was unlikely to be collecting information for the government's use. AIDHA volunteers explained to potential participants that their responses were confidential and that they did not have to tell me their names. I reiterated this and explained that they were free to not answer my questions and to leave whenever they wanted. This arrangement sought to ameliorate the uneven power dynamic between researcher and participant.

Other domestic worker advocacy groups were also helpful. Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and HOME founders, John Gee and Bridget Tan, shared their perspectives. However, these organisations deal primarily with physically abused or otherwise mistreated MDWs and rarely encounter MDWs who work for Western expatriate employers. They alerted me to the fact that my target segment of the MDW population was perceived as and, in fact in many cases actually were, more privileged than most MDWs working in Singapore.

## **3.4 Interpreting field research**

My field research raised more topics than I could address in a thesis. It became clear early in the writing-up process that the thesis would be unwieldy and unfocused if I did not hone

my analysis. The themes of the ethnographic chapters are drawn from the primary overlapping topics of concern for both sets of women. Certain subjects such as 'good' mothering and nurturing practices, the experience of being a particular type of migrant woman in Singapore (e.g. a 'maid', a Philippine woman, a MDW employed by an expatriate employer versus by a Chinese Singaporean employer or a new 'ma'am', a Western woman, a 'dependant'), the perceived value of one's labour and what constituted 'good' employment practices were reoccurring and identified by participants themselves as influential in their relationship with each other and in their experience as a migrant woman in Singapore. However, expatriate women and MDWs usually had different perspectives on the topics that both groups of women tended to gravitate towards in conversation. My field research showed that both groups frequently utilised subjects of common interest (although they did not always recognise a shared interest) to differentiate themselves from the other group of migrant women or, more rarely, to assert commonality.

In determining which social distinctions would be examined in the various ethnographic chapters, I was guided by Yuval-Davis's (2006a) advice to focus on the social divisions that most affect subject groups (2006a: 203). Certain social divisions such as gender, class, nationality and race/ethnicity were pervasive in the field research; these social divisions characterised women's discussions of the experience of being migrants, of mothering practices, of labour roles and sexuality. Other social divisions, such as age, were relevant to a narrower range of subjects. Given the particular fluidity of migrant identities and my desire to articulate the ways in which multiple dimensions of identity interact and come into play in a transnational domestic setting where competing hierarchies are manifest, I decided against attempting to address each main category of difference in its own discrete chapter and organised the ethnographic chapters thematically to reflect the topics that were most popular with participants. When discussing their relationship, my participants had evoked multiple simultaneous overlapping categories of difference; to isolate these categories would have given a distorted impression of how they were utilised by participants. For example, in expatriate women's and MDWs' respective elucidations of 'good' mothering practices, ideas of appropriate feminine behaviour were entangled and buttressed with notions of race/ethnicity, class and nationality. Because multiple social differences were repeatedly and continually raised by both groups of

migrant women when expounding on subjects they cared about, I used an intersectional approach to analyse expatriate women's and MDWs' mutual constructions of identity.

When writing-up I referred to my topic files and used word searches to comb for any relevant sections I had failed to identify. I tried to select quotations from women from a range of nationalities; although the largest national groups are the most represented in the text. I include enough information for the reader to contextualise the person being quoted but not enough for the person to be identified. I selected quotations that were either particularly insightful or representational of a prevailing opinion. I quote participants at length throughout the thesis in order to give the reader a sense of participants' own voices. I aimed to include enough text in the quoted segments so that the reader could understand what the participant was saying and meaning but not so much text that there is extraneous or non relevant material in a quoted passage.

### **3.5 Terminology and exclusions from project**

The term 'expatriate' is derived from the Latin 'ex patria' meaning 'from the homeland.' A contemporary definition for expatriate is 'a high-skilled individual who by his qualifications is employed by a foreign country or sent by his employers from his home to perform certain specialized functions on a contract of at least six months' (Chang 1995:141). Leonard (2010) notes that the term 'expatriate' is baggage laden: 'connoting not only *the West*, as it is most commonly used in reference to people living overseas who originate from Europe, North America and the Antipodes; but also *privilege*—as it is used to refer to well-paid members of the professional middle-classes; and *whiteness*, as it is rare to hear the term used in relation to people who are, for example, natives of the Caribbean or South Asia' (2010:1). In common usage the term 'expat' is rooted in classed whiteness; it conveys assumptions about class, nationality and professionalism (Leonard 2010:2). This understanding conforms to how white foreigners and MDWs in Singapore apply the term 'expatriate'.

However, Singaporeans and non-white professional foreigners use 'expatriate' more broadly encompassing all foreign professionals working in Singapore (Yeoh and Khoo 1998:162). Thus, outside Western expatriate and MDW circles, 'expatriate' carries primarily economic and class, not racial connotations. Still, I use the term 'expatriate', unless otherwise specified, to refer to Western (usually white) nationals. This conforms to conventional definitions

of 'expatriate' in Western literature and usage within my target communities. While the term 'expatriate' has negative connotations and is disliked by some Westerners; most, even if begrudgingly, accept the classification. Among single Westerners in their 20s 'expatriate' had income and age connotations that they did not identify with.

Although I included Westerners from other countries, I focused on expatriates originating from North America, UK and the Antipodes. These are by far the largest Western communities (see Appendix One) and are easily accessible through various social organisations and social networks. I included a few participants who originated in non-Western countries because they volunteered and self-identified as partially Western.<sup>11</sup> I excluded non-Western expatriates from my study. Cultural differences and lack of access made it impractical to include Japanese, Korean, mainland Chinese and Indian expatriates from this project despite each group's significance in Singapore. The relationships of non-Western expatriates and MDWs are shaped by different social and cultural factors and attempting a comparative analysis would render my study unwieldy. Nevertheless, in some cases, I refer to the viewpoints of Singaporean, Chinese and Indian friends of mine to indicate the larger social context expatriates' practices are located in.

The definition of 'migrant worker' is encompassing, referring to 'a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been re-engaged in remunerated activity, in a State of which he or she is not a national' (International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, OHCHR 1990). Yet, the term 'migrant' carries class and in Singapore racial connotations and is usually applied to people that are considered economically or politically deprived. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990), for example, characterises migrant workers as an economically and legally vulnerable group. Conversely, transnational elites or expatriates are perceived as 'mobile' rather than 'migrant' moving more because of choice of career options than necessity (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Despite its lower-class connotations, I refer to both expatriates and MDWs as 'migrants'. I do this because it succinctly highlights what both groups of foreigners have in common. The basic meaning of 'migrate' is 'to move from one area to another to find work' (Oxford Dictionary of English 2005). While

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<sup>11</sup>In my field research questions of who counts as 'Western' were sometimes contested; this is discussed in Chapter Five.

disparate socio-economic classes have different employment options and compulsions to work overseas, the basic definition applies to both expatriates and MDWs.

I have chosen to use the gender neutral 'Philippine' to refer to women from the Philippines. Much of the literature on migrant women uses the term 'Filipina' (e.g. Chin 1998; Constable 1997; Franz 2008; Lan 2006; Liebelt 2008; McKay 2003; Parreñas 2001, 2005, 2008; Tyner 1996). Most of the MDWs I spoke with referred to themselves as 'Filipina'. 'Filipina' is preferred in common usage over 'Filipino' which is masculine or when plural refers to both sexes. However, 'Filipina' has negative class and status connotations and has become synonymous with 'maid' in Hong Kong (Barber 2000:400). According to Chang and Groves (2000): 'it is the Filipina as domestic worker whose sexuality is subject to social commentary and control...defining and judging them not according to the work they perform, but in terms of their sexuality' (2000:77).

Most of the MDWs I spoke with were aware of their occupation's low social status and of racialised and sexualised stereotypes projected onto the term 'Filipina'. However, women seemed to use 'Filipina' because it belonged to them. Through their usage and counter characterisations of 'Filipina' they participated in their group's self-identification. Linguistic reclamation or linguistic resignification refers to the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its targets (Brontsema 2004:1). Marginalised groups' use of pejorative terms is a strategy for contesting oppressive practices (Tang 2010:52). Some women who use 'Filipina' may be endeavouring to reclaim the term in the way that derogatory words such as 'dyke', 'fag' and 'queer' have been politicised and empowered by the groups they were traditionally used against. However, reclaimed words change meanings and connotations depending on who uses them. As a non Filipina, I decided to use the term only in quotations.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

My field research was designed to sample a broad range of expatriates across different nationalities, industries, ethnicities and sexual preferences and to target MDWs employed by expatriates. Conducting my research in Singapore allowed me access to a large multi-national expatriate community from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. While my focus was on expatriate women's and MDWs' relationships, including expatriate men enriched my understanding of the entangled relationship dynamics between 'ma'am', 'maid' and 'sir' in many

households. Largely because my fieldwork was intensive and I sought out different facets of both expatriate and MDW communities, my ethnographic chapters contribute novel insights into the relationship between two groups of migrant women and into their respective experiences as female migrants in Singapore and more broadly in Southeast Asia.

In conducting my fieldwork and writing-up I have been mindful of my own positionality but I have endeavoured to focus on my participants' voices. Lal (1996) warns that 'we must be wary of the potential paralysis of analysis that ensues from the reflexive mode of analysis and concentrated attentiveness to the authorial strategies and powers of representations...' (1996:207). I have attempted to strike a balance between self-critical reflective analysis and the charge of 'self absorbed navel gazing or soul searching' (Harding 1987:9). Participants are not passive subjects but are engaged in actively shaping their presentations to suit their own agendas of how they wish to be represented (Lal 1996:204).

I was cognisant of the risk of perpetuating stereotypes of both MDWs and expatriate women; however, both groups of women's discourses drew heavily on widespread stereotypes. My subjects' self-presentations and views of others were informed by popular stereotypes and thus stereotypes feature prominently throughout this thesis. My participants, through the way they responded to my questions (or did not); and the subjects they were drawn to expound upon, determined the content of my ethnographic chapters.

## Chapter Four: The Singapore Setting

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains how tensions between Singapore's identification as a 'global city' (Beaverstock 2002; Koh 2007; Sassen 1998) on the one hand and the complex calculus of maintaining the political and social cohesion of a nation state on the other (Yeoh 2004; Yeoh and Huang 2004b) differentially impact categories of migrants. It elucidates how migratory processes contribute to relations of inequality between groups of migrant women. Global cities are centres for the servicing and financing of international trade, investment and headquarter operations (Beaverstock 2002, 2005; Castles 2000; Sassen 1998). Singapore's small size, lack of natural resources and dependency on favourable international developments cause 'survival driven' discourses to assume a central role in government ideology (Chee 1995; Koh 2003). Continuing economic growth is understood in popular discourse as essential to the survival of the city state (Jacobson 2010). Singapore's economic prowess as a 'global city' is integral to its national identity (Low 2002). Singaporeans expect the government to aggressively promote economic growth (Neo and Chen 2009).

The government's efforts to maximise economic development are closely linked with migration policies (Koh 2003; Low 2002; Yeoh 2007). In many ways, Singapore exemplifies tensions recognised in 'global cities' in that such spaces foster the expansion of a high income globalised workforce in conjunction with generating a greater demand for low income workers leading to greater income inequalities (Sassen 1998:90). All categories of migrant workers are considered indispensable to the economy (Yeoh 2007:1). However, migrant workers are understood through two distinct lenses. At the higher income and educational end of the spectrum are foreigners who enter on Employment Passes (EPs) some of whom will be eligible to become Permanent Residents (PR) and citizens; government policies and the media refer to this group as 'foreign talent'. 'Foreign talent' are traditionally skilled professionals from the UK, US, Australia, France, Japan and South Korea but are increasingly also from China and India (Ye and Kelly 2011). In popular parlance, 'foreign talent' encompasses all foreigners conventionally referred to as 'expatriates': in Singapore usage the term 'expatriate' includes Western and non Western foreign professionals. The government views 'foreign talent' as essential for achieving global competitiveness in sectors such as finance, biotechnology,

electronics and academia (Ye and Kelly 2011). At the lower end of the spectrum are migrants who are classified as 'semi-skilled or 'unskilled' regardless of individual backgrounds. These workers from countries in Southeast Asia and from China are needed to perform manual and household labour.<sup>12</sup> They enter on Work Permits (WPs) or Foreign Domestic Worker Permits (FDWPs). WP and FDWP holders are at the bottom of a migrant hierarchy that reflects the perceived value of each migrant group to Singapore society. Legal, social and spatial boundaries differ depending on migrant category.

This chapter places Singapore's need for foreign labour in the context of its general political ideology; it shows how migration policy operates to include and exclude different categories of migrants. It begins by outlining Singapore's reliance on a broad spectrum of foreign labour and how this is mediated by domestic legal and social apparatuses. Next it discusses specific categories of migrants. Lastly, it discusses the Singapore polity's relationship with migrants, how different migrants are imagined and how this contributes to their inclusion or exclusion. The relationship between expatriate women and MDWs does not exist in isolation; its framework is set by Singapore's legal and social terrain.

## **4.2 Situating migrants within 'the Singapore model'**

A basic knowledge of Singapore's political model is useful for understanding how various groups are situated in relation to the polity. Only citizens and to a lesser extent PRs are considered members of the polity. Singapore is often defined as an 'illiberal system' or 'non liberal communitarian democracy' (Chua 1995; Yao 2007) and contrasted with Western democracies which are characterised as having 'free, fair and competitive elections...freedom of speech, assembly and press' (Huntington 1996:24). Western liberalism has its intellectual roots in the Lockean formulation that the individual is the best rational judge of one's self-interest and must be permitted to act freely to achieve them. The only moral injunction against the pursuit of self-interest is that it should not be at the expense of others. The social is thus conceived of as a negative. The role of the state is to maintain the rules of social transactions (Rawls 1971). In contrast to liberalism, in communitarianism individuals are 'rooted' in a community; the idea is that the duties and responsibilities of citizens to each other and to the community should

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<sup>12</sup> Between the EP and the WP/MDWP categories, is the S Pass, a multi-level pass, which is issued to foreigners who possess recognised educational qualifications or practical qualifications but whose salary is too low to qualify for the EP.

balance individual rights (Chua 1995; Frazer 1999). Against the centrality of the individual is placed the centrality of the collective well-being privileging the rights of the collective over those of individuals (Frazer 1999:35-38).

In Singaporean communitarianism the family is a microcosm of the state. The underlying philosophical assumption is that if the family is cohesive, functional and secure society will be moral and secure (Chee 1995:7). While welfare liberalism evolved as a way to deal with class conflict by institutionalising claims on the national product by those who could not 'fairly compete'—women, the urban poor, the unemployed, the sick etc.; communitarian democracies like Singapore use pastoral care as a means of producing citizens attractive to capital (Ong A.1999: 202). Government agencies maintain a pervasive presence in the lives of citizens managing everything from housing, to education, to economic development, to labour organisation, to state mandated retirement funds, to health care, to the media, to fertility stimulus, to cultural expression and religion (Wee 2007; Yao 2007). The structure of accountability rests on the population's trusting in the expertise and cultural authority of the political leadership and the 'ability of the government to deliver the goods' in terms of social stability and economic performance (Ong A.1999:208).

The Singapore model is reliant on the labour of foreigners to grow its economy. In 2012, migrant workers constituted 37% of Singapore's work force (*Straits Times* 15 February 2012); foreigners contribute almost half of Singapore's GDP (Cunha 2010:164). Singapore has been a migrant society since its founding by the British in 1819. The reasons for this are straightforward. Its location and small land size (Singapore is only 697 square kilometres) rendered it dependent on trade (Wee 2007). Singapore's geographic position at the bottom of the Malay Peninsula on one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and a world class harbour made it ideally located to engage in trade and commerce. Other than its port, it has no natural resources of any consequence. Singapore's survival as a nation was predicated on economic survival (Neo and Chen 2009). A rapidly expanding economy, coupled with a liberal immigration policy drew large numbers of immigrants to Singapore, most of them labourers from China, India and the Malay Archipelago.

Immigration laws were made more restrictive following Singapore's independence in 1965 to reinforce Singapore's borders and to facilitate the establishment of its identity as a

sovereign state (Yeoh 2007). Singapore adopted an aggressive, export oriented development strategy using government enterprises or government linked companies to restructure the economy toward manufacturing and services (Low 2002). The government aimed to mobilise the entire domestic workforce; migrant workers would only be admitted when the local labour force was exhausted. As a result of this policy and rapid industrial development, the government actively encouraged women's participation in the labour force (Oishi 2005). By 1980, Singapore's native workforce was too small to meet the demands of booming construction and manufacturing industries (Ong J.1997). In response to labour shortages, Singapore admitted unskilled and semi-skilled workers mainly from Southeast Asia. There are approximately 702,000 male WP holders and 220,000 female FDWP holders (*Straits Times*, 15 February 2012).<sup>13</sup> WP and FDWP holders are not allowed to bring dependants to Singapore and are prohibited from engaging in sexual relationships with Singaporeans or PRs (Ministry of Manpower (MOM) 'Work Permit' 2010).

Singapore's economic competitiveness is predicated on a model of unequal incorporation into its success (Yeoh and Chang 2001). The basic thrust of labour policy has been to increase the flow of unskilled or semi-skilled workers to meet domestic shortages during cycles of construction and manufacturing growth and to repatriate workers during periods of economic downturn (Low 2002:102). Differential exclusion systems originated in post 1945 Europe under the guise of the 'guest worker system'; these systems entail accepting migrants only within strict functional and temporal limits; welcoming them as workers but not as settlers and only as individuals, not allowing family members to accompany workers (Castles 2004:23). Contract labour systems in the oil producing Gulf States and in Asia are based on this model. Castles (2004) notes that among Asian elites the perception of migrants as temporary workers who will not settle is still very much conventional wisdom; access to citizenship for migrants is not even on the political agenda in most places (2004:31). No Asian country allows the permanent immigration of unskilled workers (Lan 2006:33).<sup>14</sup> Regulating the labour flow tightly

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<sup>13</sup>WP holders must be between 16 and 50 years old and earn a monthly salary of no more than S\$1800. <sup>14</sup>A landmark ruling in Hong Kong in Sept 2011 declared that the Immigration Department rule barring foreign domestic workers from applying for permanent residency violated Hong Kong's Basic Law. Hong Kong's Court of Appeal overturned the ruling in March 2012 holding that it was for the state to decide the extent to which permanent residency is granted to foreigners. This judgment was upheld by Hong Kong's Final Court of Appeal in March 2013: 'The nature of Foreign Domestic Helper's residence in Hong Kong is highly restrictive. The Foreign Domestic Helper is obliged to return to the country of origin at the end of the contract and is told from the outset that admission is not for the purposes of settlement.'

prevents the state being overwhelmed by migrants making claims on resources or destabilising the fragile political and social contracts and racial balance that bind together the society (Low 2002:103).

Singapore does not extend the option of applying for PR, which is the only path to citizenship, to 'semi-skilled or unskilled' categories of migrants because it prefers migrants who in its view contribute to the talent pool and who can support themselves and their families without seeking benefits from the state (Yeoh 2007). The cost of living is among the highest in the world (Dow 2006:145). Aside from a substantial self-funded public housing programme which provides housing for 84% of the population, a self-funded pension plan and free education, Singapore is not a welfare state. There is no unemployment insurance, no free medical care, and no entitlement to public 'benefits'. Trade unions are strictly controlled by the government and there is no minimum wage (Trocki 2006). Four out of five migrants working in Singapore do not have the option of settling and becoming citizens (Gee 2010). More than 80% of migrants working in Singapore are not allowed to bring their own families with them or to start families in Singapore (Gee 2010). Regardless of their individual qualifications, WP and FDWP holders are not permitted to switch migrant categories. Some FDWP holders, for example, might be qualified to work in occupations covered by the S Pass.<sup>15</sup> Prohibiting lower tier migrants from changing categories ensures their transience.

Unlike some other countries exercising differential exclusion immigration policies, in response to a shortage of high-skilled labour coupled with an ageing population and declining fertility rates, Singapore has adopted a tiered migration policy which encourages migrants with higher educational or professional qualifications to settle as PRs and become citizens (Cunha 2010; Low 2002). The following sections explain the categories of 'Employment Pass Holder', 'Dependant Pass Holder' and 'Foreign Domestic Worker' and their practical implications.

#### **4.3 Situating EP holders in Singapore's global city**

This section explains how government policy situates 'foreign talent' within Singapore's cityscape elucidating how immigration policies determine inclusions and exclusions from spaces and resources. Research shows that everyday negotiations within cities need to be

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<sup>15</sup>The S Pass is a multi-tier pass for workers who earn a minimum monthly salary of S\$1800 to S\$2500; it includes nurses, hospitality industry employees, computer programmers and technicians in IT. Most of the 98,000 S Pass holders come from China, India and the Philippines (*Straits Times*, 23 February 2010). Higher tier S Pass holders may be eligible for PR and can bring dependants to Singapore.

contextualised within the opportunities and constraints of the particular cultures within which transnationals operate and that these localities are racially and nationally marked (Yeoh and Huang 2011:686). This section illustrates that while EP holders are welcomed in social and work localities they are excluded from state allocated resources and from participation in other areas of national life. Quantifying EP holders and their dependants is difficult because the government does not release data on the composition of EP holders by nationality or on the number of Dependant Pass (DP) holders (see Beaverstock 2002; Yeoh and Khoo 1998). However, assuming DP holders are counted in the national non resident population it is possible to extrapolate that there are approximately 217,000 dependants.<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with various embassy estimates of the number of their nationals residing in Singapore (see Appendix One).

'Foreign talent' encompasses a broad continuum of occupations and incomes: bankers, computer technicians, urban planners, medical professionals, hospitality industry workers amongst others. It includes those whose relocation is subsidised by a company 'package' and those on local contracts (Leonard 2010; Scott A. 2004). The rationale behind encouraging the employment of these migrants is that they possess knowledge and skills lacking in Singapore's small employment pool, and that their expertise will fuel Singapore's economic growth (Low 2002). There are an estimated 142,000 EP holders (*Straits Times*, 15 February 2012). Professional expatriates are disproportionately male (Yeoh and Khoo 1998). Most Westerners working in Singapore are EP holders from the US, UK, Australia and France (Yeoh 2007:5). However, the majority of the 532,000 PRs come from China and India (Yeoh 2007:5). Many Westerners are deterred from applying for PR because the requirement of mandatory national service for 18 year old males would affect their male children. Citizenship is an unattractive prospect to some foreigners because Singapore does not allow dual citizenship.

The EP is for foreigners earning a fixed monthly salary of more than S\$2500 and who have recognised qualifications; it is for a two year term and must be cancelled upon cessation of employment with the sponsoring employer. EP holders may apply for DPs for spouses and

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<sup>16</sup>Singapore's total resident population 5,183,000 minus 3,789,300 PR/Citizens results in 1,393,700 non residents minus 702,000 WP holders minus 220,000 FDWs minus 142,000 EP holders minus 113,000 S Pass holders = 216,700 uncategorised foreigners. See <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2012.pdf>

unmarried children under 21<sup>17</sup>(Ministry of Manpower (MOM), 'Employment Pass' 2010). Although sometimes erroneously stated (e.g. Teo and Piper 2009) the EP, like the WP and MDWP, is not issued directly to the applicant; the employer is responsible for applying for, renewing and cancelling the EP. If an EP holder changes jobs, the new employer must obtain a new EP. The economic crises in 2009 highlighted the vulnerability of EP holders to sudden changes in market conditions when some EP holders were laid off and wanted to remain in Singapore but were unable to find another employer to obtain a work permit for them within the 30 day limit (*Straits Times*, 29 Sept 2009).

EP holders, like all foreigners, are eligible to buy private residential condominiums; only PRs and citizens can purchase government subsidised HDB flats and landed properties.<sup>18</sup> Teo and Piper (2009) state that MDWs are not allowed to purchase a home or to pay taxes as evidence of their separateness or 'social quarantine' (Teo and Piper 2009:152). This is misleading because while they are marginalised in numerous ways, they have the same legal right to purchase property as other foreigners; not being able to afford to purchase a home in Singapore is certainly not unique to MDWs.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, not paying income tax is not evidence of MDWs' unique marginalisation but is indicative of significant economic disparity between a minority of affluent Singaporeans and foreigners and the majority of the population (Tan 2004). Approximately 60% of Singaporeans do not meet the minimum annual income threshold for taxation eligibility of S\$22,000 (Cunha 2010). In fact, increasing income tax revenues is part of the government's motivation in encouraging high-skilled migrants because EPs and PRs contribute a disproportionately large percentage of total income tax revenues (Peebles and Wilson 2002).

Restrictions and the cost of home ownership contribute to expatriates' tendency to live in 'well-defined enclaves' (Beaverstock 2002:534) where there are large concentrations of rental units. Since 84% of Singaporeans live in HDB flats (Housing Development Board 2009) opportunities to interact with Singaporean neighbours are limited. Expatriate *Straits Times*

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<sup>17</sup>EP holders may also apply for Long Term Visitor Passes for common law spouses, unmarried daughters over 21; handicapped children; step children and parents/parents-in-law (MOM, 'Employment Pass' 2010). <sup>18</sup>PRs are restricted in the categories of landed property they are permitted to purchase and in their ability to rent out landed property. Foreigners are only allowed to purchase landed property inside the specially zoned Sentosa development.

<sup>19</sup>Property is very expensive in Singapore. HDB apartments sell for upwards of S\$350,000 and private condominiums are between S\$1,880 and S\$2,800 per square foot (*Straits Times*, 20 Nov. 2011).

newspaper contributor Liam O'Brien described living in his 'typical condo stuffed to the gills with expats like you':

'If I close my eyes while I sit on the balcony I could just as well be located in an upscale suburb of Sydney, Wellington or Washington rather than Tanjong Rhu Road in the East Coast. The accents of Australians, Kiwis and Americans—plus those of Filipina maids glued to their prized mobile phones—form much of the hubbub—rather than Hokkien or Singapore English.' (O'Brien, *Straits Times*, March 28, 2010).

Expatriates' spaces, as Fechter (2007b) observed in Jakarta, are defined by expatriates using language metaphors such as 'bubble', 'ghetto', 'Disneyland' or 'fantasy island' which demarcate boundaries between the expatriate and the 'local' community. Fechter (2007b) contends that these metaphors through their prominence in expatriate discourses play a key role in defining people's everyday realities. However, their bounded characterisation belies an actual permeability of boundaries; 'social lives are subject to frequent transgressions and transactions across their boundaries' (Fechter 2007b:38). O'Brien's casual mentioning of 'Filipina maids' demonstrates that expatriate enclave boundaries are porous and alludes to MDWs' ubiquity in Singapore and the fact that for many Western expatriates the availability of MDWs is a major attraction of living in Singapore.<sup>20</sup>

A myriad of government policies are directed towards making Singapore more attractive to 'the very best of international talent' (Yeoh and Huang 2011:685). In tandem with launching cultural programmes and hosting international events such as the F1 motor race, Singapore's cityscape has been redesigned over the last decade (Ye and Kelly 2011). Cities courting skilled migrants have actively reorganised the built environment to suit the everyday life and work of urban workers (Scott A. 2004). In Shanghai, Tseng (2011) notes that most migrants care as much about *where* they live as *where* they work (2011:766). Singapore consciously projects both a family friendly image highlighting green spaces, luxurious expatriate targeted condominium developments and public safety, often explicitly contrasting itself with Hong Kong, as well as a cosmopolitan image of international night clubs, restaurants helmed by Michelin starred chefs and proximity to resorts and cities within Asia.

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<sup>20</sup>1 out of 6 households employs a MDW (MOM 2006). However, given expatriates' higher average incomes as indicated by EP income thresholds, I postulate that the ratio of expatriate households employing MDWs is significantly higher.

While welcomed in the cityscape, EP holders are subject to a set of mechanisms that reproduces their liminal status in Singapore. In the Cayman Islands, Amit-Talai (1998) observed that increasingly expatriates are operating as 'freelancers' or individuals without access to a 'transnational habitus of synchronized activities' (1998:54). Many expatriates who are unwilling or unable due to strict residency criterion to translate tenuous legal status and rights into permanent settlement live with structural insecurities of place and work (Amit-Talai 1998). 'Everyday' issues of housing, health, education and retirement all require some engagement with local structures and favour nationals (Favell, Feldblum and Smith 2006). All migrants in Singapore are ineligible for government subsidies. Excluding migrants from civil entitlements is an attempt to arrest Singaporean anxieties about the social influence and degree of privilege accorded foreigners (Koh 2003:233). EP holders, for example, are not allowed tax advantageous state mandated CPF retirement funds and are not eligible for state subsidised medical care or health insurance. Health insurance must be bought privately or provided by employers. Being 'foreign' reduces the number of available childcare options (Yeoh and Khoo 1998). Non citizen/non PRs are not eligible for state subsidised childcare centres which are much less expensive than private centres nor are they eligible for reduced MDW levies which are available to female PRs and citizens working full-time (Yeoh and Khoo 1998). EP holders' children rarely attend local schools. Language requirements, curriculum differences and admission processes prevent most expatriate children from transferring into Singapore's educational system resulting in most having to attend expensive private international schools. EP holders' transience militates against involvement with institutional realms characterised as permanent and stable (Yeoh and Huang 2011:683). EP holders (and DP holders), for example, are excluded from sitting on the boards of many local NGOs, and from full membership in some organisations, such as Singapore's preeminent women's association AWARE, because they are not citizens or PRs. EP holder candidates are increasingly perceived as less eligible than Singaporean candidates to occupy senior positions at Singaporean banks, government companies and sovereign wealth funds.

Long term expatriates often face complications in estate planning and divorce. Extended residency overseas may result in difficulty accessing legal forums in their country of citizenship. Domicile and forum requirements will in most cases prevent a Singapore court from

probating a non citizen will or hearing a divorce petition. Procedures are often further complicated by the fact that some expatriates are married to someone of a different nationality and may never have resided in either's country of citizenship. Legal uncertainty is relevant to the relationship dynamics between expatriate spouses because it contributes to the asymmetrical power relationships perpetuated by one spouse, usually the woman, following the other spouse overseas for that spouse's work. This spouse likely forgoes not only an independent income but may also relinquish the certainty of rights and protections in a familiar legal forum. I argue in subsequent chapters that an awareness among expatriate women of the legal and economic disadvantages to non-employed spouses resulting from expatriation and of different potential socio-economic futures outside marriage perpetuates insecurities which impact their relationship with MDWs.

As discussed in Chapter Two, scholars have sought to problematise the tendency to characterise expatriates as members of an elite 'transnational capitalist class' (Conradson and Latham 2005a; Fechter 2007a). Nevertheless, affluence is a relative concept. Most expatriates may be, as Favell et al. (2006) contend: 'distinguishable from "real" elites of the past who tended to have routine access to international travel and experience through family connections and schooling as well as a better chance of success in their chosen careers at home without needing to propel themselves individually on an international stage' (2006:9), but many are still financially well-off. Singapore is home to the largest proportion of high earning expatriates compared to 24 other countries and cities (HSBC 2010 Expatriate Explorer Survey). 45% of Singapore's expatriate population earns over S\$265,000 on an annual basis (*Straits Times*, 23 Sept 2010). High income ranges illustrate Singapore's status as a globally competitive city that attracts foreigners who can command the same salary in New York, London or Tokyo.

A bi-product of Singapore's immigration policy is that concentrating expatriate children in international schools and expatriates in certain areas results in expatriates of diverse socio-economic backgrounds mixing together. Researchers focusing on the everyday experiences of the expatriate community in Singapore usually fail to recognise socio-economic diversity among an elite population (e.g. Beaverstock 2011). However, class tensions within national groups are widely experienced; Chapter Five illustrates how these tensions are articulated in expatriate women's relationship with MDWs.

#### **4.3.1 Dependant's Pass Holders**

Married expatriate women tend to be on a DP. While traditionally a wives' pass, it is now issued to 'trailing' heterosexual spouses of either sex. Nevertheless, DP holders are still overwhelmingly female. The vast majority of 'trailing' spouses are married women (Beaverstock 2002; Fechter 2007a; Willis and Yeoh 2002). Family issues and husband's career requirements are perceived to render women professionals less internationally mobile than men (Moore 2002). For a variety of social and economic reasons, women in dual career households, even childless ones, are more likely to be the 'trailing spouse' with the 'follower' secondary career which is unplanned and erratic (Hardill 2002:89). As other studies have previously shown (e.g. Hardill 2002), my research indicates that prior to relocation only a handful of non working expatriate women described having given up high status, well-paid careers with defined hierarchical pay/responsibility trajectories. Most expatriate women had previously been their household's secondary earner (careers in teaching, nursing, secretarial or human resources positions were common) which as Hardill (2002) observes, while lower status and less well-paid than their husbands' careers enabled them to prioritise both home and work (2002:8). DP holders are not permitted to engage in full-time paid employment. The only exception is for DP holders who obtain permission to teach at international schools. Most DP holders are unable to secure paid work in Singapore comparable to their previous paid work. It is a small labour market and many companies are unwilling to hire personnel who are only in Singapore for a short period of time and whose decisions and often schedule revolve around the primary earner. Difficulties finding employment are further compounded by some employers' unwillingness to consider candidates who do not already have an EP and by the immigration authority's unwillingness to issue an EP without proof of employment.

Most expatriate wives have a place in the city by virtue of linking their 'place' and 'identity' to husbands (Yeoh and Huang 2010:39). The EP holder is responsible for the maintenance of dependants. Relocation Services executive, Bill Cain outlines the practical frustrations dependants encounter: 'It can be especially difficult for fiercely independent trailing spouses who find themselves dependent on their partners for even the most basic of things like opening a bank account or getting a mobile phone contract' (*ExpatLiving*, Sept. 2009:106). The EP holder's signature is needed to conduct financial transactions; all leases and contracts are in

the EP holder's name. When EP holders travel, wives can be left unable to pay bills or transfer funds. Several women I interviewed got around this by scanning a letter signed by their husband granting them permission to transfer and withdraw funds into their computers that they could print as needed.

Singapore's policies encourage the migration of expatriates who fit a heteronormative family model. Kong and Yeoh (2003) argue that the 'normal' family is ideologically constructed as the basis of the Singapore nation (2003:114). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong confirmed this viewpoint:

'The family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by 'family' we mean one man, one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children, within that framework of a stable family unit.' (Lee 2007 quoted in Oswin 2010:257)

Migration research illustrates that heterosexuality has featured as a framework for the organisation and experience of familial, marital or romantic relations in migration (Walsh, Shen, Willis 2008). Singapore's elite migration policy is designed to mirror the government's heteronormative ideology (see Chua 1997; Oswin 2010; Kong and Yeoh 2003; Yue 2007). Homosexuals, for example, are not eligible for DP passes. Same sex unions are not recognised in Singapore; partners without their own EP passes must regularly re-enter Singapore as tourists and face the possibility of being denied entry. Unmarried heterosexual partners are not eligible for DP passes but since 2004 can obtain Long Term Visit Passes. It is reasonable to speculate that migration policies contribute to a high concentration of expatriates whose family arrangements mirror Singapore's preferred family model.

#### **4.4 Situating migrant domestic workers in the Singapore model**

The autonomous migration of women to Singapore is not a new phenomenon. In the mid-nineteenth century, women from southern China, especially Guangdong province migrated to Singapore to work as *amahs* for local Chinese or colonial families (Ng 2005:100). Domestic service was also provided either by local Chinese or Malay women from rural areas who returned to their homes each evening rather than living with their employers (Jaschok 1988). The contemporary influx of MDWs from Southeast Asian countries parallels the growth of Singapore's economy and the entry of Singaporean women into the paid workforce (Singam 2005). Encouraging married women to join the labour force depleted the supply of local women

willing to perform low status work like domestic cleaning and increased pressure on women who now worked outside the home but continued to be responsible for domestic work (PuruShotam 1998).

The burden of balancing a career and family was addressed by allowing the large scale employment of MDWs (Lyons 2004). The introduction of the 'Foreign Maid Scheme' liberalised the employment of MDWs enabling Singaporeans to hire domestic workers from approved sources: Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh. Facilitating the employment of MDWs as opposed to setting up a comprehensive day care system or pursuing other state sponsored alternatives is part of a larger effort to consolidate the family as the core institution of society and to have families assume the responsibility of caring for their members (Chee 1995:8). Allowing the employment of MDWs avoids re-examining the prevailing ideology that housework is 'women's work' that includes expecting women to manage domestic workers; men tend to have only 'sporadic' contact with domestic workers (Yeoh, Huang and Devasahayam 2004:18).

Most MDWs come from the Philippines and Indonesia. MDWs must be at least 23 years old and have 8 years of formal education (MOM, 'Work Permit Application for a Foreign Domestic Worker')<sup>21</sup>. In practice, these requirements can be circumvented particularly by Indonesians who tend to lack formal educational records and sometimes birth certificates.<sup>22</sup> The term of employment is 2 years and is renewable until MDWs reach 50 years of age. As with male WP holders, the government imposes a monthly levy payable to the Singapore government by employers of MDWs. Levies are used to control the number of low-skilled migrant workers and to reduce the discrepancy between wages of foreign workers and Singaporean workers (MOM, 'Employer's Guidelines'). In 2009 the government collected S\$1.6 billion from worker levies (*Today*, March 3 2010). The current levy for MDWs payable by non citizens/non PRs is S\$265 per month (MOM, 'Foreign worker levy rates'). Levies substantially increase the cost of employing a MDW and may have the effect of reducing the wages employers are prepared to pay (Gee and Ho 2006).

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<sup>21</sup> The rationale is that older better educated women will be more mature, able to cope in a foreign country, more responsible and pose fewer problems for employers. Most reported victims of abuse are younger than 30 years old (Human Rights Watch 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Entry tests were administered between 2005 and March 2012 to verify that new MDWs understand basic safety instructions and have some English literacy and numeracy skills. However, due to a shortage of MDWs the test has been scrapped.

Unlike WP holders, MDWs are excluded from the protections of Singapore's main labour laws: the Employment Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act. Domestic workers tend to be excluded from national labour laws on 'public policy grounds' because of the logistical difficulties of regulating employment in the home (Silbaugh 2005:364). The categorising of domestic labour as 'not real work' is a well documented phenomenon (e.g. Anderson B. 2000; Chan 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2001a). Exclusion from the Employment Act means that MDWs are not statutorily entitled to rest days, limitations on hours of work or notice of termination by employers. Employers are able to cancel a MDW's work permit at will, repatriate her or return her to the employment agency. According to employment agency estimates only half of all MDWs get at least one rest day a month (*Straits Times*, 21 June 2011).<sup>23</sup> The state's hesitance to legislate basic conditions of employment establishes a situation where working conditions are extremely variable and dependent on the subjectivity of particular employers (Yeoh, Huang, Devasahayam 2004).

Largely because Hong Kong gives MDWs the same benefits and protection as other workers under the Employment Ordinance (Department of Labour, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 'Practical Guide for Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers') it is the most popular destination for MDWs in Asia. MDWs are legally entitled to a weekly rest day defined as 24 continuous hours, a minimum wage, maternity leave and public holidays, paid sick days and paid annual leave. Even though, like Singapore, Hong Kong does not have a general minimum wage it mandates a minimum monthly wage for MDWs of HK\$3,740 or approximately S\$593. Hong Kong does not charge employers a levy. However, the placement fees employment agencies charge MDWs for placement in Hong Kong far exceed those charged for Singapore and are a deterrent for some women.

In Singapore, MDWs' salaries range from S\$300 to S\$600 a month depending on nationality and experience.<sup>24</sup> In the context of Western minimum wage laws and expatriates' own salaries this can seem a pittance. However, there is wide income disparity in Singapore. Many Singaporean households earn less than WP holders' maximum salary threshold of S\$1800: in 2009, for example, 293,300 Singaporean households earned less than S\$1,000 per

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<sup>23</sup>As of Jan 1 2013, all newly contracted MDWs are required to be given an off day of at least eight continuous hours or financial compensation.

<sup>24</sup>Philippine MDWs usually command higher salaries than Indonesian, Sri Lankan or Burmese MDWs do.

month and 80,500 earned less than S\$500 per month (Singapore Labour Force Survey 2009). A security guard earning S\$900 a month living in a four bedroom flat with a homemaker wife and two children is arguably less economically well off than a MDW who has her room and board provided (security guard featured in *Straits Times*, 23 Jan 2009). Expatriates frequently place the salaries of MDWs in the local context to justify paying MDWs what by Western standards are unreasonably low wages.

MDWs must only perform household/domestic duties at the residential address stated on the work permit where the MDW is required to live with the employer (MOM, 'Conditions of Work Permit for Employer of a Foreign Domestic worker'). Not defining 'household/domestic duties' is indicative of the government's reluctance to regulate matters in the family domain. Employers are legally responsible for MDWs' well-being and conduct. MDWs are prohibited from marrying or applying to marry a citizen or PR both while holding a work permit and after the work permit has been cancelled. They are not to cohabit with a citizen or PR; not to become pregnant or deliver any child in Singapore; not to engage in any sexual relationship with a citizen or PR; not to become involved in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities including breaking up families in Singapore (MOM 'Conditions of Work Permit for Employer of a Foreign Domestic Worker' 2010). Every six months MDWs must be tested for infectious diseases such as HIV and TB and have a pregnancy test. The results of the physical exam are reported directly to MOM. As part of a mandatory MDW insurance coverage package employers post a bond of S\$5000 per MDW. Although no cash is posted, employers theoretically forfeit the bond if their MDW breaches the conditions of her work permit; in practice this rarely happens. Nevertheless, the threat of forfeiting the bond is a common excuse given by employers for restricting a MDW's social contacts by confiscating her mobile phone or for not allowing her days off. The mandatory insurance package also includes personal accident insurance and very limited medical insurance.

Employers must pay a monthly salary, provide adequate food and rest, medical treatment, housing and pay for the repatriation of the worker upon cancellation of her work permit. Each of these conditions poses a set of issues for employers to negotiate. Food and medical expenses are not supposed to be deducted from a MDW's salary but in practice whether a medical treatment is necessary and what type and quantity of food is 'adequate' are

at the employer's discretion and these expenses are often deducted from MDWs' salaries. Confusion over whether a MDW is allowed to 'help herself' to food in the home or how much food she needs often result in MDWs spending a significant portion of their salaries on food. Medical treatment can be costly. MDWs are often placed in the position of either informing their employers of medical situations which they may find embarrassing or which potentially compromise their jobs—such as an instance of a MDW who contracted herpes—or going without treatment.

The conditions of MDWs' employment produce proximities in the employment relationship that expatriates often find uncomfortable. For example, being placed in a position of consulting with the dentist treating your MDW (even being encouraged to have a look at her teeth yourself) about whether it is cost effective to fill her cavities or whether the teeth should be removed, whether or not anaesthetic is required (as one dentist suggested, anaesthetic is 'too costly for a maid' and is not used in tooth extraction procedures in 'their' villages) and, if, as her employer, you are willing to pay for her dentures. These are new experiences for many Westerners and tend to add quasi maternal or feudal overtones and feelings of obligation and indebtedness to the employer/employee relationship dynamic.

Expatriates' unfamiliarity with the conditions of MDWs' employment leads to the misunderstanding that MDWs are free to find another job and quit if they are unhappy with their working conditions. Actually, MDWs may transfer employers only with permission of the current employer and only prior to 30 days before their FDWP expires. MDWs are often dissuaded from transferring employers because they worry that the current employer will refuse permission and that even discussing transferring might cause the employer to send them home. Being 'sent home' means having an employer cancel the FDWP and buy the MDW a one-way plane ticket home. Either the employment agent or the employer escorts the MDW to the airport and supervises her until she has cleared immigration exiting Singapore. Airport security will accompany unwilling MDWs through immigration. The fear that an employer will refuse permission to transfer leads to MDWs devising expensive and inefficient ways to switch employers. A common strategy is to first find a new employer through an employment agency then to inform the present employer of an 'emergency' back home, get sent home, then quit while overseas and have an employment agency arrange for a new FDWP and re-enter

Singapore on the new permit. Employment agencies usually charge 4 to 6 months salary for placement of MDWs who do not have permission to transfer. The new employer pays the MDW's debt to the agency upfront and then deducts it from her salary. It is common for MDWs to have 85% to all of their salary deducted until the debt is repaid (Gee and Ho 2006:15).

Expatriates unawareness of MDWs' lack of job mobility causes many to miss signals of a MDW's desire to transfer employers such as a MDW acting withdrawn or less enthusiastic.

Hansen (1989) notes that labour regulations stipulating among other things that employers house, feed and take care of their servants' medical problems create dependencies which are not normally features of modern employment relationships (1989:50). Laws of this nature are informed by paternalistic attitudes which make employers responsible for workers' well-being and conduct. Such laws engender inequality between the two groups of migrant women and provide a relationship structure that can be manipulated by employers to either enhance or downplay these inequalities. Understanding the employment conditions of MDWs provides answers to a host of basic questions such as: Why do employers and MDWs have to live together? Why doesn't a MDW have time off? Why is it any of the employer's business if her MDW has a boyfriend? Why does the employer get involved in a MDW's health care issues?

#### **4.5 A delicate balance: Foreigners in the midst of Singapore's civic society**

Singaporeans are often ambivalent about the presence of so many foreigners (Yeoh 2004:2435). Cultivating a de-territorialised market relying on 'flows' (Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000; Castles 2000) of capital, ideas and of migrants both as high-skilled 'foreign talent' and as low-skilled labourers has a destabilising effect on notions of citizenship (Ong A. 2006; Appadurai 1996). The danger of Singapore's global strategy is that it potentially alienates Singaporeans by disrupting their sense of 'belonging' in the country (Koh 2007; Wee 2007). On the one hand, Singapore's success depends on migrant labour but on the other hand, Singaporean national identity is rendered insecure by the presence of so many foreign nationals. Aspects of immigration policy are structured to bolster citizens sense of belonging and of economic betterment by privileging citizens and to a lesser degree PRs over migrants in the distribution of resources and entitlements (Verweij and Pelizzo 2009).

The perception that Singaporeans are competing with both low-skilled and high-skilled migrants for jobs and housing and access to public spaces such as malls and buses creates

tensions between citizens and migrants albeit with different permutations depending on the category of migrant (Koh 2003; Trocki 2006; Yeoh and Huang 2004). Tensions are highest between citizens and the lower categories of migrant: WP holders and MDWs. These workers are seen as not possessing the international cultural capital that makes higher categories of migrants valuable; they are deemed categorically undesirable for permanent settlement (Yeoh 2004:2440). Yeoh and Huang (1999) surveyed Singaporean attitudes towards WP holders and MDWs and found that Singaporeans complained of the 'crowds'; the 'crush', the 'human barricades', the 'hordes of maids milling around'; the 'noise', and the 'litter' and a 'feeling' of being 'surrounded by them' (1999:1156). Their sheer numbers, approximately 922,000 WP holders and MDWs, make them highly visible in the city state. Certain sections of Singapore are well-known weekend enclaves for lower income foreign workers with shops and restaurants catering to specific national groups (Trocki 2006:157). Zhujiao market is associated with Bangladeshi and Indian workers; Golden Mile Complex is sometimes referred to as 'little Bangkok' because of its popularity with Thais; Lucky Plaza, also known as 'little Manila', located in the central shopping district of Orchard Road is the most well-known enclave.

Public discourse focuses on WP holders' and MDWs' anti-social behaviours. Male WP holders are characterised as posing a public nuisance through congregating in residential areas, urinating in public places, drunkenness and littering (*Straits Times*, 1 March 2010), whereas MDWs are stereotyped as sexually and morally transgressive, possibly engaging in prostitution, theft and fights as well as getting involved in romantic relationships, gossiping amongst themselves and, like male foreign workers, infringing on Singaporean public spaces by congregating in malls and parks (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005). The low social status of MDWs is magnified by the fact that they fill a job that has not been taken on by locals for some decades (Yeoh, Huang and Devasahayam 2004:20). Even though society relies on MDWs to perform essential domestic tasks, domestic work has little prestige and this translates into how MDWs are treated. The fact that MDWs are women from less developed countries who are racially and culturally different from most Singaporeans perpetuates characterisations of workers as lesser 'others' (Yeoh and Huang 1999:1155). MDWs are generally considered 'a necessary evil' that requires consistent surveillance (Yeoh and Huang 1999:1156).

On Sundays, MDWs are conspicuous in the cityscape congregating in a handful of central locations such as Lucky Plaza. Yeoh and Huang (1998) have examined how MDWs negotiate dominant conceptions of public space, occasionally succeeding in constructing 'counterspaces' which challenge dominant social practices (1998a: 595). However, it is not uncommon for MDWs to be subjected to verbal insults and comments that insinuate that they are sexually promiscuous (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005). The image of MDWs as sexually promiscuous pervades not only public discourse but conversations and interactions within MDW communities (Chang and Ling 2000). Some MDWs I spoke with sought to avoid being harassed by men by spending off days in recreational areas popular with Singaporeans and foreign students such as East Coast Park or Sentosa beach; these women felt that they blended in with other young women in these spaces and were not immediately identifiable as 'maids' as they were at Lucky Plaza.

MDWs' low status is reflected in formalised 'spatial deference'— a standard feature at condos and private clubs (Yeoh 2004:2441). Several of the more exclusive condominiums have service lifts for the use of MDWs, pets, and maintenance staff. Condominium rules prohibit MDWs from using leisure facilities. Private clubs have rules restricting areas MDWs can access. The American Club for example, requires MDWs to wait for employer's children in the 'Kids' Zone', an air conditioned playroom off the pool; the Holland Club requires MDWs to wait in the lobby and does not allow MDWs in the dining room.<sup>25</sup> Clubs commonly prohibit MDWs from accompanying employers in restaurants. If a MDW does accompany her employer into a restaurant, the staff will usually assume she is there to supervise children and not to eat and will not offer her a menu unless the employer specifically asks for her to receive one.

'Spatial deference' is embedded in the architectural design of most private condominiums and houses (see Appendix 4). Most modern middle-class North American or European homes are not built with 'spatial deference' (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997). Live-in au pairs tend to have bedrooms in the same section of the house as family members and may even share a bathroom with family members (Burikova and Miller 2010). In Singapore, apartments and houses generally have a 'maid's room' located off or near the kitchen usually

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<sup>25</sup>Regardless of nationality specific names like 'American' or 'British' Club, private clubs draw members from the Singapore elite and all nationalities and racial creeds (Beaverstock 2011).

with a nearby room with a basic shower, sink and toilet for the worker's use.<sup>26</sup> Maid's rooms tend to be small, sometimes so small that child-sized beds are the only beds that will fit in them. If larger sized, these rooms often double as storage areas for employers' non-perishable items like suitcases and Christmas ornaments. Rooms normally do not have direct exposure to the exterior of the residence and doors usually lock from the outside only; the assumption is that employers should be able to control a MDW's comings and goings from the premises. Windows usually face the 'yard' which contains clothes washing machines, storage shelves and cleaning materials. Some apartments have a door to the building hallway off the yard which is the door MDWs are expected to use and provides easy access to the kitchen. Most rooms do not have air-conditioning but usually have a ceiling or portable fan.

'Spatial deference' segregates workers to particular areas of the house, usually the kitchen and their bedroom, when they are not working (Romero 1992:118-19). MDWs do not usually join employers for meals; workers tend to eat separately in the kitchen or the yard or in their bedroom. Nor are MDWs usually allowed to make use of family household spaces such as TV rooms, games rooms, living rooms or pool areas. McClintock's (1995) discussion of how the layout and architecture of Victorian homes were designed to minimise servants' presence within public or family areas of the house resonates with contemporary practices in Singapore except that most Singapore flats and houses are much smaller than Victorian homes so workers are usually located not in 'servants' quarters' but in a single room within earshot of the kitchen.

WP holders' and MDWs' unaccompanied status likely contributes to their being 'othered' (Kitiarsa 2008; Oswin 2010; Yeoh and Huang 2010). Yeoh and Huang (2010) assert that the unaccompanied by a husband status of MDWs and 'study mothers' who come to Singapore with their children from China, causes these groups of women to be viewed as 'out of place', 'predatory' or 'potentially dangerous' (2010:39). Oswin (2010) suggests that the social stigma surrounding male construction workers unaccompanied by family and obliged by law to live in employer provided single sex dormitories or on work sites is in part due to their 'deviant' positioning as a collective of single men in a country favouring a traditional family composition. With foreign construction workers efforts are made to establish 'buffer zones' between their dormitories and Singaporean housing (Oswin 2010); with MDWs strict rules relating to

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<sup>26</sup>These areas often appear in floor plans as 'yards' or 'household shelters'. See Appendix 4.

pregnancy and relationship formation are enforced and employers are given broad surveillance responsibilities over employees (Teo and Piper 2009; Yeoh, Huang and Devasahayam 2004; Yeoh and Huang 1999). WP and MDWP holders, as already explained, are expected to earn money and return home; Singapore is unwilling to assume any entitlement burdens towards them or their dependants which would likely occur if families were permitted to join workers in Singapore due to their low wages and the high cost of living. Thus, they are precluded from complying with Singapore's preferred societal norms for adult citizens. In contrast, EP holders can afford to support their families in Singapore and thus can comply with Singapore's preferred family model without making demands on the state. Unlike MDWs, Yeoh and Huang (2010) contend that expatriate women by virtue of linking their 'place' and 'identity' to men or having higher status occupations are not seen as predatory or potentially threatening (2010:39).

Surveillance measures are targeted at controlling low-income female migrant workers' (i.e. MDWs) sexuality far more than they are directed at controlling male low-income workers' sexuality. Kitiarsa (2008) illustrates how employers of male WP holders make little attempt to control their workers' access to pornography, to monitor the area around worksites for prostitution or to control workers' contact with women on their day off. Requiring MDWs to live with employers (unlike male WP holders) enhances monitoring of MDWs' sexual activities. As previously mentioned, MDWs are required to have bi-annual medical evaluations which include screening for infectious diseases and a pregnancy test. Kitiarsa (2008) points out that these measures 'aim to trace the unwanted outcomes of possible individual sexualities during their period of employment in Singapore' (2008:599). According to MOM, regular screening for infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, malaria, syphilis and HIV is necessary because MDWs come from countries with higher incidents of these diseases and their proximity to employers' families necessitates regular check-ups (MOM in *Straits Times*, 12 Feb 2011). Singling out MDWs for screening of disease and pregnancy perpetuates what Yeoh (2006) calls Singaporeans' 'deep seated discomfort with and perhaps fear of the migrant other' (2006:33).

Societal tensions are lowest towards EP holders who are perceived to most advance Singapore's position as a 'global city'. Unlike low-skilled migrants, those labelled 'foreign talent' not only serve the purpose of meeting Singapore's economic needs but are part of a strategy to augment the population by possibly attaining PR and citizenship (Ye and Kelly 2011:695).

Unlike low-skilled migrants, the presence of high-skilled migrants is not deemed a threat to the social fabric of the host society because they are seen as possessing cosmopolitan cultural capital that ‘transcends the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’ (Cheah 2006:487). Because of their high incomes, EP holders are perceived to infringe less on public services such as buses and MRT trains than WP holders or MDWs and do not usually reside near public housing (HDB) estates. In addition friction is minimised by the fact that most EP holders’ children do not compete with Singaporeans and PRs for places in local schools. Like WP holders and MDWs, expatriates tend to congregate in specific enclaves (Beaverstock 2002). However, unlike WP holders and MDWs who risk being ostracised outside migrant enclaves, EP holders are at most an oddity when they venture beyond the city’s main shopping and entertainment districts.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter situated Singapore’s differential migration policies within the context of the larger political and social landscape. It illustrates that Singapore’s globalisation is conditioned upon domestic political accommodations. The process of globalisation is widely understood to generate contradictory spaces and internal differentiation (Sassen 1998). Domestic politics requires that the processes of migration deliberately favour some groups of migrants over others (Lee and Yeoh 2004). ‘Singaporean cosmopolitanism,’ Yeoh (2004) notes, ‘extends upwards, not downwards, welcoming foreign professionals who represent “talent capital” but excluding foreign construction workers and maids’ (2004:2438). In practice, I showed that this entails adopting a multi-layered process of ‘stratified otherization’ (Lan 2006). Ong (1996) uses the term ‘cultural citizenship’ (Ong 1996) to refer to the status of top tier migrants who the government and citizens of the host country view as most easily and advantageously (from the perspective of the host country) accommodated. I explained that a clear hierarchy defines migrants’ places in the Singapore model: PRs, are ‘the people with more permanence’ who ‘met certain standards and whose children could become Singaporeans’, EP holders are those ‘who have skills and professional qualifications’ and WP holders ‘who came in large numbers but may only stay for a short term.’ (Yeoh and Huang 1999:1163). DP holders, as non-employed migrants, are invisible in migrant hierarchies; so much so that the government does not even release statistics about DP holders.

While Singapore's immigration policy is intended to be economically pragmatic, evaluating all migrants regardless of race/ethnicity or nationality by the same financial, educational and skills based criteria, I showed that it nonetheless reflects hegemonies of relative race/ethnicity and civilisation producing an implicit racial and cultural ranking often along national lines. I illustrated how the racialised subject position of migrant workers is situated opposite Singaporean citizens and also in relation to other ethnic others. A defined Singaporean community is shaped by its exclusions and marginalisations of migrants (Yeoh and Huang 1999). WP holders and MDWs are most marginalised; tending to congregate in public spaces that Singaporeans deliberately avoid. Neither group is integrated into Singapore's residential neighbourhoods. Male workers live in dormitories set apart from Singaporean residential areas and MDWs are isolated within the confines of employer residences. Conversely, expatriates tend to work with Singaporeans and socialise in places that also serve a Singaporean clientele. Expatriates tend to live in predominantly expatriate enclaves but these enclaves are not stigmatised. The private condominiums and houses expatriates rent are viewed as more exclusive than the HDB apartments most Singaporeans live in. However, as non citizens/non PRs, expatriates are characterised as transient and do not enjoy the same rights as citizens with regard to property ownership and state subsidised schemes. Expatriates are considered insufficiently grounded to be involved in the localised politics of place making (Yeoh and Huang 2011) and are restricted from joining and taking leadership roles in Singapore organisations.

Migrant categories are gendered to reflect patriarchal norms of gender appropriate social roles (Willis and Yeoh 2002). Perhaps nowhere is the rigidity of gendered migrant categories clearer than with MDWs who are all female and can only perform domestic work. While DP holders are mostly female and face restrictions on employment, they are not subject to prohibitions on their sexuality or regular medical examinations. Regular medical screening for contagious diseases reflects Singaporean discomfort with having women from less developed countries who are racially and culturally different in close proximity. Government policies categorise MDWs' romantic attachments with citizens and PRs as harmful to the Singapore family unit and to national well-being; these assumptions further encapsulate economic and racial prejudices towards MDWs that are discussed in subsequent chapters. At the other end of the spectrum, the legal infrastructure of skilled migration is undergirded by expectations of

heteronormative family models and working/non working spousal arrangements that entrench gender roles and identities along traditional lines. Policy considerations and market conditions, including a bias against employing DP holders, facilitate the assumption of gender roles in which one spouse, usually the man, works while the other spouse, normally the woman, oversees the household. DP holders' right to remain in Singapore is entirely dependent on the EP holder; this can complicate and significantly disadvantage DP holders in the event of marital separation.

This chapter illustrated how Singapore's legal, political and social terrains operate to compel asymmetries of power between different migrant groups along interrelated axes of gender, ethnicity, class and nationality. By explaining the rationale behind Singapore's migration policies and outlining the implications of these policies, this chapter establishes the framework for subsequent chapters' exploration of how complex issues of gender roles, race and nationality, processes of socialisation and class positioning are embedded in the relationship between differentially situated migrant women.

## Chapter Five: Constructing Difference

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter shows how both expatriate women's and MDWs' processes of alignment and difference-making are informed by their shared migrant status. It provides new insight into how two groups of migrant women situated in a transnational context in which both perceive the host country's culture and the other migrant woman's home culture as, in varying degrees, at odds with their own cultural norms draw on national, cultural and racial stereotypes to favourably situate their relationship and respective migrant group in Singapore's ethnoscape. In this chapter I explain how expatriates, as outsiders to Singapore's polity, construct stereotypes of Chinese Singaporean employers of MDWs against which they juxtapose their own employment practices. Importantly, these stereotypes are informed by MDWs' own discourses. I argue that stereotyping Chinese Singaporean employers allows expatriate employers to discursively position themselves as 'better' employers assuaging conflicting feelings about participating in a highly hierarchical domestic employment relationship that many perceive as antithetical to their 'home' country's values.

The racial stereotyping of MDWs by employers and employment agencies has received significant scholarly attention (e.g. Anderson 2000; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Constable 1997; de Regt 2008; Lan 2006; Pratt 1997; Yeoh and Huang 1998b). Domestic workers, particularly non-white workers, are often characterised by employers as childlike, backward, overly-emotional and irrational (Anderson 2000; Cock 1989; Hansen 1989). In Singapore, MDWs are routinely categorised according to racialised stereotypes of cultural and character traits (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005). Philippine MDWs, for example, are stereotyped as good English speakers, quick learners and hygienic but undesirably assertive and manipulative (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005:243). Indonesian MDWs are stereotyped as docile and obedient but naïve and with a poor command of English (*ibid*). These stereotypes are cited by employers when justifying restrictive employment conditions (*ibid*). Disparaging MDWs as an inferior 'other' enables employers to confirm their superiority along the axes of class, gender, nationality, race/ethnicity and culture (Lan 2006:17). Expatriates tend to use the same racialised stereotypes of MDWs as Singaporean employment agencies to justify hiring preferences (Borch 2006). However, reciprocal attention has not been given to the racial stereotyping of employers

by both MDWs and other employers. This is likely because in most studies of domestic employment relationships the employer is part of the ethnic majority in the society (e.g. Chin 1998; Constable 1997; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2001a). Thus, whether employers' and MDWs' use of stereotypes is interrelated has been overlooked.

The vast majority of expatriates I interacted with employed Philippine MDWs who had previously worked for Chinese Singaporean employers. Certain MDW employment agencies cater to expatriate clients and part of positioning themselves as market experts entails demonstrating that they can be relied upon by potential employers to screen workers. Such agencies influenced expatriates' employment preferences by representing Philippine MDWs as most suited to working in 'Western' households. One agent advised me: *'You get a Filipina she knows about modern living. An Indonesian is too much work to train for a Westerner.'* Although Islam was never specifically mentioned, agents warned that Indonesians' dietary restrictions and Ramadan observances could be *'troublesome'* for employers. Some expatriates stated that they preferred Philippine MDWs because *'they're Catholic'* and *'less foreign'* than Indonesians.

The first section of this chapter contextualises the employment of MDWs within expatriate communities, providing a framework for interpreting expatriates' tendency to rationalise employing a MDW not simply in practical but in moral terms. The second section explores expatriates' rationalisations of themselves as 'better' employers than Singaporeans and shows how this is informed by information from MDWs. The third section suggests that whiteness operates as a visible boundary between most expatriates and MDWs that frees employers from the racial proximity anxieties experienced by Asian employers. The fourth section explores MDWs' racial hierarchies of employers. It shows how MDWs' and expatriate employers' racial stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers operate in conjunction with each other. It discusses MDWs' psychological and pragmatic investment in asserting that Westerners are 'better' than 'Chinese' employers. The final section considers whether expatriates recognise cultural affinities with MDWs.

## **5.2 Expatriates' ambivalence about employing a MDW**

A defining characteristic of expatriate employers is that they live outside of their country of origin. The prospect of employing a MDW is new to many of them (see Appendix 2.14). While house cleaning services, nannies and au pairs are increasingly common in Western countries

(Burikova and Miller 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), most expatriates arrive in Singapore with no experiential framework to draw on for how to manage a live-in employment relationship amid restrictive legal and social conditions. Many expatriates grapple with the decision of whether to employ a MDW precisely because it raises unsettling issues of race, class and cultural identification. Expatriate women worried about maintaining their privacy, about having a stranger living in their home, about the size of their dwelling's 'maids' room' and about being a 'boss' within the home. Underlying these concerns was uneasiness about what employing a MDW revealed about their character and cultural identification. Sally, a Canadian in her late 30's who was living overseas for the first time, described her initial apprehensions about employing a MDW:

*'I had mixed feelings—I'm a stay at home mom, a stay at home wife so it was partly what am I going to do? You're going to take my job away from me and having someone live with you was really a hard idea for me. I couldn't imagine it at the time having someone working for me in my house 24/7. We just don't do that. I remember seeing their living conditions and that kind of freaked me out when we were looking around at apartments...well lets just say, I didn't think I would put my dog in there [the maid's room] it was just so small I couldn't imagine a woman living in there. I didn't know if I could do that. Initially what I got told [by other women in the condo] was that I was giving somebody a job and a place to live and that you really need one [a MDW] here and I started to wrap my mind more around the fact that I was helping somebody as opposed to not helping somebody and if I'm helping somebody and that's just the way it is maybe I could accept that.'*

Like many newly arrived expatriates, Sally felt uncomfortable at the disparate standard of living between MDWs and employers. She recognised that hiring a MDW displaced her from her accustomed domestic role yet felt pressured to hire one. 'We just don't do that' has dual meaning: it suggests that Sally regarded the practice of employing MDWs as morally or ethically dubious; it is a practice that clashes with her cultural identification and needs to be justified as, at least partly, altruistic. Anderson (2007) observed that Western employers tend to see themselves as 'helping' and offering a degree of protection and stability to an 'impoverished' woman (2007:255). 'We just don't do that' also alludes to the fact that employing live-in domestic staff is not a feature of most expatriates' socio-economic backgrounds or 'real' lives back home.

While the expatriate experience of upward class mobility is well documented (e.g. Fechter 2007; Leonard 2010), I argue that the experience is often more ambivalent from a self-identity perspective than has been previously noted. For some women, employing a MDW is a visible indicator of a dissonance between their lifestyle at home and their expatriate lifestyle. Blair, American psychologist and long-term expatriate who teaches a seminar for expatriates on coping with affluence (both the experience of affluence and exposure to it), explains:

*'...the expat subculture is another kind of world. I think in the US if you've grown-up there, you have your social group that you've grown-up with, people who are like you. A lot of the places in the US are not really that diverse—if ethnically then definitely not on a socio-economic level right? And then you come here and there are a lot of benefits, for example the American Club. If I was working for Chevron, for example, in the San Francisco area which is where Chevron is based I wouldn't hang out at a country club. And then suddenly you're entitled because your company gives memberships to its Singapore employees but that's not a lifestyle you're familiar with—it's not your lifestyle—so there's a disconnect. A lot of people feel this way but nobody talks about it so you feel like you're the only one who feels that they don't belong.'*

Intersections of class and gender, McDowell (2006) suggests, are of key significance to understanding the widening class inequalities *between* women (2006:828). I suggest that understanding the spatiality of social life—'the ways that places can veil or heighten awareness of differences and varying axes of difference' (Pratt and Hanson 1994:8)—can provide vantage points from which to see certain aspects of identity and social difference. For example, when a woman who identifies as a 'middle-class' stay at home wife and mother suddenly delegates her 'job' by employing a MDW and becomes a 'ma'am' with a 'maid' and other trappings of heightened class status such as club memberships and children at private schools it is unclear from which class position(s) she draws her conception of self-identity or from which social vantage point (i.e. her 'middle-class' home identity or her 'ma'am' class identity) she evaluates proximities and distances between herself and her MDW. Class identification is complicated by the temporariness of being in a position to employ a MDW and by continual travel between 'home' and Singapore.

I illustrate how MDWs help to enable expatriates' performances of heightened class status not just by 'doing the dirty work' (Anderson 2000) but also by functioning as status symbols in the same way as they have been observed to function as indicators of upward social

mobility for Asian and Arab employers of MDWs : 'Filipina domestic workers are like Mercedes. They are a status symbol for employers (Oishi, quoting Philippine state official, 2005: 21). For example, when interviewing Leila, an American in her 40s living in an unfashionable mid-range rental four bedroom apartment, who had employed a MDW—her first house cleaner—for over a year, I was struck by the contrast between her discussion of how clothing was too expensive in Singapore so she '*stocked up on everything we need at Walmart*' in the US on visits home, and the ease with which she rang a small bell which had been resting on a side table for her MDW who was in the kitchen adjoining the sitting room (about 4 meters away) to come and refresh our coffees. Noticing my puzzled expression at the use of a bell she explained: '*I just hate shouting for her to come.*' The use of a bell to so conspicuously summon her MDW drew attention to hierarchies of feminine domestic gender roles—Leila was clearly a 'ma'am'. Barker and Galasinki (2001) observe that expatriates negotiate 'several, sometimes contradictory identities, enabling subjects to assume a variety of shifting identities at different times and places' (2001:126). However, in the context of a determinedly middle-class setting and thrifty discussion such an overt display of disparate class status unintentionally drew attention to the tenuousness of her social/class position.

I maintain that the expatriate experience of temporary upward class mobility can entail not only coping with new and heightened asymmetries of economic and social inequality, such as between themselves and MDWs, but also the shifting of more subtle status markers such as cultural dispositions and tastes (e.g. DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Skeggs 2005). Bourdieu (1984) argues that outsiders are often excluded from high status groups because of their cultural style (1984:258). While expatriate women's increased attention to their appearance has been discussed (e.g. Fechter 2007; Leonard 2008; Walsh 2005), it has not been thoroughly contextualised. McDowell (2006) notes that the experience of displacement, such as in migration, often makes subjects more cognisant of social differences and power differentials (2006:828). I observed that employing a MDW facilitated the aesthetic reinvention some expatriate women underwent to be accepted by certain cliques. When I met Jacki, originally from Texas, she had recently moved to Singapore from Surrey in the UK. Several months later we met for lunch and Jacki, the wife of an oil executive, reported that she was '*branching out*' from 'Oil Wives' and had joined the AWA fashion show committee. She said that the committee

was *'like a sorority'*; they all knew each other and were not welcoming to outsiders. She described how the chairwoman introduced herself as an 'Aggie'—a reference to a college in Texas that would be lost on most people. She said the women were all white, thin, carefully coiffed, fully made-up with long lacquered square shaped nails and big rings. She felt like a *'mess'* with her ponytail clad in the shorts and t-shirt she had worn to the post office before coming to the meeting. Jacki's *'maid'* was starting later in the week and her husband took the car to work so she had to do errands on foot in the humid weather. No one made much of an effort to include her. Jacki concluded by saying that she figured that it would just take time to be accepted by these women. When I saw her at the AWA fashion show months later it appeared she had succeeded. She was now the mirror image of other committee members right to the square tips of her coral coloured nails.

Jacki's story is an example of how employing a MDW indirectly enables women to pursue social acceptance not only by providing leisure time but by enabling the cultivation of an appearance that does not have to withstand scrubbing dishes or exposure to heat and humidity. It illustrates how MDWs feature in the composite portrait of an affluent expatriate lifestyle.

Expatriates, to varying degrees, seek to emulate or distance themselves from this lifestyle. **5.2.1**

#### ***Expatriates' discomfort with the employment relationship's racial and class***

##### ***hierarchies***

For some expatriates, the dynamic of white women employing Southeast Asian women as *'maids'* had disconcerting colonial overtones. Meredith, an Australian in her 30s, offered an insight into these internal conflicts: *'It's unreal right? You come here and everyone has a helper. My mum was like "Oh it's just like the British in the days of the Empire." It's totally not an Australian way of living.'* I suggest this exchange underscores a conflict for some expatriates in employing a MDW; namely, in their *'home'* countries it is perceived as a retrograde employment relationship not compatible with contemporary Western understandings of equality. Some expatriates were mindful of and discomforted by global economic inequalities that reproduce a class hierarchy which results in a racial dynamic which largely parallels that of colonial women and subject populations. Furthermore, expatriate women were conscious that employing a MDW often provokes criticism from those at *'home'* and fuels derogatory stereotypes of expatriate women as *'lazy'* and *'spoilt'*.

For some expatriates who are not accustomed to the sharp class divisions that underlie the roles of 'ma'am' and 'maid' this juxtaposition brings to mind not only discredited colonial enterprises but maligned and challenged (albeit still existing) racial hierarchies within their own countries. Rebecca, an American who had lived in Singapore for a year, recalled a child's birthday party she had attended with her three year old daughter: *'I can imagine the impression someone from home would have of us, all these American women sitting around in the shade while the Filipina maids chase the children. I mean it would be like the old South if they were black.'* Rebecca quickly qualified her statement with an explanation of how it was not the same because being a 'maid' was a 'good opportunity' for Philippine women since they earned more than they could in the Philippines. Nevertheless, disquiet with racial difference and social hierarchy is palpable in Rebecca's recollection of the party; she recognises an alignment of whiteness with social superiority and ethnicity (from a white perspective) with social inferiority in interactions between expatriate women and MDWs. Rebecca was aware that both her identity as 'ma'am' and her MDW's as 'maid' were infused with racialised meanings. Disparate material circumstances differentially distributed privilege and disadvantage between their respective migrant groups. Whether or not being a 'maid' in Singapore is a 'good opportunity' for Philippine women does not neutralise the social processes of categorisation and otherisation that essentialise differences between the two groups of migrant women; racialised hierarchies remain intact through the construction of binary oppositions such as, 'ma'am'/ 'maid', citizen of developed world/citizen of developing world, EP Holder/WP Holder. As Torres et al. (1999) argue 'there is always a dimension of power between the end points of such oppositions' (Torres et. al. 1999:7).

I contend that how expatriates refer to MDWs reveals sensitivity to underlying racial dynamics and insecurities about how employing a 'maid' is perceived by others. Only academics, legislators or migrant worker advocates use the term 'domestic worker'. 'Maid' is the term most often used in Singapore discourse. However, expatriate women increasingly refer to MDWs as 'helpers'. 'Helper' obscures the highly asymmetrical power dynamic and the economic relationship between employers and MDWs. 'Help' implies the offering of services to aid another; it has voluntary non-remunerated connotations. 'Helper' perpetuates the well-worn characterisation of household labour as non-economic. Some expatriate women argued that

'helper' was 'less derogatory' than 'maid' and that they employed someone to 'help' them around the house not to wait on them. Holdsworth (2002) notes that among 'conscience-stricken' expatriate women in Hong Kong who were 'horrified' to be addressed as 'ma'am', 'helper' seemed less feudal than 'maid' (2002:201). Valerie, a French woman in her 40s who had been in Singapore for 3 years, reasoned: '*Some people think the word maid has class connotations that one shouldn't use anymore. Helper is more respectful.*' While we were talking Val's 'helper' brought us tea and sliced fruits. 'Helper' and 'maid' appeared to describe exactly the same job; which term was used did not seem to impact most employers' expectations of hierarchy. I suggest that 'helper' was used to ease expatriates' conscience and to discursively obscure their participation in a commercial domestic service relationship which has, at least among Westerners, distasteful hierarchical, racial, class and gendered overtones.

Some expatriates' uneasiness at using the term 'maid' was indicative of the fact that among expatriates employing a MDW is a contested practice. Chantal, a Canadian in her 30s who had moved to Singapore 18 months previously with her husband and three young children, fit the mould of expatriate women who usually employ a MDW but was opposed to hiring MDWs:

*'They are looked at as less human. For me that's the not so nice side of Singapore and expats fall right into it. That's one of the reasons why I don't have a maid. I wouldn't back home and I find it would be very hypocritical for me to come here and hire one, maybe I would if the conditions weren't so appalling, but to me they are. Everybody excuses it by saying "oh life is so bad in the Philippines." But I can't have another woman live in a closet with no air-conditioning and no hot water. I don't care if she never in her life decides to have a hot shower—to me those things are just... they're human beings. I don't want my children growing up with values that say it's okay to treat some people as less human.'*

As Chantal's comments demonstrate, employing a MDW is seen by some expatriates as a betrayal of Western values. Gunilla, a Swedish woman in her 30s working full-time with two young children, paid her MDW S\$900 a month (the typical salary is S\$500 among expatriates) and violated the law by allowing her MDW to rent a bedroom in an HDB apartment shared with other MDWs. For Gunilla behaving consistently with her identification as a Swede was more important than adhering to Singapore's laws:

*'We pay for the luxury of not having a live-in. In Sweden we have strong labour laws and it's a very egalitarian society. It's so important that Minda feels that she has a job to go to and when she leaves the house she has finished working. She's not a maid, she's a normal person who works as a domestic worker during certain hours and the rest of the time she's a perfectly normal person.'*

Scandinavian employers most strongly associated maintaining their national identity with making an effort to comply with their home country's labour practices.

This approach was rare. Far more employers adopted a culturally relativist approach. The cultural relativist argument can be summarised as follows: 'we must respect the host's ethical evaluations and, so far as possible, conform to their customs—when in Rome do as Romans do' (Smith and Duffy 2003:35). Katie, an Australian in her 30s with three children, echoed this sentiment:

*As I said to a number of friends back home when they said 'oh God you and your helper...' (Rolls her eyes) I'm not going to be a martyr about it. I'm going to enjoy my time up here and take full advantage. There are no brownie points for making lunches and beds and dropping your kids at school everyday. So why not enjoy a little of it?*

The belief that employing a MDW was a perk of the expatriate experience was widespread. Newcomers were told that they would quickly adapt to having a live-in MDW do the cooking and tedious domestic tasks; '*they're so discrete*' and '*they're practically invisible*' were assurances given by experienced expatriates to newcomers who worried about intrusion into their privacy.

### **5.3 Expatriates' discursive construction of themselves as 'better' employers**

Most expatriate employers characterised themselves as superior to 'Chinese' employers. While a few expatriates, primarily Americans, singled out their own nationality as the 'best' among Western employers, most expatriates did not differentiate between Western nationalities in their assertions that expatriates were 'better' employers than Chinese Singaporean employers. Yvette, a woman in her 40s from the UK, who had lived in Singapore for over 2 years rationalised: '*She [MDW] tells me she's really lucky now. The Chinese she worked for before were cruel. They never let her sleep.*' As Anderson (2007) observed, Western employers tend to see themselves as protectors of 'impoverished' women (2007:255). I contribute insight into the construction of this self-image by showing how it is disseminated by drawing on accounts of 'Chinese' employers. Expatriates derived their ideas about 'Chinese'

employment practices from reading about cases of MDW abuse in newspapers, gossip, observing interactions between Chinese Singaporeans and MDWs, and, mainly, from MDWs themselves.

Recounting stories of 'Chinese' employers' conduct seemed to allay expatriate's internal conflicts about employing a MDW by providing favourable comparisons. Michelle, a British woman in her 40s, explained to several new expatriate women who had voiced discomfort about the spatial segregation entailed in having someone live in a 'maid's room' that: *'They're [MDWs] so happy to work for expats. Have you seen the maids washing cars at 4am? The Chinese squeeze as much out of them as they can.'* Michelle's account of 'Chinese' employers' conduct was intended to show that, contrary to the new expatriates' fears, MDWs would be 'happy'—even lucky she implied—to work for an expatriate. Justine, a Dutch woman in her 30s who had lived in Singapore for 7 years with four young children who employed two MDWs, obfuscated the fact that she controlled her MDWs' access to food by describing how much worse a 'Chinese' employer behaved in a restaurant:

*'I've seen them, Chinese in a Japanese restaurant, where there were two chubby boys playing computer games and each of them has an Indonesian maid next to them spoon feeding them and then suddenly this tai tai mom shows up with her big hair and designer handbag and she plops down two styrofoam packages in front of each maid—like okay there's your lunch. So the whole family was being spoon fed Japanese food and mom went down to the food court and bought two packets of rice for the maids. If you take them along you might as well buy them some food. My maids know better than to break into the smoked salmon or anything but everything else they know they can have.'*

In pointing out that her MDWs can eat everything but smoked salmon she reveals that like the 'Chinese' employer she differentiates between food for the family and food for MDWs, however, she characterises herself as comparatively generous.

#### **5.4 Racial proximity and distancing processes**

Many expatriates, as Fechter (2005) and Leonard (2010, 2008) note, come from backgrounds in which whiteness and the cultural mores associated with it are considered 'normal'. Frankenberg (1993) explains that white people's inability to grasp and name their own cultural positioning reflects how 'whites are the non-defined definers of other people' (1993:197). For some expatriates relocating to Singapore makes race and culture visibly

significant for the first time; they experience being 'racially marked' as a racial minority in the host society. However, as Fechter (2005) observes, white expatriates, even under compelling circumstances, tend to be reluctant to relinquish the notion that they constitute a racial norm (2005:89). In Singapore, factors such as large expatriate national populations, national clubs, international schools, malls catering to expatriates, restaurants frequented by expatriates and neighbourhoods dominated by expatriates make it possible to avoid significant contact with those who do not conform to cultural mores considered 'normal' by white expatriates. For many expatriate women whiteness tends to correlate with 'normal' unless a specific incident or environment disrupts this correlation. White expatriate women's experiences of disruption, of being 'racially marked', are explored in Chapter Eight.

Expatriates' whiteness influenced their relationship with MDWs by serving as a visible, effortless, marker of positional distance; unlike some Asian employers of MDWs, with a white employer there is no possible ambiguity about who is 'ma'am'. In Taiwan, Lan (2006) observed that when a MDW's ethnic otherness is ambiguous, boundaries between employers and MDWs are emphasised through class differentiation and national disparity (2006:94). Some Asian female employers experience anxiety at possibly being mistaken for their MDWs (Constable 1997; Lan 2006; Yeoh and Huang 1998b). Boundaries are constructed through the application of norms, etiquette and spatial rules that orchestrate personal interaction (Glenn 2002:12). Requiring MDWs to cut their hair short, wear baggy clothing or uniforms and use no make-up or perfume are common differentiating practices utilised by racially proximate employers (Gee and Ho 2006).

I suggest that racial difference between MDWs and white expatriate women rendered boundaries between MDWs and their expatriate employers secure, at least from an employer's perspective. Jane, a white American in her 30s who had lived in Singapore for 2 years, described queuing at Starbucks with her Philippine 'maid' Mindy. Jane recalled that they had come straight from dropping the kids off at school and were feeling 'frazzled': *'When I asked Mindy if she wanted a coffee the Singaporean behind me just about choked. You know, you don't have a coffee with a maid.'* In this situation Jane, unlike some Asian employers, could invite Mindy for coffee without incurring any public confusion about their relative statuses. In Singapore's cultural terrain there was no ambiguity about whether Jane was the employer.

Other white employers who invited their MDWs for lunch, who helped carry grocery bags or otherwise engaged in behaviours that disrupted the conventional social hierarchy of 'ma'am' and 'maid' described receiving similar censorious looks or warnings such as *'you'll spoil her'* or *'she'll forget her place'* from Singaporeans. Frankenberg (1993) observes that when part of the dominant culture, people classified as 'white' have the power to remove themselves from issues of race and consequently choose not to see the complex power relations embedded in race relations (1993:157). While expatriates are arguably not part of Singapore's dominant culture, white expatriates, as Leonard (2008, 2010) and Fechter (2005) observed, tend to be oblivious to the fact that in Asia they do not constitute a cultural norm. I add to this insight by asserting that for many expatriates 'whiteness' serves as a boundary that enables them to behave less hierarchically towards MDWs without experiencing a diminishment in status either because of public confusion or worries that their MDW will think that she was the 'same' as them. Consciously or not, underlying many expatriates' less hierarchical behaviour is a perception of the relative statuses accorded particular skin colours and/or ethnicities and nationalities. For most Western expatriate women racial difference ensures that the prospect of being 'treated like a maid'—no matter how dishevelled they are—does not exist.

However, my research shows that for Asian Western expatriates racial proximity is a source of anxiety. The potential for diminishment of status due to positional ambiguity was evident in a few instances in which 'ma'am' and 'maid' were confused. In one instance at the Dutch Club a Philippine Dutch woman in her 30s was told by a new member of staff to wait in the 'Amah area' for her employer's children to finish their swimming lesson. Mega, a Thai British woman in her 40s, admitted that to differentiate herself from her Philippine MDW she had her MDW wear a uniform. Sunny, a Philippine American in her 40s, explained that she made an effort to 'dress up' to avoid being mistaken for a 'maid'. *'Of course,'* she shrugged, *'as soon as I open my mouth and they hear my accent everyone knows I'm not a maid.'* She described hiring a Philippine MDW who was shorter, less fair and bulkier than herself so that the worker would be less likely to be mistaken as being the mother of her children. Appearance differentiating hiring criterion is typical among employers with racial proximity anxieties (see Chin 1998). By wearing expensive clothes and jewellery Sunny used economic signals coupled with her American accent to emphasise status differences between herself and Philippine MDWs.

## 5.5 MDWs' hierarchical framework of stereotypes of employers

Domestic worker studies rarely consider the deployment of racial and cultural stereotypes in MDWs' discourses. Lan (2006) and Constable (1997) are notable exceptions; both observe how Philippine MDWs derive a sense of cultural superiority over their Taiwanese and Hong Kong employers by emphasising their superior English language abilities. Paul (2011) developed this nascent area of domestic worker studies by considering MDWs' use of racial stereotypes in contrasting 'Western' employers with 'Chinese' employers in Hong Kong and Singapore. She shows how through contrasting 'Chinese' and 'Western' employer stereotypes and identifying with 'Western' traits MDWs redefine themselves as occupying a higher position in the global racial order (as they see it) on cultural grounds despite their low socio-economic status (ibid:1070). Paul (2011) suggested that these stereotypes are part of a broader, as yet unexplored, hierarchical framework of MDWs' racialised stereotypes of employers; my research further articulates this hierarchical framework.

My MDW participants constructed the same principal dichotomies between 'Western' and 'Chinese' employers that Paul (2011) observed. MDWs' focus on Chinese Singaporean employers (as opposed to Malay or Indian Singaporeans) was likely because Chinese are the ethnic majority in Singapore and the ethnic group that most frequently speaks English at home and thus are most likely, like expatriates (see Appendix 2.2), to employ Philippine MDWs who are generally conversant in English (Tan 2004). Among both Philippine and Indonesian MDWs a high level of English proficiency was perceived as a gateway to 'better' employers. However, comparatively few Indonesian MDWs spoke English well.

'Western' employers are widely considered by MDWs as the 'best' employers in Singapore (Borch 2006; Gee and Ho 2006; Human Rights Watch 2005; Paul 2011). While I targeted MDWs working for Western expatriate employers, to contextualise often repeated stereotypes of Westerners as the 'best' employers I asked MDWs about their perceptions of employers of different nationalities. In MDW discourses employers from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, mainland China and India were racially essentialised and ranked lower than Western employers. It was unclear how they ranked in comparison with Chinese Singaporean employers. MDW discourses stratified 'Western' employers placing expatriates from English speaking countries at the top: Americans followed by the others in no particular order then by

non-English speaking Westerners.<sup>27</sup> Americans' place at the top of the employer hierarchy is likely related to historic US involvement in the Philippines and to discourses and imagery in Philippines popular culture characterising America as a modern, open, egalitarian and free society (Berreman 1958; Rafael 2000). The ranking of English-speaking countries above non-English speaking Western countries is not surprising; Philippine MDWs are more likely to speak English than other Western languages.

Philippine MDWs' preference for English speaking expatriate employers is practical from a communication standpoint and emphasises cultural commonality with a migrant group identified as elite 'foreign talent' in Singapore. As previously mentioned, for MDWs, English proficiency is an important source of pride and status in relation to non-English speaking employers (Constable 1997; Lan 2006). MDWs employed by expatriates whose English was weak tended to express frustration and mild disdain with their employer's struggle to communicate. Other MDWs described linguistic confusions resulting in arguments and tensions. Inability to communicate well through a common language often exacerbates tensions between MDWs and employers (Gee and Ho 2006:27). Any increase in agency derived from acting as interpreters appeared to be offset by a higher probability of conflict due to linguistic misunderstandings.

By preferring expatriate employers, MDWs sought to communicate in English and also to maximise the odds of receiving material and intangible employment benefits. MDWs viewed working for an expatriate employer as a way to improve their chances of receiving days off and higher pay.<sup>28</sup> Days off are obviously prized, enabling MDWs to get some respite from employers, socialise, take classes and form support networks. All of the MDWs I interviewed normally had either every Sunday off or alternating Sundays off, although some reported performing household tasks prior to going out and again when they returned home. No

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<sup>27</sup>I don't think that my own positionality influenced MDWs categorisations of Westerners as the 'best' employers. Other studies (e.g. Gee and Ho 2006; Human Rights Watch 2005) conducted by non Western researchers and domestic worker rights advocates in Singapore at HOME and TWC2 have observed the same categorisations. Likewise, I don't think my nationality influenced MDWs' ranking of employers. Most MDWs were unsure what my nationality was. My accent is difficult to place. Many assumed I was British because they knew I was conducting research for a degree at a British university.

<sup>28</sup>For some MDWs better pay did not mean a higher monthly salary but rather cash in hand at the end of the month. This was initially confusing because I could not understand why a salary of S\$400 a month from an expatriate employer was considered 'better' or 'more' than S\$400 from a 'Chinese' employer. Expatriate employers were believed unlikely to follow the common practice (illegal but prevalent) of keeping a MDW's pay in arrears until her two year contract is complete, which is done partly to prevent MDWs from running away and partly so that the employer can dock small amounts in fines for various transgressions.

comprehensive data is available on the number of days off MDWs are given.<sup>29</sup> Employment agencies estimate that just over half of MDWs in Singapore receive at least one day off each month (*Straits Times* June 21 2011). MDWs' perception was that Westerners were less exacting than Singaporean Chinese employers and were more likely to provide benefits such as a private room, a TV, Christmas bonuses and annual visits home. Less tangibly, some MDWs derived status in MDW communities from working for expatriates and said that their self-esteem improved because of what they described as a less rigidly hierarchical employment relationship.

## **5.6 MDWs' stereotypes of 'Chinese' and 'Western' employers**

Stereotypes of 'Chinese' and 'Western' employers should not be understood to document the behaviour of actual employers (there are good and bad employers across national and ethnic groups). My intent is not to document actual behaviour but to show how stereotypes and stories of 'Chinese' and 'Western' employer behaviour are utilised by MDWs and expatriate employers. As Hall (1997) reminds us, identity is always relational, 'a structured representation that achieves its positive only through the narrow eye of the negative' (1997:174). While I did not include non-Western expatriates or Singaporeans in this study, the comments of Singaporean, Indian, Chinese and other non-Western friends and acquaintances strongly suggest that other employers do not subscribe to expatriates' characterisation of themselves as the 'best' employers.

Expatriate employers were stereotyped by MDWs as relaxed, friendly, generous, egalitarian and considerate. 'Western' encompasses imaginings of modernity and individuality as opposed to traditionalism and hierarchy (Carrier 2003:7). 'Chinese' employers were stereotyped as pernickety, aloof, stingy, selfish and proud. For MDWs whose job mobility and bargaining power is highly circumscribed, the prospect of better treatment even if it just consisted of acts of basic civility like an employer saying 'good morning' or 'how are you' or introducing a MDW to guests, represented an improvement in working conditions over being treated like a living appliance. Ellen, a single Philippine MDW went overseas after secondary school to help support her parents and eight siblings. She worked in Kuwait for 3 years. She

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<sup>29</sup>Beginning 1 Jan 2013, the government has made it mandatory for all newly contracted MDWs to be given a 'rest' day or, by mutual agreement with employers, to be paid in lieu of a 'rest' day. A 'rest' day is poorly defined in the employer guidelines—a few continuous hours off work will suffice. Employers are permitted to require that MDWs do household chores before taking their 'rest' day and on their return home.

subsequently worked in Singapore for three Chinese Singaporean employers over 6 years and then for a British employer for just over 2 years. She offered insight into MDWs' perceptions of some of the intangible benefits of working for an expatriate employer:

*E: Chinese they treat you as you are in their home only and you must work.*

*B: What was your relationship with the Chinese families like?*

*E: They're nice but you cannot feel as in that they are truly nice. They say they are Singaporean and you—you are Filipina you are as in maid only. Like that.*

*B: When you say 'maid only' what do you mean?*

*E: It means that we are a maid only so you don't mix with this group—you are lower [indicates with hand low height] it's not only a job but also your personality. It's how they treat you.*

*B: Can you explain a bit more about why you think working for an expat is different? E: All my friends they say every Sunday off day, better salary too, more freedom because the Chinese is very strict. I think it's better—expatriate people. I lack of confidence also with my Chinese employer because of course Chinese employers even they are good most of them behave [pauses] it is something like you also differentiate yourself to them. With expat you are a woman too. So it's really different. It's more freedom and they appreciate, they really appreciate, even the small things that you do and they always they never forget to thank you. I like that!*

Being treated like 'a maid only' was a phrase used repeatedly by MDWs in contrasting stereotypes of 'Chinese' and 'Western' employers. It means, for example, not being praised or thanked for one's work, not being acknowledged as being present in a room, not being understood to need privacy and rest time and being berated or ridiculed (Gee and Ho 2006). Ellen's contrasting 'Chinese' and 'Western' employers' efforts to differentiate themselves from MDWs highlights that social distance is manufactured (from MDWs' perspective) and not natural. Pointing out the construction of distance enables MDWs to feel that their inferior class, national and racial/ethnic status is to some degree forced upon them by insecure employers.

MDWs' stereotypes of 'Chinese' and 'Western' employers are permeated by racial stereotypes circulating in the Philippines (Paul 2011). Historically, as a foreign group of urban merchants, the Chinese were deeply resented (Berreman 1958). Chinese Filipinos are viewed as a privileged minority in the Philippines (Baytan 2000). Chinese Filipinos are characterised as highly ethnocentric and are stereotyped as: 'rich'; 'racist'; 'exploiters of Filipino labour'; 'walking calculators'; 'emasculated entities'; 'selfish' (Baytan 2000:395-6). Chinese Filipino stereotypes cannot be disentangled from stereotypes which cast ethnic Filipinos as backward, uncivilised

and poor (Baytan 2000:396). MDWs' stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers as unrelenting taskmasters and racists bear a close resemblance to stereotypes of Chinese Filipinos circulating within the Philippines. In some ways, working for an overseas 'Chinese' employer replicates deeply resented Philippine racial and class hierarchies. It makes sense that MDWs, who are themselves racially essentialised in Singapore, apply a racial lens, drawing on stereotypes from home and elsewhere, in the construction of employer hierarchies.

In contrast working for a 'Western' employer offers possibilities of alignment. The prevalence of American popular culture in the Philippines contributes to Americans and Westerners generally being stereotyped as liberal, frank, friendly, kind, modern and democratic (Enloe 2000; Ignacio 2000; Rafael 2000). These traits correspond with constructions of Philippine MDWs' self-identity as 'warm', 'friendly', 'big hearted' and 'open' (Human Rights Watch 2005; Sampang 2005). Dida, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, described why she found it easier communicating with her Australian employer than with her previous Chinese Singaporean employer: *'For me if I want to say something I feel it in my heart—I don't hold back. We are not like that—we are open people. (laughs) So with Liz I can say what I feel because she is open. She understands. With my Chinese employer I had to hold everything inside.'* Like Dida, other MDWs attributed a sense of affinity with their expatriate employers to a common cultural background of openness and expressiveness.

MDWs' tendency to characterise Westerners as 'better' employers is likely related to exposure to a colonial legacy that categorises non-Western cultures as essentially inferior (Rafael 2000). The danger of Philippine MDWs privileging ideas of the West, Paul (2011) contends, is that doing so accepts and enforces a global hierarchy in which the West occupies a superior position on moral and cultural grounds (2011:1082). I noticed that by idealising 'Western' employers MDWs risk disappointment. Several MDWs regretted leaving Chinese Singaporean employers to work for expatriates. Josie, a Philippine MDW, for example, explained: *'I wanted to try expatriate because my friends said working for expatriate is so nice. But it's not so nice for me; she always yells at me. I miss my Chinese employer.'* Several MDWs who were currently working for expatriates described missing the 'closeness' of always being included in the 'Chinese' families activities and the feeling that through several years of service they had earned the trust and affection of the family. These MDWs asserted that their expatriate

employers were polite but fundamentally detached treating them as *'employees'* not as *'daughters'*. Other MDWs were disappointed to discover that working for expatriates was *'the same'* as working for Chinese Singaporeans.

Expatriates who failed to conform to MDWs' stereotype of 'Western' employers were categorised as 'not Western' and described as having 'become Chinese'. It was widely acknowledged by MDWs that expatriates often 'change' as they adapt to living in Singapore and become accustomed to employing a MDW. Gina, a Philippine MDW in her late 40s with 17 years experience in Singapore and Hong Kong and all but 6 years with expatriate employers, commented: *'If the employer gets friends, Chinese or expats, who have been here a long time it's bad. A lot of expats used to be good to the maids but they get influenced by the others and become Chinese.'* 'Becoming a Chinese' was understood as a cultural not racial transformation. Asian employers from the West were not usually classified as 'Chinese'. Glades, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, demonstrated this when describing her current Chinese Canadian employers: *'Oh they're not the same as Chinese here. They are Western people.'* White and 'Western' are generally synonymous in Singapore. Separating race from 'Western' is a tactic for making the category of 'Western' more accessible to non-whites who cannot adopt 'whiteness'; it is more feasible to adopt the category of 'Western' instead (Bonnett 1999:202). It follows logically, that if 'Western' is accessible to a Chinese Canadian it is also (as far as MDWs are concerned) open to them as well.

However, expatriates generally did not recognise substantive affinities between their own culture and that of the Philippines—or more broadly with Southeast Asia. Expatriates tended to view similarities (such as speaking English) as superficial; arguing that substantive cultural differences negated possibilities of MDWs being genuinely 'Western'. While expatriates did not mention race overtly, most engaged in processes of 'stratified otherisation' (Lan 2006). Within given schemas of cultural difference, civilisation and economic worth, Philippine MDWs were placed at a distance (lower it was implied) from Western expatriates. Ruth, an American in her 40s who had lived in Hong Kong for 4 years and in Singapore for 3 years, exemplified this process:

*'That's a mistake people make. We forget that they are still Asian women. They might live with an American family for 12 years and sound American and pick up American expressions so that we forget that they come from a radically different background. She*

*comes from a house with a dirt floor. She grew up in a village in the Philippines. They do not have our cultural reference points. We assume they do because they sound like us, they watch our TV shows but they don't think like us. Employers tend to forget that and assume that just because they speak English well, Filipinas in particular, that they are like us and get where we are coming from. Because they seem like us some people can't adjust to the fact that they are not like us. They don't have the same expectations for us that we presume they have so what happens is this creates confusion because the maid doesn't understand why you're being so nice—they don't get it. For them, there is nothing wrong with the job they do here.'*

Ruth is describing contrasting social and economic locations, which each have particular implications vis-à-vis the grids of power relations in society (Yuval-Davis 2006b:199-200). '*They come from a radically different background*' alludes to multiple interlocking categories of experience which explain inequalities between MDWs and expatriate women. For Ruth, cultural exclusion was determined by gaping economic differences. Ruth's argument was a variant of distancing processes commonly used by employers; Anderson (2007) observed that employers tend to believe that their lifestyle is beyond the aspirations of domestic workers and therefore not subject to envy or resentment (2007:255). According to Ruth, superficial cultural similarities caused inexperienced expatriate employers to incorrectly attribute similar life expectations to MDWs.

### **5.7. The prospect of increased agency for MDWs**

When conducting fieldwork, I noticed a pronounced contrast between expatriates' expectations for MDWs to perform their work without much interference from employers and the time-consuming process of training a MDW anticipated by Singaporeans (Chew 2004; Gee and Ho 2006; Yeoh and Huang 1998b). In her study of MDWs' use of racial stereotypes in contrasting 'Western' employers and 'Chinese' employers in Hong Kong, Paul (2011) focused on ideological sources for MDWs' employer stereotypes. My research offers new insight into MDWs' employer preferences by considering how expatriates' transnational positionality tends to produce a difference in work environment which can influence MDWs' employer preferences.

Expatriates routinely hire MDWs with employment experience in Singapore (see Appendix 2.16). Expatriates usually expect MDWs to work independently so as to not inconvenience employers and to help new expatriates settle into a routine as quickly as possible. Conversely, Singaporeans often prefer to hire MDWs without previous work

experience. A Singaporean veteran employer of MDWs advice was typical, she recommended hiring someone *'fresh'* [new to Singapore] because *'it's best if they don't have any bad habits then you can shape them to what you want.'* She warned me that it would take *'a couple of months'* of careful supervision to *'train up'* a MDW. Her advice reflected a prevalent Singaporean belief that it takes substantial effort on an employer's part to train a 'good' MDW. Employment agency owner Chew (2004) explains that after selecting a MDW: 'the next step is to train (or untrain, retrain) her into your ideal maid. With patience, you can make it happen' (2004:6). In Singapore being a 'marketable maid' generally involves displaying complete deference to employers (Lyons 2005:6). Training courses operated by employment agencies and disciplining practices by employers inculcate obedience and docility in order to 'make' maids (Lyons 2005:6).

Unlike mainstream employers, expatriates usually sought to employ someone who would act on her own initiative in scheduling and performing household tasks and who would be capable of managing the household when employers were overseas. Alice, an Australian in her mid-30s, commented:

*'We didn't want one fresh off the boat—we wanted one with experience. I needed someone who I could feel could help me out, someone who could make settling in easier for me. When I interviewed Portia I just thought here was someone who could really take charge.'*

By 'really take charge' Alice explained that she meant someone who could stock a Western kitchen, prepare meals independently and devise her own cleaning schedule. Interviewing MDWs in the summer when many employers were on extended home leave provided a glimpse into the increased sense of agency some MDWs experienced when left in charge of the household. Grace, a Philippine MDW in her 40s, explained over tea on her employer's veranda:

*'You know, I am the boss of the house. "Where is something?" Only I know. I am the boss. I'm here all the time with him [points to cat and chuckles]. When you are a maid, when you become experienced, you run the house. If they want something they have to ask you.'*

Through being entrusted to organise the household, MDWs like Grace gained a sense of control and power. Being the only one who knows where items are kept, when food supplies need to be replenished or when a pet's medication is due are examples of the type of power, usually

overlooked in domestic work studies which tends to view employers as the actor who has the effective means of eliciting compliance while her MDW does not. I do not deny this power imbalance, but I try to understand the interpersonal processes by which interclass social relations are produced. MDWs often described the subtle ways that they sought to gain more control over their work schedules or extensions on their off day curfew by conveniently 'forgetting' instructions, performing tasks better when they did them their own way or by appealing to their expatriate employers' own sense of loneliness at being away from home to obtain permission to use an employer's computer to email and/or Skype relatives and friends. Scott (1985) refers to these actions as 'routine resistances'; 'a constant process of testing and renegotiating relations between classes' (1985:255). These actions are not dramatic in the way they are practiced or in their intended as well as unintended consequences, rather 'there is a never-ending attempt to seize each small advantage and press it home, to probe the limits of the existing relationships, to see precisely what can be gotten away with at the margin, and to include this margin as a part of an accepted, or at least tolerated, territorial claim' (ibid). I suggest that a contextual understanding of how power relations are constructed and maintained helps us to understand the ways in which the self-interests of MDWs and employers are expressed, negotiated and contested in the home workplace.

Part of many expatriates' rationale for employing a MDW was that doing so enables them to travel spontaneously within Asia. A significant difference between expatriates and Singaporean employers is that expatriates regularly leave MDWs home alone relying on them to look after pets and maintain households when they are overseas. Although controversial within the expatriate community, in the absence of relatives and trusted friends, it is common for expatriates to leave their children (occasionally even infants) in the care of a MDW for a weekend or longer. Conversely, when Singaporeans travel overseas they usually make arrangements for MDWs to stay with other family members or, as several MDWs explained, because Singaporeans often live with extended family there is always someone at home to supervise a MDW.

In India, Kidder (2000) observed that Western expatriates had a paradoxical relationship with domestic workers of being simultaneously dominant and dependent (2000:208- 09). She illustrates that Indian servants had a 'homeland' advantage in that they could speak

local languages far better than their expatriate employers could and that they knew about all the mundane matters that Indian nationals took for granted: how to shop for household provisions; how to supervise repair work (ibid). Employing Indian servants enabled Western expatriates to purchase the skills to navigate all the tedious details of day to day living that foreigners found bewildering and frustrating (Kidder 2000:209). I suggest that, to a lesser degree, expatriate employers in Singapore purchase a similar skill-set through employing experienced MDWs.

Cultural norms differ in the extent to which people are direct or indirect, how requests are made, and more importantly, how requests are denied or refused. When persons from different cultures meet they will have difficulty in communicating with one another to the extent that their respective 'codes' differ (Ward, Bochner, Furham 2001:53). It was common for expatriate women to rely on MDWs to liaise with building maintenance staff because it was convenient but also because MDWs could understand Singaporean accents and colloquialisms far better than their employers. Both MDWs and expatriate women described incidents of MDWs helping expatriate women adjust to cross-cultural etiquette. Sometimes, this entailed pointing out to an expatriate employer that she would be expected to leave her Gucci shoes on her Singaporean dinner host's front doorstep as shoes are not normally worn indoors in Singapore. In another example of a MDW helping an expatriate navigate cultural differences, Colleen, a Canadian in her early 50s, described being at her 'wits end':

*'I absolutely flipped out. We had workers in our house painting and it was taking forever and there was paint everywhere and in the end a sculpture that my son had made got dropped on the floor and broken and I was really angry with how careless they were doing it and I flipped out and I yelled at them and my maid made me come in the kitchen and I was really flipping out for a while and I didn't know that the neighbours could hear—I don't know if they could or not—but I was yelling a lot. And my maid called me in and said "ma'am don't yell". She said "you're losing face. You don't want everyone around here thinking that you don't have any self control. If you get upset go in the other room and cry and then put it aside and come out and start again but don't yell." I thanked her the next day. I just said thank you for telling me that because I didn't realise what that meant. She said "well ma'am its okay to cry [privately] but don't yell." I was pleased that she said that to me actually.'*

It had not occurred to Colleen that by shouting she was diminishing rather than asserting her authority. The gentle reprimand from her MDW and Colleen's favourable response is an example of how a MDW's greater cultural expertise can influence power dynamics. Accounts of

MDWs informing expatriate women about Singaporean cultural quirks or culturally correct behaviour tended to involve employers and MDWs who were either close in age or older MDWs. The relative age of employers and MDWs is not usually noted as influencing relationship dynamics; however, for younger MDWs, a significant age difference with employers appeared to impede candid exchanges. Nevertheless, gentle corrections took place within the boundaries of a transnational space in which MDWs' generally had more local knowledge than expatriate women and did not challenge expatriates' sense of the correctness of their behaviour within their own cultural perimeters.

Expatriate women readily acceded to MDWs' superior knowledge of Chinese Singaporean employers' behaviour. MDWs enabled expatriates' favourable juxtapositions of themselves with 'Chinese' employers by sharing stories about 'Chinese' employers. I observed that conveying information about 'Chinese' employers to expatriates was a subtle way for MDWs to exercise some influence over their employment prospects and conditions of employment. Upon 'learning' about 'Chinese' employment practices, expatriate women tended to want to protect their MDW from working for a 'Chinese' employer in the future. Carol, a British woman in her 40s and approaching the end of her husband's contract in Singapore, for example, worried about finding an expatriate employer for her MDW: *'I'll definitely help Franny find another expat employer. After working for us she cannot go back to a Chinese employer.'* Sharing stories of 'Chinese' employers' behaviour with expatriate employers perpetuates the cycle of certain MDWs being employed by a continual stream of expatriates.

Sharing accounts of 'Chinese' employers with expatriate employers also served to inform expatriates about how MDWs feel in certain situations and how employers (in MDWs' view) ought to behave. For example, MDWs often recounted incidents involving an employer's unwarranted mistrust of a MDW. These stories involved a 'Chinese' employer accusing a MDW of theft; often using callous racially derogatory language and threatening to send the MDW home or to call the police only to discover the missing money or item. The message MDWs sought to convey was that it was extremely hurtful to be considered categorically untrustworthy and most importantly, that employers should not allow general prejudices about MDWs to shape their perceptions of an individual MDW's character. In this way, MDWs utilised stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers to facilitate expression of how certain situations made them feel (e.g. being

accused of theft, not getting enough to eat etc.) to expatriates in a way that was non-confrontational because both MDWs and expatriates distinguished between expatriate and 'Chinese' employers.

#### **5.7.1. Heightened status in MDW communities**

I contend that expatriate employers' particular expectations for MDWs create a niche market for MDWs who only (if they can help it) work for expatriates. By networking with expatriate employers and friends who work for expatriates and by placing employment ads on bulletin boards in areas with high expatriate traffic, some MDWs have become 'expatriate specialists'. An ad at Tanglin Marketplace (a grocery store frequented by expatriates) for example, read: 'Hard worker, honest, good English, good with children, like dogs, can cook Western food, references available, employer leaving beginning of August.' Hansen (1989) observes that such advertisements establish a 'pedigree' for workers differentiating them from the general employment pool (1989:251). These MDWs advertise a skill-set which includes being able to cook and clean without much supervision and a practical familiarity with Singapore (knowing where to shop, which bus to take etc.) that eases a newly arrived expatriate employer's adjustment process. In many ways, 'expatriate specialist' MDWs position themselves as the opposite of the docile worker (re)produced in the mainstream MDW employment market.

Through socialising with a mixture of MDWs, some employed by expatriates and some by other employers, I noticed that those employed by expatriates tended to enjoy enhanced status within and across national groups. In a sense, working for an expatriate employer was a status symbol for some MDWs and facilitated the composite portrait of a 'good' (under the rigid conditions described in Chapter Four) MDW lifestyle in the same way employing a MDW functioned for some expatriates. Domestic worker studies usually focus on MDWs' national hierarchies, for example, pointing out how Philippine and Indonesian MDWs emphasise their own group's moral superiority over the other (e.g. Lan 2006:90). I show that MDWs' social hierarchies are constructed not only along axes of nationality but also by type of employer. MDWs not employed by expatriates commented enviously about 'relaxed' expatriate employers, increased access to salaries and more days off.

The only instances I observed in which MDWs' social networks crossed national lines were at AIDHA.<sup>30</sup> AIDHA's student population was close to 90% Philippine MDWs employed by expatriates.<sup>31</sup> Timah, an Indonesian MDW in her 20s, was working for her first expatriate employer after 6 years of working for Chinese Singaporean employers. She described initially feeling linguistically and culturally isolated at AIDHA. She said that the Philippine women were confident and assertive and that she was hesitant to express her viewpoints because she was unsure of her English and did not want to sound '*stupid*.' In her first month at AIDHA she was offended when a fellow student told her that she looked Chinese not Indonesian and that was probably why she was smart. Over a few months, Timah made friends with a few women who included her in conversations and post-lesson dinners. Timah's Sunday appearance gradually transformed. Initially, she wore no make-up and favoured long loose fitting trousers or boyish shorts and t-shirt combinations. Over several months at AIDHA, Timah began experimenting with make-up, wearing short denim skirts with fitted t-shirts, painting flowers on her meticulously shaped finger nails and had a friend from AIDHA cut her hair in an edgier look.

There was often a visible difference in the appearance of MDWs who enjoyed the working conditions (e.g. more leisure time, more access to salaries, and greater control over their appearance) that MDWs tended to attribute to being employed by an expatriate. The strategy adopted by a minority student at AIDHA to assimilating with a student body overwhelmingly employed by expatriates provides insight into 'expatriate specialist' MDWs' particular aesthetic that identifies them to each other and to other MDWs as members of this niche group. Timah's makeover could be construed as part of a process of adapting to her new status as a member of a perceived elite group among MDWs. Wearing make-up and form fitting clothing signalled her relative freedom to MDWs whose employers restricted their off-day clothing and forbid make-up (or who did not give MDWs a day off) and whose employers withheld most of their wages so that they did not have sufficient funds to purchase stylish bags and sandals. Within her own migrant group, Timah, like the expatriate woman Jacki, differentiated class or cultural tastes along delineated lines of 'status spheres' (Hall 1992:264)—

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<sup>30</sup>Other schools offering language classes and skills such as cooking or sewing were often either church or mosque affiliated and attracted only one nationality of MDW.

<sup>31</sup>Since 2008-09 when I conducted my research this majority has become slightly more balanced as more expatriates have employed Indonesian MDWs in response to a shortage of Philippine MDWs in Singapore.

such as the social worlds of AWA fashion show committee membership and studying at AIDA. Both groups of migrant women applied a much finer differentiating process within their respective groups than between groups.

## 5.8 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I argued that expatriates' and MDWs' overlapping transnational fields promote interactions and dependencies not seen in relationships in which the employer is comfortably ensconced within their 'home' cultural framework. By drawing on the separate literatures documenting the migratory experiences of MDWs (e.g. Lan 2006) and expatriates (e.g. Fechter 2007; Leonard 2010), I considered how their relationships with each other impact their respective experiences of class mobility or status shifting within their respective migrant communities. My observations add insight into the processes of 'transnational class mapping' identified by Lan (2006:18) by showing how migrant women's cross-group relationships enable each group to assume a range of subject positions which allow individuals to perform multifaceted class identities. I showed that the social status of each migrant woman in her respective community was in part tethered to the migrant women's relationship with each other.

This chapter augments domestic work literature by illustrating how both expatriate women's and MDWs' processes of alignment and difference-making are informed by their respective experiences as migrants. Including the perspectives of expatriate employers and MDWs showed how aspects of the two migrant groups' experiences inform each other. Both groups of migrant women drew on national, cultural and racial stereotypes to favourably situate their relationship and respective migrant group in Singapore's ethnoscape. Expatriates and MDWs used their status as 'foreigners' in Singapore to put themselves at a cultural remove from Chinese Singaporeans. Expatriates emphasised their moral superiority over 'Chinese' employers of MDWs by characterising themselves as more egalitarian, fair, flexible and open-minded. This was validated by MDWs' characterisations of differences between 'Chinese' and Western employers. I contend that constructing stereotypes of onerous 'Chinese' employers helped expatriates assuage lingering insecurities about what employing an MDW revealed about their character, domestic role, social aspirations and national and cultural identity. I argue that MDWs' use stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers not only as a defensive tool against

'Chinese' employers to further their own psychological ends by emphasising their own moral superiority, as Paul (2011) showed but, importantly, pragmatically as well. Given MDWs' limited job mobility and bargaining power, stereotypes of employers enhanced MDWs' sense of agency by serving as predictors (not always accurate) of likely employment conditions.

Importantly, by elucidating the unique dynamics of migrant employer/migrant employee domestic relationships, this chapter showed that the migratory condition of employers can have a direct bearing on domestic employment relationships. I showed that preferring 'Western' employers is also about preferring a particular type of migrant employer. Expatriates' specific migratory circumstances tended to foster employment conditions which often presented MDWs with opportunities to exert greater agency. I contribute insight into the tactics MDWs have available in gaining increased power in employment relationships by showing how MDWs could use their greater experience in Singapore (relative to most expatriate employers) to influence employment conditions. This chapter also expanded on Paul's (2011) research into MDWs' use of employer hierarchies.

While most expatriates were oblivious to questions of how 'whiteness' might influence their relationship with MDWs, participants' discourses nevertheless add depth to white studies' understanding of how migrants who are categorised as 'white' function as transnational racial minorities—particularly in relation to an 'other' transnational minority group. I contended that expatriate experiences of 'whiteness' were significant in expatriates' boundary making processes. West and Fenstermaker (1995) point out that 'it is important to distinguish an individual's experience of the dynamics of gender, race/ethnicity and class as they order the daily course of social interaction from that individual's sense of identity as a member of gendered, raced, and classed categories' (1995:27). In the Starbucks example, the white expatriate woman buying a coffee for her Philippine MDW may experience the simultaneous effects of gender, race/ethnicity and class yet identify her experience as only 'about' race/ethnicity or as only 'about' class. Nevertheless, the accomplishment of race, West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue, makes the social arrangements based on race/ethnicity seem 'normal' and 'natural', that is, as legitimate ways of organising social life (West and Fenstermaker 1995:24). I argue that white expatriates assumed that racial difference signalled what they considered obvious or 'normal' class and national hierarchies between themselves

and MDWs; they engaged in less overt boundary work than did more racially proximate employers because they assumed that their higher position in social hierarchies was evident.

Somewhat ironically, MDWs perceived expatriates to less actively engage in boundary work and attributed this relative lack of effort at maintaining hierarchical distinctions to 'Western' cultural traits of egalitarianism and openness. They inferred that expatriate employers did not seek to construct insurmountable boundaries between themselves and MDWs—not that expatriate employers often took such boundaries as a given. Expatriates' discourses comparing themselves with both MDWs and Singaporeans tended to (re)produce global hierarchies in which, as Paul observed (2011:1082), the West occupies a superior position on moral and cultural grounds.

## Chapter Six: Interconnected Labour

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how MDWs and expatriate women negotiate their gender identities in response to the ideological constraints imposed by the continuum of domestic labour. The narratives of expatriate men are also included to gain further insight into this relationship. Mothering is a major component of domestic labour and is discussed separately in Chapter Seven. West and Fenstermaker (1995) suggest that women are not only 'doing gender', they are 'doing differences'—their social actions involve gender, race and class as 'ongoing accomplishments' (1995:30). In this vein, I argue that in negotiating various positions on the structural continuum of domestic labour expatriate women and MDWs perform different versions of femininities and are simultaneously engaged in the accomplishment of other social identities that define differences among women.

This chapter takes into account the perspectives of expatriate primary earners, non-employed spouses and MDWs in analysing how they understand and value each other's labour contributions. I assert that expatriate men's influence over household dynamics and in the shaping of domestic femininities has not been adequately explored. A transnational division of domestic labour not only reflects hierarchical national differences between women but also reveals the divergent family dynamics and patriarchal structures these women are embedded in (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002:18-21). My research like other studies of domestic work (e.g. Chin 1998; Lan 2006; Gamburd 2000; Gill 1994; Glenn 1992) shows that domestic employment does not diminish but consolidates the gendered division of domestic labour.

More privileged women hire domestic help as a means to negotiate their individual career achievement and social responsibilities as a mother and as a wife (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Wrigley 1995). On the other hand, waged domestic work creates a niche in the global labour market for women from less privileged countries, who emigrate to improve the economic welfare of their families as well as to escape the patriarchal constraints at home and seek self-realisation overseas (Oishi 2005). In Singapore, MDWs' labour is often an integral component in expatriate spouses' negotiation between the demands of work and home domains. While expatriate literature illustrates MDWs' role in enabling expatriate women's leisure (e.g. Fechter 2007a; Leonard 2008; Walsh 2008), this chapter expands on that insight by showing how

gender roles and forms of labour—economic and emotional—are negotiated and valued in transnational homes. MDWs continually balance gender roles that are often contradictory in their own societies; they define themselves equally as both primary earners and distance caregivers. I show that MDWs' process of validating their own labour draws on their perceptions of the relative worth of expatriate employers' labour. The first section of this chapter explores predominant gender roles among expatriates and associative labour practices. The second section illustrates how MDWs' identification as primary earners impacts their evaluations of household labour practices. The third section shows that MDWs' recognition of a mutual identity as primary earners is not shared by expatriates and explores why it is not reciprocated.

## **6.2 Expatriate spouses' gendered roles and labour practices**

The highly gendered character of global processes produces different sets of experiences for the men and women involved in elite migration (Willis and Yeoh 2002). As explained in Chapter Four, most highly-skilled migrants are male. One spouse's increased financial dependency on the other can alter power dynamics within marital relationships (Callan and Ardener 1984; Coles and Fechter 2008; Hardill 2002). The assumption of conventional gender roles happens through subtle means (Hindman 2008:56). Government migration policies, husbands' company cultures and the expatriate community operate in unison to discourage wives from seeking paid employment (Leonard 2010:105-6). As Hindman (2008) argues, stability and normalcy are usually anchored in the expected gender roles associated with the traditional nuclear family: 'If it is male labour that brings the couple abroad, it is the woman's job to erase the move' (2008:42). In other words, the job of the spouse whose career has not prompted relocation is to create a home environment which allows the primary earner to be as effective and efficient in his/her work as possible.

Primary earners' spouses, usually wives, are charged with settling families which entails finding accommodation, schools for children, doctors, dentists and perhaps hiring a MDW. Primary earner spouses coping with new job responsibilities may be less available at home for routine tasks and emotional support. While non-employed spouses have opportunities for growth and self development, they usually initially lack social support networks or organisational affiliations and so are prone to experiencing loneliness, frustration and low self-esteem (Bryson and Hoge 2005; Callan and Ardener 1984; Fechter 2007a; Walsh 2008). Some oscillate

between acceptance of an auxiliary role and resentment and remorse (Hindman 2008). Such extensive changes in job and family life can create a crucible for stress, forcing expatriates to struggle for balance within and between the domains of work and home.

The predominance of male primary earners in the expatriate community, particularly in households employing MDWs, meant that most of my volunteers participated in a household division of labour in which men were primary earners and women were primary caregivers. I include the perspectives of members of female primary earner households but these were rare. Later in this section I discuss the gender specific pressures experienced by male 'dependant' spouses. Their experiences provide valuable insight into the rigidity of expatriates' expected gender roles. Dual career households in which both spouses made significant financial contributions were more common than female primary earner households but were still not numerous. Dual income household dynamics resembled those observed in households studied in Singapore and elsewhere where working middle-class couples employ a MDW to avert conflicts over domestic work and childcare (e.g. Anderson 2002; Hochschild 1997; Huang and Yeoh 1996; Lan 2006).

This section begins by showing how primary earners' needs influence household dynamics. This proposition can seem counter intuitive given that both MDWs and expatriate women described primary earners as being largely absent from the home. Expatriate women's response to hearing that I was including men's perspectives in my study was usually *'but they're never around.'* Most expatriate men, like other male employers of MDWs (e.g. Lan 2006; Gee and Ho 2006) stated that they had little interaction with MDWs. Typical descriptions of interactions with MDWs given by expatriate men included: *'I hardly ever see her'* or *'I have a "hello good morning" relationship with her,'* or *'Occasionally I ask her how she's doing but I wouldn't say we have conversations.'* The majority of expatriate men described their wives as having more contact with MDWs, creating an impression of household dynamics being determined by the dyad relationship between the women. However, as Pateman (1988) observed; 'Discussions of housework often overlook the expectations of the husband. The demands of his work largely determine how the housewife organises her time' (1988:130). I argue that husbands are more influential in shaping household dynamics than is usually recognised in domestic worker literature. Next, the section focuses on the non-employed

spouse's supportive labour; it demonstrates how this spouse's labour is strategically deployed to facilitate the paid labour of both the primary earner and MDWs.

### **6.2.1 Masculinity and the 'good' provider role**

The close association of masculinity and the ideology of the male primary earner family is long-established (e.g. Davidoff and Hall 1987; Okin 1989; Pateman 1988). In 'breadwinner' ideology, negotiations of self-identity centre on paid employment (Aitken 2000:587). Aitken (2005) notes that traditional post-industrial divisions of parenting labour have located masculinity and fatherhood in the public role of good provider and femininity and motherhood in the private role of caregiver (2005:227). 'Patriarchal power relations are covertly embraced as cultural norms, and these norms are translated into fathers prioritizing their perceived role as principle primary earner' (Aitken 2005:230). I argue that the additional work and family pressures brought on by relocation accentuate the close association of masculinity and the 'good' provider role.

Most primary earners described their job as 'bigger' as a result of relocation (see Appendix Three). Some felt that increased seniority created more pressure to perform well at work. Others felt greater pressure because their career was the impetus for uprooting their family. Andy, an Australian in his 40s with a wife and three children, commented: *'Certainly, I feel more pressure. It was my career that uprooted everybody.'* Some men felt that their family's decision to relocate overseas was predicated on expected financial rewards and that they had to meet expectations for vacations, acquiring new furnishings and generally maintaining a heightened lifestyle. Some men who described working more hours to secure their family's lifestyle expressed a desire to spend more time with their families but, as in other studies (e.g. Hochschild 1997; Seidler 1997), work absorbed their time and energy during the week and 'family time' was relegated to weekends.

Competition from non-Western expatriates who consider working in the region as career advancing and have no expectation of having their living expenses subsidised by their companies has amplified pressures on Western expatriates (Leonard 2010:76). In some industries, a widespread desire to work in Asia has resulted in more competition for positions. Senior bankers remarked that with increasing taxes and lower standards of living in Europe, they receive loads of requests for internal transfers to Singapore. An American banker in his

40s commented: *'Everyone wants to jump ship because Asia is the future but we don't need most people here.'* Expatriate men's tendency to view life overseas as preferable to life in their home countries was observed by Knowles (2009) and Leonard (2010). Expatriates often maintain dialogues in which the relative merits of 'home' and life overseas are continually evaluated. Knowles (2009) noted a tendency among British expatriates to view the UK as 'falling into an abyss of decline and incivility' (2009:91). I contend that discourses framing Asia as 'the future' have become more audible since the financial crisis of 2008, increasing pressure on primary earners to succeed in their jobs and on spouses to redouble efforts to accommodate the demands of the primary earner's career.

The connection of expatriate masculinity with paid work is underscored when those who do not fit predominant gender role models are considered. In a social context where most males' sense of identity is derived from financial productivity, adjusting to being a male 'dependant' can be especially challenging. Male dependants were relatively rare; men who described having initially relocated for their wives' careers tended to seek part-time, freelance or full-time work. The exceptions were men with under school-aged children who defined themselves as full-time parents. ANZA has an informal group, Secret Men's Business (SMB) for male 'trailing spouses'. I attended a couple of SMB Wednesday afternoon pub gatherings. All of the four or five men who turned up were acutely aware of the social stigma attached to being a male not engaged in paid labour. Several recounted feeling pressure from within the expatriate community to find paid employment. Martin, an Australian in his 30s who had lived in Singapore for 18 months and was a freelance writer, felt that while both male and female expatriates were critical of non-employed men, expatriate men were most vehement in their disapproval: *'Some blokes are like, "What do you do?" You know, you take a deep breath and say "I look after my kids" but they just look at you like "get a job man."'*

Men countered the social disapproval of assuming a feminised gender role by engaging in narratives which emphasised that being a full-time caregiver was best for their children or which explained that being a 'stay at home dad' was temporary and that they were/would search for paid work. However, men who found employment still coped with not being identified as their family's primary earner. Steve, a Canadian in his 30s, who had recently found part-time work at an international school, illustrated how linked the concept of 'primary earner' is to

masculine gendered roles: *'Now that I can say "I teach PE" people are much more accepting. It's like I'm somehow more of a man again—although with her career [He laughs. His wife was a senior executive at a multi-national company] my wife is still The Man of the house.'* For male spouses being a 'dependant' entailed going against powerful gender role stereotypes and facing social censor. Aitken (2005) argues that in Western culture fathers are expected to prioritise their perceived role as primary earners and that men who are children's primary caregivers occupy an awkward space because practices of fathering are defined with recourse to mothering and motherhood, hence, these men become 'Mr Moms' or 'house-husbands' (2005:230). Non-employed men's experiences illustrate the inflexibility of expatriates' gender roles; masculinity and being a 'good' provider are so closely associated that different situational contexts are perceived as deviant.

### **6.2.2 Primary earner masculinities**

McDowell (2005) illustrates how high and low status workspaces require different versions of masculinity. Similarly, I argue that expatriation tends to favour particular versions of masculinity. Walsh (2008) observes a 'macho culture' among male expatriates which thrives on increased responsibilities, long working hours, high remuneration and possibly the feeling of being the primary earner (2008:73). Professional expatriates, as explained in Chapter Four, are characterised by the Singapore government as 'foreign talent' and constitute a readily identifiable elite (Koh 2003). Beaverstock (2002) found that British male expatriates in Singapore viewed themselves as 'decision makers' with special expertise that made them more valuable to corporations than most local employees (2002:531).

The inflated egos of male expatriates are frequently alluded to in popular literature about expatriates by expatriates (e.g. Greedy 2005; Lebowitz 2004; Pascoe 2003) and were a conversational staple among expatriate women. Marisa, an American former university instructor in her 40s, commented about her husband working in the technology sector:

*'He's "big man on campus", it's a bit like being the star athlete in school. He has inflated notions of his own worth and ability to evade consequences. I think it's a very basic problem with the power dynamic in expatriate families.'*

In Singapore's male-dominated expatriate workforce, gender and occupational seniority often coalesce, producing hegemonic versions of masculinity which have traits such as self-belief,

intense hard work, risk-taking, expectation of high monetary rewards and an enhanced sense of self-importance.

Notions of 'hegemonic' and 'subordinate' masculinities encapsulate men's differential access to the power associated with their gender (Connell 1987:183-88). As illustrated by the experiences of non-employed expatriate men, there is a hierarchy of masculinities, in which gender intersects with other factors such as class, occupation, race and sexuality. Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in opposition to a range of subordinate masculinities and femininities (Hooper 2000:62). In this view, there can be no equivalent hegemonic femininity because while there may be prevailing constructions of femininity, and some women may be more privileged than others, all femininities are subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (ibid).

I argue that hegemonic expatriate masculinities fostered in the work environment create tensions when transported into the domestic domain. Walsh (2008) observed this phenomenon among expatriates in Dubai; she postulated that continual frustrations dealing with Emirati culture in the workplace led to verbal put-downs at home (2008:74). I elaborate on the impact husbands' altered behaviour (from wives' perspectives) has on domestic dynamics. Joy, an American retired school teacher accompanying her husband on his 'pre-retirement' overseas posting, theorised that his company's Singapore office was more hierarchical than the US office where less deference was given to seniority. She thought that her husband had become accustomed to obsequious behaviour at work and expected the same degree of deference at home: *'I call him the little emperor because he expects us to wait on him like they do at work.'* Joy described an incident in which her husband, who prior to relocating had made his own coffee in the morning, had a 'tantrum' when their MDW absent-mindedly poured water into the machine and turned it on but forgot to put in coffee grinds: *'He acted like it was the end of the world, poor Lynne was left quaking in the kitchen. She offered to redo the coffee but he said it was too late and she had ruined his morning.'* Joy felt that her husband's lack of concern for Lynne's feelings was because of work stress and was an unthinking extension of the dismissive way he behaved towards his '*minions*' at work.

Joy's characterisation of her husband's disconnect with expectations of normal behaviour and the usual control of emotions is similar to McDowell's (1997) observations of merchant bankers whose boisterous, aggressive, confident, 'swinging dicks' behaviour was:

‘unconnected to the real world and standards of normal behaviour’ (1997:167). Numerous women contended that husbands’ experience of seniority in a deferential work environment impacted how they behaved in the home. Home spaces which were described as having been more egalitarian pre-relocation with husbands making their own coffee or doing the dishes, for example, post-relocation became spaces geared to meeting the needs of the primary earner.

### **6.2.3 The supporting labour of spouses and MDWs**

*‘Your job is to ensure, as much as possible, calm sailing. I think to myself sometimes “do not rock the boat”.’* Jen, American in her 40s.

While overt power dynamics among female employers and domestic workers are well-explored (Anderson 2000; Cock 1989; Cox 2006; Lan 2006; Rollins 1985), the influence of male employers on household dynamics, aside from literature noting the threat of sexual advances towards MDWs (e.g. Rollins 1985:150), is largely overlooked. Cox (2006) argues that even though husbands may have no direct contact with a domestic worker the conditions of employment often reflect the husband’s values and goals as much as the wife’s; a chief goal is often projecting a more prestigious lifestyle (2006:97). I contend that the magnified importance of expatriate primary earners renders visible the efforts of both women, albeit different, to meet the expectations of the primary earner.

A sharply inverse ratio of time spent at work to time spent at home heightened the importance of whatever time husbands spent at home, increasing pressure on spouses and MDWs to make that time as conflict-free as possible. Some expatriate women referred to a husband’s arrival home as *‘show time’*. Keira, a British woman in her 30s, described her husband’s expectations: *‘His standards are much higher here than they were when we did everything ourselves. Dinner is candles, a table cloth, matching napkins... I enjoy it too but it’s my job to set the stage.’* Sarah from the UK recalled that the previous Christmas was the first of three since moving to Singapore where her husband had not lost his temper and got frustrated with everyone. *‘It’s because he’s used to being the boss at work,’* she explained, *‘and spends so much time at work that he forgets that he can’t boss everyone at home.’* She recalled how she and Mandy, her Philippine ‘helper’, had put up the tree and other decorations when her husband was away on a business trip so he would not have to deal with getting ornaments out of storage and *‘everything would be done’* for his arrival. She said she and Mandy worked to ensure that *‘Christmas would be waiting’* for her husband. Sarah explained that it was easier to *‘plan*

*around'* her husband than to confront him about his exacting demands or to ask him to help out with household tasks. Sarah said that such a request was futile because he would respond: *'I already have a job.'*

Expatriate women commented that living conditions in Singapore conspired to limit husbands' household involvement. Living in rented accommodations and in most cases apartments curtailed husbands' involvement with household tasks; cutting grass, tinkering in the garage and assorted DIY projects were either not required or were done by landlords' maintenance staff or MDWs. Expatriate women reasoned that to many husbands employing a MDW meant that all domestic work was someone else's job. Lars, a Norwegian working in the shipping industry, commented: *'It's fantastic having a maid. My wife and I can relax and enjoy our weekends. We don't waste time grocery shopping or cleaning the house like we did when we both worked full-time. Life is much freer here.'* I assert that employing a MDW solidifies a gendered division of labour because it obviates any responsibility most men might otherwise feel to 'help'.

Some expatriate women felt that creating a domestic refuge for their husbands compensated for not contributing financially to the household. As Walsh (2008:69) observed, husbands' work commitments were perceived to constantly intrude on expatriate family life. Hochschild (2003) argues that women tend to manage feelings more because in general they depend on men for money and one of the various ways of repaying their debt is to do extra emotional work especially work that affirms, enhances and celebrates the well-being and status of others (2003:165). Emotional labour is the intentional management and display of one's own feelings, usually undertaken in order to influence the feelings of others (Devault 1999:53). Sadie, an Australian in her 30s with two young children who gave up paid employment when the family relocated, commented: *'Yeah I feel more pressure here to have everything just right. Tom works so hard and is always travelling so yeah I think you do put more effort into the time you have together... it's a balance. No one wants to come home to a harried wife (laughs).'* Vicky, an American self-described 'stay at home mom' in her 40s with two children in a female primary earner household, remarked:

*'Moving here really kicked our relationship in the ass. There's lots of travelling where she's gone and I'm home with the kids and there's a lot of disconnect so we make more of an effort. It's staged cooperative parenting (laughs)—like a cooking show where*

*everything's already prepared—we [her MDW and herself] make a point of dealing with stuff when she's not home so that our family is her focus when she's here.'*

Vicky's description supports research that shows in same sex relationships with a significant difference in spouses' financial contribution a disproportionate share of housework and emotional labour is often assumed by the more financially dependent partner (Oerton 1997:423). Like other expatriate women, Vicky and her MDW endeavoured to sort out anything that might annoy or distract the primary earner; they laboured so that the results of their labour concealed its occurrence.

Expatriate non-employed men did not seem to feel a need to balance their contributions with those of the primary earner through emotional and domestic labour. Men with young children tended to focus on parenting, leaving all other domestic tasks to MDWs. Those with teenagers were generally *'hands off'* when it came to domestic tasks, as an American non-employed man commented: *'Running the house is her [MDW's] job, I stay out of it.'* The small number of non-employed expatriate men makes it difficult to generalise. Nevertheless, it does point to a significant difference in how domestic labour is allocated between households in which the non-employed spouse is female and in which he is male.

Vicky's analogy to a cooking show, where everything is prepared in advance of the telecast so cooking appears effortless to the viewer, is apt for the labour performed by wives and MDWs in creating 'quality time.' Cara, a British woman in her 30s with three young children, described how she arranged her family's schedule:

*'My husband's very good about spending time together. He works really hard but he still needs his own space so Saturday is kind of his day off. We have a small sailboat so he goes out and does his thing on the boat on Saturdays or he lies in. He can do that because I have help. If I didn't have help I know he wouldn't be able to do that with three small children in the house and then on Sunday he's 100% with us. If he doesn't get his Saturday he's a bit grouchy; on Sunday he doesn't switch off mentally. I'm really happy on Saturdays the girls go to the pool in the mornings [with MDW] or I'll take them out and on Sunday we're together as a family and then he's happy.'*

Cara and her 'help' coordinated Saturdays so that her husband could have an 'off' day (from work and from family) reflecting his primacy in setting the weekend agenda. Providing him with 'his Saturday' was in a sense Cara's way of offsetting his economic labour.

As these examples illustrate, integral to 'setting the stage' for a primary earner's time at home is the performance of emotional labour. A significant product, although intangible, of a caregiver's labour, Himmelweit (1999) contends, is that the cared for believes that he is cared for by someone who cares about his well-being (1999:29). For emotional labour to be effective it has to be perceived as genuine. I assert that cultivating the emotional dependency of the primary earner is a strategy some expatriate women utilise to counter asymmetries in power caused by their financial dependency. It establishes a dynamic in which the non-employed spouse is financially dependent but the primary earner is emotionally dependent.

A significant component of expatriate women's emotional labour involved conciliating MDWs. MDWs often bear the brunt of employers' frustrations (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005: 250). The lower one's status, the more likely one's feelings are not noticed or are treated as inconsequential (Hochschild 2003:172). According to expatriate women and MDWs, husbands had a tendency to upset MDWs by threatening to send them home for failing to perform household tasks such as not ironing shirts properly or by calling them 'stupid' or 'useless'. Katarina, a Swedish woman in her 40s, commented: *'It can be exhausting placating her [MDW]. I don't want her to sulk and take it out in her work though so I always explain, 'oh he didn't mean to sound so harsh, he's tired. You know we really appreciate everything you do...'* Theresa, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, was upset when her male employer did not want her to go out on Easter Sunday after she had stayed at home in the morning to stage an Easter egg hunt for the children. She recalled:

*'So I went and changed and told her I'm going now. And then the husband is in the kitchen cooking so I tell him "Sir I'm going now." And you know what he did, he had the tongs and he do like in my face [pretends to shake barbeque tongs in my face] "I don't understand why every Sunday you have to go out. Sunday is my day off not yours. You don't have a day off." And he's doing that with the tongs. So I went upstairs crying because I was very upset. Because the wife heard what he say so the wife ask him to go up and apologise because maybe she is thinking that I will leave them. So he apologised and I said "okay accepted" what can I do I'm only just the helper.'*

Women are more likely to engage in unpaid labour of a highly interpersonal sort; more 'adaptive' and 'cooperative' and more inclined than men to look out for the psychological needs of others (Hochschild 2003:170). The perspectives of MDWs and expatriate women, like their

roles, tend to coalesce in their sense of the intractable centrality of male primary earner's needs and in their feminine subordination to hegemonic masculinity.

Expatriate women tended to be grateful for MDWs' help in co-ordinating household routines but were also resentful because of what they often described as an emotionally draining relationship dynamic; some perceived having to placate or empathise with MDWs as extra work. Even when in a position of authority, women are expected to be more tactful, gentle and aware of the feelings of others than are their male counterparts (Hochschild 2003:168). Some expatriate women resented feeling obligated to have more personal involvement with MDWs than their husbands. Increased personal involvement undermined boundaries between 'maid' and 'ma'am' blurring distinctions between the versions of domestic femininities that female employers and MDWs enact in their daily practices through the stratified division of household labour. Being so proximately positioned on the continuum of domestic labour to MDWs threatened expatriate women's class specific and ethnocentric version of domestic femininity.

Expatriate women commented that, unlike their husbands and MDWs, they did not have days off. The labour of 'actively enhancing other people' is ongoing (ibid). Hochschild (2003) argues that women perform deference through showing support for the well-being and status of others more often than men do: 'The difference between men and women is a difference in the psychological effects of having or not having power' (2003:169). I postulate that expatriate women resented feeling gender-specific pressure, while their husbands did not, to interact with MDWs in ways that increased social proximities between the two groups of women because this behavioural difference highlighted gendered status differences (i.e. their lower status) between themselves and their husbands.

Expatriate women often felt pressure not only to make sure that everyone else was content but to present a 'happy' countenance to avoid seeming not to appreciate the 'advantages' of living in Singapore. A wife's ability to adapt to living overseas directly impacts her husband's success at work (Schell and Solomon 1997:173) Leanne, an American in her 40s who had followed her husband on prior postings to Japan and China, commented: *'As far as I can see if the wife in a partnership doesn't settle down the husband doesn't have a chance. So you do your best. You make it work.'* Some women rationalised that expressing their

unhappiness with living in Singapore was pointless because it was not an easy situation to get out of—there was no job waiting back home.

Expatriates of both sexes referred to Singapore as a 'marriage graveyard' alluding to the supposedly high divorce rate among expatriates. Expatriate women were aware of their increased financial vulnerability as a result of moving overseas. *Expat Living*, a popular magazine among expatriates, occasionally runs articles outlining the precarious financial position of most wives in the event of either of 'the twin spectres of death or divorce' occurring (*Expat Living* March 2009:143). Veronica, an Australian in her 40s reflected:

*'A lot of marriages fall apart here. I think you have to work to maintain your focus. I do put more of an effort in. I prioritise things differently than I would have at home. You know if I've had a terrible day I try to take a breath and let it go before Dave gets home.'*

Marriage both bridges and obscures the gap between the resources available to men and those available to women (Hochschild 2003:170). Post-divorce women usually have fewer financial resources than men. Compounding expatriate women's insecurities (as discussed in Chapter Eight) is the belief that Asian women are just waiting for a chance to 'steal' Western husbands.

Expatriate women's insecurities about not making an economic contribution to households—about being perceived as unproductive or not useful—are amplified by stereotypes caricaturing expatriate women as neglectful housewives and mothers: perennially dining out, obsessively groomed, self-absorbed with loads of free-time (Fechter 2010; Greedy 2005; Keenan 2005; Walsh 2008). Expatriate relocation expert Robin Pascoe warns of the social invisibility of becoming an 'expat wife' (Pascoe 2003). Numerous non-employed expatriate women related being snubbed or belittled by expatriates of both sexes but especially by employed expatriate women. Suzy, an Australian in her 40s, recalled incidences at cocktail parties where employed expatriate women literally turned their backs and walked away when they discovered she was *'just a stay at home mum.'*

Nevertheless, it is important to note that many expatriate women were happy and lead fulfilling lives. Expatriate women, like women in other studies (Devault 1999; Duncombe and Marsden 1993), tended to be most happy when they felt that their labour contributions were appreciated. Expatriate women adopt various strategies to deal with their situation (Yeoh and Khoo 1998:162). Some framed living in Singapore as a 'break' from work and a chance to focus on their children or/and explore Asia. Women engaged in a myriad of activities such as

volunteering, language classes, sports, book clubs and small businesses. However, as Fechter (2007a) observed, it is difficult to determine whether these activities should be understood as expressions of increased agency, or whether they merely reflect the limitations which arise from women's transnational situation in the first place (2007a:48).

#### **6.2.4 How primary earners view the supporting spouse's labour**

I was surprised by how aggressive some expatriate men were in response to my questions about whether their wives had experienced difficulty adjusting to life in Singapore and whether they found their roles fulfilling. I speculate that these men resented someone questioning their home dynamics—perhaps particularly a woman and/or an academic—who were described by several expatriate men in varying ways as '*a bunch of clueless liberals*'. Focusing my attention specifically on their wife's fulfilment was interpreted by some men as an attempt to undermine the narrative of expatriate life being 'great' for families.

Expatriate men tended to frame their wives' lives as privileged and desirable. Harry, an Australian in his 40s, commented: '*She has the best life in the world—her words.*' In response to an online survey (see Appendix Three), a British man in his 40s responded: '*She enjoys being a stay at home mother AND she enjoys being a stay at home wife. Our quality of life is much better now than when she worked.*' Comments like this prompted me to wonder about the balance of interests 'our quality of life' encapsulated; to what extent was 'our' actually 'my'. A few men, including an Australian in his late 30s, were hostile to my efforts to investigate the implications of relocation on spousal relationship dynamics:

*'I get the feeling that you are heading towards a very negative view on X-Pat living, another feminist beat up. I know there are many negative stories but there are many more families that just go about their normal lives and enjoy it. My wife is very happy here and loves being able to be a full-time wife and mother. There is nothing wrong with that. We have different responsibilities. This will not be discussed by people like you because it's not sensational. We have a lifestyle that you really cannot beat.'*

A number of men intimated that women who failed to adapt to expatriate life were somehow defective and/or ungrateful for their husband's efforts to provide them with a better lifestyle. Only a handful of men expressed an understanding that it might be difficult for some women to adjust to being a dependant or that women's self-esteem might be altered by giving up employment.

Blair, an American psychologist specialising in expatriate issues, regularly counselled expatriate women and couples dealing with shifts in relationship dynamics in which the husband's importance is heightened and the wife's diminished. She commented:

*'What I see in my office is all these men who are very proud of their accomplishments, as they should be, but they don't think about how everything is affecting their wife. The men say "I provide a great lifestyle—nice house, a helper, she doesn't have to work, she can enjoy herself—what more is there?" They don't think about the diminished sense of self that is so often a by-product of the lifestyle.'*

While some men may be genuinely unaware of this 'by-product', I contend that others are cognisant that wives experience adjustment problems including a diminishment in self-esteem but ignore these issues because they fear that addressing them would draw attention to uneven power relationships and possibly lead to relocation being (re)evaluated in terms of whether it serves both spouses' interests as opposed to being evaluated primarily on whether it best furthers the primary earner's career goals.

An acquaintance described attending a dinner party at which her husband, a manufacturing executive, merrily declared: *'In my next life I want to be an expat wife.'* His outburst was met with a chorus of agreement from other men at the table with comments about how fantastic it would be to be free to do whatever you wanted most of the time and silence from the women. I have heard this declaration various times and have never been convinced that any of the men uttering it genuinely desires to switch places with 'an expat wife'. I suggest characterising a wife's lifestyle as idyllic and carefree is a way to restrict her range of permissible responses to expatriation. Husbands stating a belief that they are providing a 'great life' put wives who are not 'happy' on the defensive; they risk appearing ungrateful for the lifestyle their husbands work hard to provide. Statements like 'in my next life I want to be an expat wife' are belittling; they convey the lesser status of non-employed spouses and by alluding to expatriate wives' ample leisure time—an economically unproductive activity—remind women of their dependency and unequal access to financial resources.

However, non-employed expatriate women also tended to frame relocation within a prism of family interests—albeit more ambivalently. Relocation sometimes entailed sublimating their own careers and/or skill-sets to their family's overall well-being. Clare, an Australian/French dual citizen in her 40s who had lived overseas 'for years' and in Singapore for

2 years, described how she had struggled to be '*happily dependent*' and to take responsibility for the decision to give up her career as a university lecturer and consultant which she had found '*enormously fulfilling*'. She missed the intellectual demands of her career but felt that, given her husband's demanding schedule, it was better to be an '*anchor*' for her family: '*Some women never take responsibility for the decision to become a dependant; they think it's something that was done to them. I recognise it's a sacrifice I made for the good of my family.*'

As Clare asserts, expatriate women often framed relocation as not entirely of their own volition. As a way of asserting agency, Clare took responsibility for the decision to subordinate her own career to her husband's. However, the word 'sacrifice' alludes to an apparent one-sidedness in forgoing personal interests for the family's overall good. Some expatriate women addressed this issue more bluntly. Julie, an American nurse who had tried without success to find a position in Singapore, mused: '*I don't think Jeff [husband] really gets it. You know he would die if you took away his career but he thinks I'm lucky to have a break... to be an expat wife for a while.*' Having their loss diminished or not acknowledged impacted some expatriate women's self-esteem (and angered a few).

### **6.3 MDWs' characterisations of their own labour and household authority**

MDWs are active participants in this continual negotiation of gendered roles and expectations in expatriate households. MDWs expressed their attitudes towards employers and assessments of male and female employers' relative statuses through interactions with employers and in how they performed their work. I suggest that by identifying with expatriate, generally male, primary earners, MDWs sought to legitimise their position as primary earners in their own families, reframe their status in Singapore's migrant hierarchy, and distance their paid domestic labour from the unpaid household labour of female employers. I show how as primary earners themselves, MDWs equated earning money with increased power even though that may not have been their experience within their own families. This association and expatriates' tendency to behave in ways that supported the equation of earning power with household authority influenced how MDWs evaluated the labour contributions of expatriate spouses.

In contrast to expatriate women's perception of themselves as working in concert with MDWs, MDWs tended to see more affinities between themselves and expatriate primary earners. Melissa, a single Philippine MDW in her late 30s who had over the course of 13 years

in Singapore worked for a series of expatriate, primarily American, employers, explained:

*'Usually you're both supporting families. I think that's why most helpers get along with the husband because they understand us because they are also working they also have a boss, that's my thought.'*

Melissa was one of the MDWs I got to know well through dog walking. She was representative of a group of migrant women who are seen as 'buying their way into their own bit of capitalist development' (Gibson, Law and McKay 2001:371). Melissa had bought a pension plan in the Philippines and owned a boarding house with an internet café which was managed by her mother and employed her sister-in-law. She was cognisant that her relative affluence provided her with increased influence within her family. However, she recognised that her culturally anomalous position as a financially independent single woman caused her not to fit into kinship structures back home:

*'I'm an old maid,' she joked. 'I'm tough—you have to be in my position. My brother tried to mortgage my mother's house [she bought the house for her mother and owns it] and I told him "no" it's not his; he never works for anything but he has the pride of men—you know? It's my money not his. Nobody is going to look after me when I'm old.'*

Despite being her family's primary earner, Melissa was confronted with her brother's expectation of exercising authority over the family (and its assets) as the oldest male even though he was not the primary earner.

MDWs are aware that as primary earners they usurp a traditionally masculine role but contend that they have no choice because the global demand for domestic workers is gender specific and they lack comparable employment opportunities in their home countries. MDWs are usually high earners within their home communities and are subject to pressure, often intense, to send money or to give gifts (Anggraeni 2006; Tyner 2009). It was not uncommon for childless MDWs to support parents, siblings and siblings' families. Overseas domestic service is discursively constructed as more than a job opportunity for the individual; it is a chance to raise a family's fortunes (Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Yeoh and Huang 2000)—even if doing so entails a MDW not utilising her education. Economic imperative was the driving force behind MDWs' paid domestic work. Remy, who worked as a MDW for a British family, surprised my veterinarian, Natalie (she makes house calls) with her knowledge of antibiotics. Natalie asked her how she knew so much about drugs and Remy explained that she had studied

pharmacology in the Philippines. Taken aback, Natalie blurted out: '*Aren't you bored working as a maid?*' Remy said that she found her daily routine monotonous but got paid more working as a 'maid' in Singapore than as a pharmacist in the Philippines so it was worth it—enabling her to support her parents and pay for her nephews' schooling.

However, as female primary earners, MDWs' identity within their family structure is problematic because although they are fulfilling the financial provider role traditionally associated with male heads of household, the only socially sanctioned status enjoyed by mature women within their cultural framework is as wives and mothers (Parreñas 2005; Sears 1996; Tiwon 1996). Rozario (2005) suggests that the gratitude women expect from their families is often not forthcoming because families have never accepted these women as legitimate economic providers (2005:174). In her study of Sri Lankan MDWs, Gamburd (2000) shows that a wife's financial dominance does not usually translate into increased influence over a husband's actions (2000:176-78). Despite being primary earners, the persistence of traditional gender role stereotypes prevents MDWs from claiming the familial authority normally aligned with being the primary earner (Guerra and Anonuevo 2002; Parreñas 2010; Sobritchea 2007).

Far from being seen as legitimate primary earners and familial authority figures in the Philippines, MDWs, especially mothers, are blamed for weakening the social fabric of society (Parreñas 2005:35). Husbands who are financially supported by wives face social disapproval (*ibid*). People in the Philippines use the terms 'houseband' and 'huswife' to mock migrant workers' husbands who stay home and take over domestic tasks (Pingol 2001:41). They become targets of ridicule when doing 'feminine' chores in public; in Pingol's (2001) study a stay at home father was sweeping the yard and some female students passing by shouted at him 'You will grow breasts!' (*ibid*). In the Middle East, MDWs' husbands are called 'donkeys' because they send their wives abroad (Gamburd 2000:176). The phrase emphasises that husbands have proved incapable of providing for their families financially and carries overtones of sexual impotence thus merging themes of migrant women's financial and sexual dissatisfaction (*ibid*).

In Singapore, MDWs also inspire social anxieties (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005; Yeoh and Huang 2010). The low status of domestic work contributes to MDWs being stereotyped as irresponsible, manipulative, childish, overly-emotional or as sexual predators (Yeoh and Huang 2010; Stivens 2007). Even among other female migrant workers from the

Philippines MDWs are stigmatised. Philippine MDWs recalled trying to make conversation with Philippine women who held S Passes and worked in hospitality or healthcare and being rebuffed. Jessica, a MDW in her 30s who had sufficient occupational experience and education to have been accepted to work in Canada, commented: *'Oh they think they're better than us. You know—you're just a maid but who are they?'* As mid-level migrants, S Pass holders looked down on low-level MDWs.

By framing their role as akin to expatriate primary earners, I argue that MDWs attempted to enhance their status within migrant hierarchies in Singapore and rebut their problematic social status back home. Like expatriate primary earners, they characterised themselves as going overseas for the best (i.e. highest paid) employment opportunity that would secure their family's financial well-being. However, the fact that most expatriate primary earners are men somewhat undermined the strength of this identification. In most cases, expatriate household dynamics embodied the very gender roles MDWs were accused of undermining in their home countries. MDWs' identification with expatriate primary earners was limited to the financial provider role itself and not to the role's correlation with familial authority. Highlighting this disconnect perhaps indicated that some MDWs thought that earning power and authority should align regardless of the primary earner's gender.

Still, framing themselves as 'the same' as expatriate primary earners discursively reduced the distance between their own position as low-valued foreign workers at the bottom of migrant hierarchies who are seen as socially problematic (at home and in Singapore) and expatriates' position as highly valued respected foreign workers at the top of migrant hierarchies. In this way, they challenged dominant gender roles in the Philippines by discursively disregarding views that being female is incompatible with the authority attached to being a primary earner. Pietila (2007) suggests that terms like 'dominant' and 'subordinate' are 'too polarized in their conceptualization of the distribution of social power to capture the inescapable intertwining of the competing representations of reality' (2007:9). I contend that MDWs' conceptualisation of themselves as performing a parallel economic role to that of expatriate primary earners is an interjection into ongoing social discourses both in Singapore and in their home countries about permissible gender roles and the moral and economic value attached to paid domestic work.

### 6.3.1 Perceptions of household authority

MDWs usually expected a correlation between male expatriates being primary earners as well as heads of household. This reflects traditional gender roles in the Philippines and Indonesia (Anggraeni 2006; Parreñas 2008a). Linda's—a Philippine MDW in her 30's—rationalisation that her male employer was the head of the family provides insight into MDWs' conception of how employers' gender roles and corresponding labour practices translated into household authority:

*'It is something like that because he is the man right? He is the leader of the family. He provides for his family. So for me he is more (pause) in terms of, I differentiate between my madam and my boss because he is really the leader of the family he is the man. Because my madam is my own friend and my own mother I don't hesitate. With my boss sometimes he will ask me if he's heard that I have some problem but I don't tell him my problems.'*

Linda associates her male employer with providing for the household financially whereas her female employer is associated with managing the household and providing emotional support. Linda positions herself as a 'daughter' in the household who relies on her female employer for emotional support and advice in contraposition to her male employer who is conceived of as a distant figure who is not usually disturbed by feminine domestic concerns.

However, in the couple of households in which the primary earner was female, both MDWs viewed the expatriate woman as the ultimate household authority which suggests that some MDWs correlate earning power with household authority regardless of the primary earner's gender. These MDWs explained that they did not confide in their female employers because '*she's too busy*' or '*she's never here*'; however, they did not express a parallel reliance on their non-employed male employers for emotional support. This suggests that non-employed males are not expected to perform the same emotional labour as non-employed female employers.

Some expatriate women deliberately reinforced the alignment of household authority with the primary earner by engaging in what is referred to as 'good cop/bad cop'. The wife acts as 'good cop' who behaves in a sympathetic and understanding way towards the MDW and the husband acts as 'bad cop' who enforces rules and deals with financial requests. Expatriate women reasoned that the fact that husbands spend relatively little time with MDWs makes their

assuming a disciplinary role easier. Some women thought that playing 'good cop/bad cop' fostered a communicative relationship with their MDW. Lucy, a British woman in her 30s with a young daughter, explained:

*'You want them to be able to come to you with any major problem... There are issues that you have to address and be understanding about and that might affect her work or she suddenly might be a bit miserable and you don't understand why if you don't have the relationship where she can come to you and talk and you're not going to get in a tizzy about it. You might not want to do anything about it or offer any help but if you need to know about it and if you're the one whose always strict and always on their case they're not going to want to come to you necessarily so we play 'good cop/ bad cop' so Mike would be the one to deal with a situation. I think it's easier that way because I see a lot more of Donna than he does.'*

For Lucy, disciplinary authority was incompatible with approachability. In contrast, in Singaporean households, female employers usually manage and discipline MDWs while husbands, if involved, tend to take a moderating role (Gee and Ho 2006; Yeoh and Huang 2010; Yeoh, Huang and Devasahayam 2004). As explained in Chapter Five, most MDW participants had experience with both types of employers and noticed differences in who exercised household authority.

MDWs' responses to male and female employers' relative household authority is overlooked by domestic work literature. I assert that MDWs' reactions to how employers delegate authority can have a substantial impact on the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs. MDWs recognised the power dynamics of 'good cop/bad cop', even referring to it by name, and tended to be irritated by expatriate women's unwillingness to act as managers. Lorna, a Philippine MDW in her 40s, argued that the person home most often was best suited to critique her work:

*'The maid knows who is complaining! The maid can understand because how should the sir know if the wife didn't tell him? Sir is at work all day. It makes you more angry. Why don't you tell me? Why she cannot talk with me? Why do you tell your husband? Just tell me. That's why I cannot understand them—always push the husband to tell the maid. Maybe they just do because they get themselves out of the trouble. They think that whatever goes on they make their conscience clean but they don't handle it. But they don't realise that the more they do that the more the maid gets angry with them not the husband. You know what supposed to be the household is carried on with the*

*women not the men. Every time they depend on the husband for everything, I cannot understand.'*

Lorna perceived the usually masculine role of primary earner as transgressive when it doubled as household manager—for Lorna, while the man might be the head of the family, domestic matters were feminine concerns. Lorna viewed her female employer's abdication of responsibility for the household as symptomatic of a general tendency among expatriate women to shirk off decision-making: *'It's all the responsibilities—it's the kids, it's the car, it's everything. Even though the husband is not at home they call him to deal with things. Can I ask you a question? What is the role of the expat wife?'* Ironically, by seeking to be approachable through delegating management of MDWs to husbands, expatriate women inadvertently caused some MDWs to question their competency. This caused some MDWs to bypass female employers and bring problems directly to male employers which furthered their sense of identification with male employers as fellow primary earners. Predictably, this annoyed several expatriate women who viewed it as MDWs currying favour with their husbands. Expatriate women usually did not connect their own hesitancy to manage MDWs with MDWs turning to husbands to sort out issues.

### **6.3.2 MDWs' perception of expatriate 'ma'ams' role**

While it is common for MDWs to criticise all employers, criticisms of expatriate women had a unique dimension because MDWs tended to know that for the vast majority of expatriate women, employing a MDW was a perk associated with temporarily living in Singapore. This is a previously unnoticed example of how the migratory condition of Western employers impacts domestic relationships. MDWs' knowledge that female employers would eventually resume doing a larger share of housework themselves seemed to impact their assessment of class differences. In MDW discourses expatriate women were not considered 'real' 'ma'ams' in the way that Singaporean employers or some non-Western expatriates were because for Western expatriates the lifestyle of a 'ma'am' was not a feature of their 'real' (i.e. more permanent) lives in their home countries. This was especially evident to MDWs who had accompanied employers on home visits; who saw first-hand that employers did not normally have a 'maid' and that sometimes they were not even particularly affluent compared to other members of their home society. One MDW who had visited her employer's home in the Netherlands was aghast at the

small size of their townhouse; she pointed out that she owned more land in the Philippines and that she employed a 'maid' whereas her employer did not even have a separate clothes washer and dryer.<sup>32</sup> Vivian, a MDW from the Philippines who had worked for 7 years for a French family, commented:

*'Expatriates they really want Singapore. Because they can take maids, they can do whatever they do. They take advantage of it but of course they are paying for it. If you come here without the maid you know all the things already but then you have your maid and you change your attitude. I was just thinking, what are they thinking? That they are staying forever with the maid? When they come here they don't have maid then they are not going to be here forever, they have to do things for themselves again. I think they don't really realise that they have to do things for themselves again. One of my boss's friends is like that. They stay here for 5 years with the maid and she does everything for them. When she back to their country very very hard to adjust. The kids are complaining that they don't like the way she cooks. See? Because maybe they were only thinking about now for the time being forget about the next one.'*

Vivian derived satisfaction from envisioning that eventually her female employer would have to do the work she was paid to perform for free and would possibly do it less well. Her vision of what her employer's life would be like once she returned home is an inverse of the 'fantasy of reversal' that Parreñas (2001a) observed among MDWs in which they imagine being personally served by their own domestic worker on returning to the Philippines (2001a:172). I maintain that MDWs' awareness that for many expatriates an enhanced lifestyle including employing an MDW was only temporary reduced perceived class and labour differences between themselves and expatriate women.

#### **6.4 Expatriate primary earners' reactions to the suggestion of parallel roles**

MDWs' sense of symmetry between their own and primary earner expatriate employers' role was not shared by most expatriates. While male primary earners generally recognised that MDWs work overseas because it is their best job option. None accepted a substantive correlation in roles. When asked if they thought of MDWs as occupying a parallel position as primary earners in their families, responses ranged from *'Are you joking?'* to *'It's a totally different situation.'* Some men contended that their special expertise set them apart. A UK financial industry worker in his 30s expounded:

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<sup>32</sup>In Singapore, US style clothes washing and drying machines are common as opposed to models which combine both functions that are used in Europe.

*'The difference is I'm an economic agent. My skill set is rare. There's a small number of people globally who can do what I do. Domestic workers are like fungible goods. They're fundamentally interchangeable because a virtually endless number of people can do their job.'*

A few men acknowledged that MDWs were also working overseas to support families but emphasised that *'the situation is completely different, I have lots of options and I chose to come here'* or unhelpfully concluded, *'you just can't compare the two—it's apples and oranges.'* Some men expressed sympathy for the financial pressures MDWs faced but tended to blame corrupt governments and overpopulation. Unlike for MDWs who enhanced, at least psychologically, their own migrant group's status by identifying with expatriate primary earners, there was no gain for expatriates in identifying with lower status MDWs.

For expatriates, a mélange of class, national, ethnic/racial and cultural differences—often referred to using the catch-all vague terminology of 'backgrounds'—usually formed an insurmountable barrier. Lisa, an American woman in her 30s working full-time, explained:

*'There is stuff going on with these people. So many of these women come with huge social problems. Part of why they end up here is because of their backgrounds. They're not very stable. They're not well brought up. They have huge complicated biographies.'*

Expatriates' comments about the dubious backgrounds of MDWs echoed popular stereotypes of MDWs which characterise MDWs as essentially inferior (morally, culturally and intellectually—as discussed previously) to employers (e.g. Gee and Ho 2006; Yeoh and Huang 2010). In examining the class relation embedded in domestic service in South India, Dickey (2000a) argues that employers attribute the linkage between lower-class servants and the institution of domestic service to the naturalness of servants' inferior personal characteristics rather than to the economic structure (2000a:39). Conversely, expatriates tended to argue that class positions are not immutable but are based on macro-economics. They contended that the advantages of being born in a developed country as opposed to a developing country accounted for their greater opportunities. The argument was not that MDWs were innately different but that the reality of coming from the developing world was a future of curtailed options and expectations and that circumstances in the developing world were not conducive to shaping individuals with the same values as those from developed countries. Lilly, an executive at a multi-national company, explained:

*'In the sense that we're both foreigners working overseas with dependants then I guess I see a parallel but you can't say it's the same thing. They're driven overseas—like economic refugees, we come here because we're needed. It makes all the difference.'*

Her description of lower categories of migrants being 'driven overseas like economic refugees' conjures images of masses of migrants who are compelled to move overseas not by bourgeois evaluations of comparative taxation policies, the value of international experience and consideration of career trajectories but by a basic need to survive—to provide their families with food and shelter. 'It makes all the difference' refers to the belief that the former type of economic migrant contributes to the receiving state and does not threaten to overwhelm the state in numbers or by making demands on social assistance programmes.

Solomos and Back (1999) warn that contemporary cultural racisms are 'coded within a cultural logic': 'The crucial property of these elaborations is that they can produce a racist effect while denying that this effect is the result of racism' (1999:73). 'Backgrounds' alludes to ethnic identity which is often a central component of cultural racisms; it is a social process that is relational and is inseparable from the broader social relations of power and material and ideological structures (Miron 1999:80). In drawing boundaries between themselves and lower tier migrants expatriates engaged in processes of 'stratified otherisation' (Lan 2006:16); expatriates used economic, political, geographic and cultural rationales in defining differences (and hierarchies) between themselves and lower tier migrants. Yuval-Davis (1999) points out that defining 'otherness' serves as a basis for legitimising exclusion and/or subordination of the members of the collectivity thus labelled (1999:112).

Expatriates generally accepted and sometimes praised the Singapore government's 'use and discard' policy (Yeoh 2006:32) towards migrants categorised as 'semi-skilled or unskilled'. Some expatriates said that it was 'too bad' or that they felt 'sorry' for MDWs but largely accepted Singapore's rationale that these migrants were undesirable for assimilation into society. As Leonard (2008) noted among British expatriates in Hong Kong, most Western expatriates in Singapore were unreflective about privileges of class (2008:52). For many expatriates, dissonance between their own treatment as migrants and the treatment of lower level migrants did not pose an intellectual or moral quandary. Most expatriates asserted that it was not their place as foreigners to question or try to change Singapore society; many agreed with Singapore's migration policies. Leonard (2008) noted that some British expatriates in Hong

Kong characterised Britain as 'not necessarily the best democracy' and preferred 'Chinese' ideas (2008:54). I observed that some expatriates had views congruent with Singapore policies on a broad range of issues such as taxation, social policies favouring marriage and traditional family formation, limited social benefits, restricted migration and enforcement of rigid, by Western standards, criminal laws. For these expatriates, hierarchy between migrant groups is not problematic but the logical result of an ideological view they endorse.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I argued that how the labour of various members of transnational households is valued and understood by household members informs the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs. The characterisation and performance of labour in transnational households highlights the situational/interactive nature of gendered identities (West and Zimmerman 1991:27). Conceptualising domestic labour as a continuum rather than in the constructed oppositions of paid/unpaid and labour/love (Nippert-Eng 1996), revealed how expatriate women and MDWs in their daily negotiations of domestic labour perform different versions of femininities and are simultaneously engaged in the accomplishment of social identities that define differences between them. For MDWs, remuneration established a boundary between their domestic work and their female employers'. It enabled MDWs to identify with expatriate primary earners, discursively minimising status differentials between the two migrant groups. For expatriate women, the continuity between their domestic role and MDWs' highlighted gendered status differences between themselves and their husbands. I argued that the dissonance between expatriate women's racial/ethnic and class identities and their feminine gendered role produced uncomfortable distances and proximities between, on the one hand, their gendered status relative to their husbands', and on the other, their gendered status relative to MDWs'.

In co-ordinating their household labour with MDWs, expatriate women used those aspects of women's experience that reflected their shared accommodation to the power of husbands. MDWs were assumed to understand, for example, that a husband's needs came first. While the two groups of women did not necessarily share the same understanding of the patriarchal norm of female subordination and experienced gendered power relationships differently in the various spheres of their lives, both groups of women allowed, if not actively

invoked, shared patriarchal assumptions about women's subordinate position in the family and status in society in their interactions.

Domestic work studies tend to overlook men's influence in household dynamics and in the shaping of domestic femininities. Including expatriate men in my study provided insight into how MDWs' and expatriate women's gendered performances are constructed and how power relations between men and women, as well as among women and among men, are rationalised. Connell (1995) has argued for a wide range of masculine identities that are hierarchically structured around hegemonic understandings (1995:77). Exploring the centrality of expatriate primary earners in the domestic sphere illustrates how the demands of a hegemonic masculinity—being the 'breadwinner'—influenced the different femininities of expatriate women and MDWs. I showed how when the non-employed spouse is female her 'job' (male non-employed spouses did not assume the same role) becomes creating as stress-free a home environment as possible and that this entails working in concert with MDWs—a process which can place additional emotional labour demands on expatriate women.

Framing domestic labour as a continuum highlights how both groups of migrant women are subject to patriarchal family structures and to various constraints given their class, ethnic/racial, and developed/developing world positioning. Expatriate women and MDWs formulate different strategies to divide their domestic labour between family and market. On the one hand, expatriate women hire MDWs so they can create tranquil home environments and have personal time, and, importantly, avoid conflict and tensions caused by either failing to meet husbands' expectations for a well-kept house or by pressuring husbands to help out around the house. Employing a MDW enables expatriate women to perpetuate ideals of expatriate life being more leisured and comfortable than life back home while freeing them from the more labour-intensive domestic tasks. However, expatriate women expend significant emotional labour in mediating between husbands and MDWs and in offering emotional support to MDWs. While the least visible form of household labour, emotional labour animates and maintains household relations.

On the other hand, MDWs make use of a gendered occupation to secure a higher wage than they could earn in their home countries and to attempt to transcend gender boundaries by becoming their family's primary earner. Discursively aligning themselves with expatriate primary

earners reduced hierarchical distance between themselves and 'highly-skilled' migrants. Emphasising their commercial domestic role—'it's a job'—allowed MDWs to discursively challenge predominate prejudices which meld 'being a maid' into a natural attribute of poor women from developing countries. MDWs minimised differences between their class positionality and that of expatriate women by pointing to expatriate women's shifting classed and gendered identities. MDWs differentiated between their social identity at 'home' which they considered their more stable or authentic identity and which they usually characterised as more affluent and higher status and their temporary social identity as MDWs.

The willingness of both expatriate women and MDWs to recognise parallels in their labour roles or in the structural constraints they experienced as a result of migration was limited. For example, few expatriate women and none of the MDWs I spoke with recognised parallels in each group's tendency to have under-utilised skill-sets or to subordinate personal goals for the well-being of their families. Expatriate primary earners failed to see substantive parallels between their role and that of lower tier migrants like MDWs. Hall (1997) explains: 'Identification is always structured through ambivalence. Always constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is, and which is the other' (1997:47-48). As I explained in Chapter Four, Singapore's migration policies produce a hierarchy of migrants; different categories of migrant are associated with stratified cultural images. Expatriates' articulations of difference between themselves and MDWs affirmed and argued for a class and culturally specific version of 'foreign talent'.

## **Chapter Seven: Mothering, Childcare and Quasi-Familial Relationships**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Literature about domestic employment in societies around the world suggests that similar tensions appear widely because of the combination of intimacy based on the worker's closeness with the employer's family and distance based on class, race and other hierarchies that are reproduced through the work and are maintained in the home (Constable 1997; Gill 1994; Hansen 1989; Lan 2006; Rollins 1985). However, these factors do not converge in a tidy way, their intersections are complex and 'personal experiences within domestic service are lodged within them in ways that may contradict, accommodate, or compromise their workings' (Hansen 1991:58). Employer/employee hierarchies are culturally constructed and rooted in local circumstance (Dickey and Adams 2000:3). Chapter Six showed labour is variously valued and characterised by differentially positioned members of transnational households; it considered how through performing domestic labour expatriate women and MDWs are enacting different femininities as well as defining social differences between them. This chapter focuses specifically on mothering labour and related gender identities.

Like most domestic service relationships (Constable 1997; Cox 2006; Gill 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Lan 2006; Rollins 1985), expatriate employer/MDW relationships are substantially between women. The alignment of women with domestic work must not be taken for granted but should be understood as the result of specific economic and social forces (Hansen 1989). As Chapter Six explained, employing a MDW usually perpetuates the association of domestic work with women's work because it enables households to delegate household tasks (usually to a woman) without re-examining the gendered balance of household labour (Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007). However, unlike the majority of women in Western countries (Hays 1996) and in Singapore (Stivens 2007) many expatriate women do not engage in paid employment yet still delegate a substantial portion of domestic tasks (cleaning, cooking, laundry and childcare) to a MDW. Women employers' interactions with domestic workers and nannies often centre on childcare (Burikova and Miller 2010; Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007; Hays 1996; Lan 2006); however, when employers are non-employed questions of who does what within the household and how roles are delineated become more acute.

This chapter shows how ideas of mothering and childcare are impacted by the two women's transnational positionality. The first section shows the interrelationship between the two migrant groups' 'good' mothering narratives. Mothering narratives are used by both women to situate themselves in relation to their transnational community's mothering practices, 'home' mothering ideals and to the other migrant women's mothering practices. The second section shows how delegating childcare is an area of heightened anxiety for expatriate mothers because it can be interpreted as contravening cultural ideals of intensive mothering. Expatriate women's discourses discussing MDWs' unsuitability for performing certain aspects of childcare resonate with colonial literature as well as contemporary domestic service literature. The third section argues that the formation of quasi-familial relationships between the women is motivated partly by the guilt expatriate women feel in delegating childcare (especially to a woman who lives apart from her own children) and a sense of obligation to MDWs for their helping to perform what both women recognise as a mother's role.

## **7.2 Mothering narratives**

Migrant women, like other women, are heavily invested in the moral presentation of self in relation to public norms that constitute 'good' motherhood (Bhopal 1998; Liangputtong 2006; May 2008; Parreñas 2008a). The notion of women as caregivers and nurturers is central to many cultures' conceptions of femininity (Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Hochschild 2002; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2010). Conventional femininity encompasses ideals of 'good' mothers as endlessly giving, selfless, interpersonal, empathetic and compassionate (Williams 2000:180-81). Mothering is central in the construction of both groups of women's understandings of heteronormative femininity. Various studies have shown that it is important for mothers to 'belong' and that individuals take others in their peer group as their reference point and follow shared social norms that convey respectability and a moral self (Duncan 2005; May 2008). Narratives of 'good' motherhood are constructed through justificatory accounts which situate one's own practices in relation to social norms (May 2008:472).

While all women negotiate mothering norms, in this section I contend that MDWs' and expatriate women's overlapping transnational social fields heighten the significance of 'good' mothering narratives. Both groups of migrant women are in some ways situated in an aberrant position in relation to dominant mothering narratives in their respective 'homes'. I argue that as

a result they exert additional effort in constructing narratives about their own 'good' mothering. The first subsection focuses on MDWs' narratives; the second considers expatriate women's narratives.

### **7.2.1 MDWs' mothering narratives**

Migration takes MDWs away from their families, thus disrupting the ideology of female domesticity—the notion that women are better suited to nurturing children and doing household chores than men (Parreñas 2010:1826). Transnational motherhood despite being increasingly prevalent is a highly contested practice in the Philippines (Parreñas 2005:35). Hilsdon (2000) explains that MDWs:

'like all Filipinas are subjected to a femininised form of the state sanctioned religious discourse of martyrdom in which women and mothers, located in the household formally through marriage, sacrifice themselves for "hearth, home and heaven." Yet leaving her "traditional" location may be perceived by the media, the migrant woman's family and the migrant woman herself to produce "disintegration of the family"' (2000:174-75).

Transnational mothering would seem to promote the rearrangement of gender roles because it not only removes mothers from the confines of the home, but also redefines conventional mothering, which in the Philippines is historically defined as mothers nurturing children in close proximity (Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Medina 2001; Parreñas 2010; Pingol 2001; Sobritchea 2007). However, research shows that while husbands may assume more household responsibilities including childcare, most of the labour is redistributed to female kin leaving traditional gender roles largely unchanged (Asis, Huang and Yeoh 2004; Dreby 2006; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997; Parreñas 2010). Philippine gender ideology, Parreñas (2002) reflects, 'remains a few steps behind the economic reality which has produced numerous female-headed transnational households' (2002:39).

Emerging notions of motherhood by MDWs who have been physically separated from their children either continuously or intermittently for long periods of time have been analysed by numerous researchers (Asis, Huang and Yeoh 2004; Colen 1995; Dreby 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001, 2008, 2010; Sobritchea 2007; Wong 1994). Themes of 'sacrifice' and selflessness that resonate with traditional notions of femininity and domesticity are reconfigured in transnational mothering narratives. MDWs' 'sacrifices' include coping with homesickness, guilt, spousal separation and fears that children back home would lack proper

guidance (Sobritchea 2007:180). MDWs' mothering narratives centre on rationalising that the emotional costs to themselves and families are outweighed by material gains (HondagneuSotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005). As in other studies, MDWs I spoke with discussed how remittances enabled their children to acquire better educations; education was seen as a pathway to improved job prospects. May, for example, proudly told me that by working overseas for 19 years she had paid for her children's education and that her son had finished a degree in aerospace engineering in the Philippines and would shortly be coming to Singapore to do an internship with Singapore Airlines. His older sister worked as a nurse in Manila. May's husband had initially cared for the children but had taken a mistress and started another family in their home so her children had moved in with her mother. May said she 'understood' why he had found someone else: *'He is a man after all; they cannot make the sacrifices we make.'* For May, being a 'good mother' had entailed sacrificing her marriage and not being physically with her children. For May, her sacrifices, including visiting home only 6 times in 19 years in order to save money, were justified by her children's success.

MDWs' narratives of 'good' transnational mothering appeared to hinge on separation from children being compelled by economic circumstances; only childless women described going abroad for adventure. All of the MDW mothers I spoke with advocated leaving children only as a last resort. Even women who had grown accustomed to working overseas and felt ill at ease visiting 'home', maintained narratives of being compelled to remain abroad. Rosemarie, for example, had worked in Singapore for 7 years and was estranged from her now adult children. She adapted the 'good mothering' narrative arguing that while she was no longer compelled to work abroad to pay for her children's education she was now obligated to work to save for her own retirement since she reasoned it would be *'wrong'* to be a *'burden'* on her children. For Rosemarie, 'good mothering' comprised working overseas to prevent being a drain on family resources. Justifying remaining overseas for her family's financial well-being obscured other possible reasons for remaining overseas such as a desire to avoid living with estranged children and/or a desire to be financially independent when she retired.

MDWs' mothering narratives emphasised maintaining close ties and intimate involvement in the lives of their children through communicating by mobile telephone, texting, Skype, email or Facebook. As in other studies (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas

2001b), my participants reasoned that regular communication with children eased physical distance. Rea, a Philippine single mother in her late 20s, showed me photographs (many women had photos of children on their phones) of her 6 year old daughter and 3 year old son who were cared for by her mother. She strengthened her mothering ties by talking to her mother and children almost every day and was involved in their lives through offering advice, instructions and occasionally admonishment. She stressed her close involvement by telling me that she *'knew everything'* that her children did. Rea's mothering narrative diminished the significance of physical separation by emphasising how technology enabled emotional and informational proximities.

Still, regardless of how assiduously MDWs communicated with their children, some were sensitive to being judged as 'bad' mothers by their expatriate employers. Rea, for example, worked for a British employer with two children under 10 years old. I asked her what it was like caring for children approximately the same age as her own children. She said: *'My ma'am always say she's so sad for me to have to leave them. She says, "Oh I don't know how you do it"—like that. But I tell her I don't have a choice. I don't want her pity. She probably thinks I'm a bad mother but she don't know what it's like in the Philippines.'* Like Rea, MDWs tended to resent employers' pity and implied moral superiority. Employers who characterised working overseas as a 'choice' undercut MDWs' narrative of 'good' mothering which is premised on being compelled or *'forced'* to go abroad for the good of their families.

MDWs' tendency to advocate mothers being children's primary caregivers impacted how they evaluated expatriate employers' mothering practices. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) observed that domestic workers in Los Angeles indulged in the rhetoric of comparative mothering, highlighting the sacrifices that they make as poor, legally disenfranchised, racially subordinate working mothers and setting them in contrast to the substandard mothering provided by their comparatively privileged employers (2007:26). She found that domestic workers tended to endorse motherhood as a full-time vocation for those they thought were able to afford it (ibid). Conversely, MDWs in Singapore employed by female primary earner households or dual income households were not critical of employed female employers, reasoning that they were providing for their children the same way MDWs provided for theirs. Monica, a Philippine MDW working in a dual income household, explained: *'They both have to*

*work. It's why they're here is for work.*' I suggest that the large number of non-employed expatriate women caused MDWs to conclude that employed expatriate mothers, like themselves, worked because of financial necessity.

While often critical of non-employed expatriate women's mothering practices, MDWs rarely mentioned employers' fathering practices. In spite of their own households not conforming to social norms, MDWs accepted the social norm of male providers and understood the role of 'good provider' as central to 'good' fathering. In Philippine culture (as in expatriate culture) the role of 'good provider' usually overrides other aspects of fathering and singularly determines the masculine identity of men (Parreñas 2010:1842). Expatriate fathers who spent a few hours with children at the weekend were described as 'good' because it was accepted that they were 'busy' with work most of the time. The couple of MDWs I interviewed who worked for non-employed fathers did not expect the men to spend time caring for children; these MDWs considered stay at home fathers who actively participated in childcare a novelty and an oddity.

MDWs were most critical of the mothering practices of non-employed expatriate women. Criticising expatriate mothers for neglecting their children, wondering why they had bothered to have children and pointing to possible ramifications of motherly neglect such as children not being emotionally attached to their mothers or behaving badly were common strategies for comparatively highlighting their own 'good' mothering ideals. Even from a geographic distance, MDWs argued that they were more involved in caring for their own children than were their geographically proximate to their children yet absent employers. For example, Ruby, a Philippine MDW in her 30s with three children, expressed dismay at her female employer's lack of involvement with her 10 month old son and three other children. Ruby commented: *'She's never with her kids—only for a few minutes and then she calls 'Ruby come take Henry to play.' I don't know why she have four. Maybe because she have a maid she think its okay she don't need to do anything but the kids they don't love her much.'* By voicing her disapproval of her employer, Ruby aligned herself with the still predominant belief in the Philippines that mothers should be and, importantly, should want to be even if it is not financially possible, their children's primary caregivers (Parreñas 2005:45).

MDWs believed that many expatriate mothers did not appreciate having an opportunity to spend time with their children. Faye, a Philippine MDW in her late 30s with two children,

commented: *'If you have kids you should be the one pushing the trolley right? But it's the maid taking care of the kids. Am I correct? Some they don't want even to play with their own kids.'* I asked Faye if she would behave differently if she could switch places with her employer: *'I miss my kids so much. It is a big hurt for me. If I could I would spend every day with them. When I go home last time they cry and cry when I go back. My heart is very heavy but what can I do?'* Like other MDWs, Faye idealised being able to spend 'every day' with her children participating in the minutiae of their lives.

MDWs did not consider that from the perspective of expatriate women, many of whom had worked prior to relocation (see Appendix 2.13), the time they spent with their children, even taking into account delegating some childcare to a MDW, was greater than what they had spent with their children at home. Numerous expatriate women mentioned that they spent *'far more time'* with their children in Singapore. MDWs did not see this net increase in time spent with children but focused only on the amount of total available time. MDWs and expatriate women differed in their perceptions of what constituted sufficient time with children and what counted as a legitimate reason not to spend time with children. MDWs generally did not accord much value to what expatriate women called 'me' time or to expatriate women's participation in various mothers' groups. I suggest that this is because their perspectives are shaped by very different experiences: for expatriate women relocation often results in more time being available to focus on their children but for MDWs it results in almost no time with their children.

I assert that characterising some expatriate women as wilfully neglecting their children allowed MDWs to displace their own anxieties about being 'bad' mothers. MDWs tended to not discuss fears that their own children might fail to thrive without their mother's physical presence. Only a handful of MDWs mentioned that some MDWs' children experienced social problems as a result of physically absent mothers. Angel, in her 40s with two children in their early 20s, one working as a security guard and the other working in a restaurant indirectly articulated these concerns:

*A lot of my friends have been home and they've been to meet my kids and they'll say, 'your kids are so good they didn't turn out to be like most of those Filipina who come here and work they leave their kids to somebody else's care and their kids turn out to be you know drug addicts, drunkards, they gamble and they drop out from school' and then they see my kids and they say 'you have nice kids'. I'm happy because that's how my parents brought them up and that's how I was brought up so, I mean it's a good thing.'*

Anxieties that their own children might suffer in their absence were likely exacerbated by witnessing the impact disengaged mothering had on some expatriates' children. While MDWs rightly differentiated between disengaged mothering and long-distance mothering, they must wonder how their absence is understood by their children and what impact it has on their children's development.

However, MDWs were quick to praise expatriate women who conformed to their mothering ideals. Tita, a Philippine MDW in her 30s with two children being raised by her mother, had worked for her American employer for 4 years. She identified her employer as a 'good' mother:

*'My ma'am she love kids she wants to be a mother to the girl [6 year old] so me it's only the dog and to clean the house. And she's very organised. I like their way. The American is very light job and they talk soft. She teach the girl good manners. Everything is please and thank you Auntie Tita. She's very independent child.'*

I contend that through praising expatriate women who conformed to traditional cultural ideals of femininity and domesticity, MDWs identified with and validated a conception of femininity that economic realities prevented them from fulfilling. MDWs and employers, as other chapters have shown, are continuously negotiating differences in terms of distance and proximity. Recognising a shared ideal of feminine domesticity is a significant commonality for the two migrant women.

### **7.2.2 Expatriate women's mothering narratives**

Expatriate mothers also constructed 'good' mothering narratives. A range of factors including class and ethnicity influence how mothers combine employment and caring for children (Duncan 2005; May 2008). Being a 'stay at home' mother is not a viable (or necessarily desirable) option for many Western mothers (Wrigley 1995:1). In her study of mothering ideologies in America, Hays (1996) interviewed women from a variety of ethnicities and classes; she concluded that the ideology of intensive mothering is a quintessentially middle and upper-class white women syndrome because for most households a mother giving up paid employment is not financially feasible. This mothering ideology focuses heavily on the needs of the child to the extent of putting the child's needs before the mother's (Hays 1996:8). Hays's (1996) analysis is instructive because it offers insight into prevalent mothering discourses in white upper middle-class circles which expatriate women tend to belong to or step into upon

relocation. For many expatriate women the option of staying home with their children only becomes available as a result of relocation. Hays (1996) points out that, like mothering ideologies in the Philippines, Western white middle and upper middle-class mothering ideologies have failed to keep pace with the reality of most women's lives (1996:3).

Many expatriate women identified strongly as 'mothers'. Compared with total fertility rates in Western countries which range between 1.5 births per woman in Europe to 2.09 in the US (UN World Population Prospects 2010), expatriate women as a group chose to have more children; many had given birth to a third or fourth child or adopted another child from an Asian country (see Appendix 2.6). Identifying Western women walking by with double strollers as having the 'Singapore bonus' was common at women's association coffee mornings. The 'Singapore bonus' alluded both to favourable child birthing and rearing conditions and to relatively accessible fertility treatments. Expatriate women pointed out that coping with multiple under school-aged children was only possible (and appealing) because of the '*extra pair of hands*' that MDWs provided. The availability of MDWs made it possible for expatriate women to have a mothering identity that they could not otherwise sustain.

Numerous women mentioned how being or becoming a 'mother' provided them with a sense of identity and belonging in the expatriate community. McMahon (1995) observes that children carry symbolic power to transform women's identities (1995:20-21). Abigail, a British woman who had moved to Singapore 4 years prior with no children and who had since had two children and was planning a third, described how becoming a mother had provided her with a sense of identity and social context:

*'I was much younger than most others. I was 24 when I came here. Everyone is in their 30s or 40s. They treat you like the younger sister or something. They are sweet enough. Before I became a mom myself I didn't feel like they truly acknowledged me. I found it easier once I became pregnant. You really had a purpose for meeting people— these were other moms or moms to be. And baby groups—actually it made it much easier for me to get a social context and to get new ideas of what to do with my life.'*

Of course, in numerous contexts, children become central to women's self-conceptions (e.g. Liamputtong 2006; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). However, I contend that for non-employed expatriate women the impulse to reshape their own identity through identifying as 'mothers' is particularly strong. Mothering labour, especially involving young children, is a socially

sanctioned women's role, unlike the more socially problematic position of being a non-employed expatriate wife. Women with careers tend to derive a strong sense of identity from their work whereas women without careers tend to identify primarily as mothers (Duncan 2005:67). I assert that the social uprooting inherent in relocation and an expatriate community with predominantly traditional gender roles creates an environment exceptionally conducive to expatriate women self-identifying primarily as mothers.

As Abigail's commentary illustrates, mothering narratives place the self in social terms. McMahon (1995) argues that identities are upheld through interactions when individuals embark on different social relationships (1995:29). I assert that expatriate 'good' mothering narratives bring together diverse groups of women who might otherwise struggle to find common ground. However, for parents who did not conform to the expatriate community's normative gender roles gaining acceptance in mothering networks was challenging. Valentine (1993) argues: 'Everyday interactions do not occur between asexual individuals, but between people with sexual identities and labels' (1993:397). Aaron, an American 'stay at home parent' in his 30s who had two young children, commented:

*'It was difficult because I didn't know what to expect, I'd walk into a 'mother's' group or 'baby' group as I like to call them and just get stared at—It was very weird for the first five or six months and everyone just getting used to me being there.'*

Aaron persevered because he believed being part of a 'parenting community' was in his children's best interest. Heterosexuality features implicitly as an assumed framework for the organisation and experience of familial, marital or romantic relations in migration (Walsh, Shen and Willis 2008). Lesbian mothers had difficulty being accepted in heteronormative expatriate mothering networks. Vicky, a lesbian 'stay at home mum' in her 30s with two children, commented:

*'I tried so hard to fit in...I'm a real chameleon I've learned to dress differently and act differently depending on the circumstances. At first all these women were like 'what is she doing here?' I mean I would go to a meeting and no one would sit next to me. It was like I was contagious—these women are fucking unbelievable!'*

Vicky rationalised that *'my kids are different enough as it is'*; she worked at being accepted because she thought that participating in 'normal' mother organised events like Halloween parties minimised her children's 'other' status due to being among the few children with same

sex parents at the American School. Both Vicky and Aaron described their MDWs as either helping to facilitate their acceptance in mothers' communities by being accepting of their domestic arrangements and not dwelling on differences between their family structures and the predominant heteronormative model in interactions with other MDWs and children in their care or by hindering their acceptance by making judgmental comments to other MDWs and children in their care.

Expatriate mothers emphasised that they devoted a lot of time to their children. However, it was usually difficult to discern which aspects of 'mothering' were delegated and which were reserved for mothers. Janet, an Australian in her mid-30s with three children ranging in age from 2 to 7 years old, commented:

*'I'm sure a lot of moms have told you this but Singapore is really great for kids. Everything is so child friendly. Moms devote a lot more time to their kids. It's much easier here than in Sydney to have a young family. I look at my sister with two kids managing all on her own without a helper and I wonder how she does it.'*

Like Janet, expatriate mothers described themselves as very child-focused and acknowledged that MDWs made it easier. Macdonald (1998) notes that jobs associated with dirt and disorder—such as changing diapers and cleaning up messes in the playroom—are usually assigned to domestic workers. Mothers tend to take over duties related to acculturating and socialising, such as reading books to children and assisting children with schoolwork (1998:33). Lan (2006) observed that some women employers perform all childcare themselves and restrict the role of MDWs to 'maid' to maintain a status distinction between themselves and MDWs (2006:113). Unlike other employers, expatriate women tended not to have firm divisions between physical childcare tasks performed by them and those performed by MDWs. MDWs regularly gave children their pre-bedtime baths, read bedtime stories and helped with homework and other projects. Numerous expatriates kept baby monitors in their MDW's bedroom so that husbands (and themselves, one inferred although this was never the reason given) could get '*a good night's sleep*'. Toilet training was usually left to MDWs. Some expatriate women got up in the mornings to see children off to the school bus but others left that task to MDWs. Expatriate mothers tended to help older children with schoolwork and drive children to activities (MDWs are not allowed to drive). Most mothers did not prepare their children's school lunches or dinners (younger children tended to eat around 6pm and their parents around 8pm), although

they usually had rules about children's diets and often did specific child-related grocery shopping. While several expatriate mothers recalled being 'jealous' of their children's affection for a MDW, most rationalised that it was good for children to be loved, that MDWs would treat their child better if they were emotionally attached to him or her, that children '*knew*' who their mother was and that the MDW would only be in the child's life for a few years whereas they would be their mother '*forever*.'

Much of expatriate mothers' mothering work took place in interactions with other 'moms'. Chatting with other mothers at mothering groups or informally about where to buy certain child products, which activities were good, which clinics were recommended and debating how to deal with behavioural issues and what role a MDW should have in childcare was time consuming but believed necessary because living in a foreign country made it more difficult to find out where to do things and presented a host of new childcare issues. Counselling seminars on how to raise 'global nomads' or 'affluent children' were usually sold out. Coordinating children's playgroups was done by expatriate women and MDWs but within segregated migrant groups. A newly arrived South African expatriate mother, for example, was surprised when she brought her daughter to playgroup at an acquaintance's home and was the only 'ma'am' present. The 'mom' social function of some playgroups is indicated by being labelled as 'mother only'. Brownies and Girl Guides specify that only mothers can volunteer or help girls earn badges (a rule frequently broken). Mothers tended to be active on committees at their children's schools: planning and organising children's schedules, making sure children's birthdays were celebrated, national and religious holidays were appropriately observed and making sure that curriculums met home countries' requirements. In expatriate women's mothering narratives a mother's dedication to ensuring that her child had a 'good' school and extra-curricular environment were important determinants of 'good' mothering.

Like MDWs, expatriate women were vulnerable to criticisms from those 'back home' that by delegating childcare they were failing to live up to feminine domestic ideals. Women described being visited by relatives, especially mothers-in-law, who made comments about how 'they' had managed to cope without MDWs. Margot an Australian in her 30s with three children recalled a recent visit:

*'I got really fed up. I know I'm lucky that I can take time to do things for me. It doesn't make me a bad mother that I'm not there every minute of the day or that I don't change*

*every damn diaper myself. Her precious son isn't home but he's a great dad. It's the idea of a mother doing something for herself—being able to—that pisses her off.'*

Margot's comment reflected the sentiments of other expatriate women who argued that relatives back home were '*jealous*' of their enhanced lifestyles and ability to opt out of tedious tasks like changing a child's wet sheets or picking up toys. They contended that implying that they were 'bad' mothers was an attempt to, as one woman put it: '*take me down a peg or two.*'

One practice that was central to expatriate women's mothering narratives is breastfeeding. Several continued breastfeeding until children reached 4 years old; in one instance a uniformed boy came home from pre-school during my interview with his mother and was promptly breastfed in order to 'comfort' him after a bad day at school. Kukla (2005) argues that breastfeeding in contemporary Western ideology has become the privileged essence of maternal care and devotion (2005:151). Failure to breastfeed is considered deviant (Wall 2001:594). Expatriates' focus on breastfeeding may be in part because this aspect of childcare is not usually delegated (Wrigley 1995). Dagmar, a Dutch woman with four children between the ages of 1 and 8 years old had lived in Singapore for 5 years and employed two MDWs. She believed that her MDWs lacked a comparable bond with their own children:

*'I felt really sad—like she'd had the same connection and then after 2 years when the child was weaned she flew to Singapore and has only seen her two times since. So that makes me feel really strange. Just knowing that in so many ways she is just like me the way she started out with her baby and then she chose to just leave it; she just abandoned that basic almost primal bond. Basically she doesn't have much choice if there's a whole family depending on her and a husband who's no good. She takes pride in showing me pictures of her little girl in her school uniform because even though she does support a whole extended family the only one who's really going to a great school is her daughter because of her job and she takes so much pride in that. She just does the whole mothering thing very differently. I could never do what she does—leaving my children would be unnatural no matter what the circumstances.'*

The physicality of motherhood was integral to Dagmar's understanding of 'good' mothering. Her assertion that it is 'unnatural' for a mother to leave her child was expressed by several expatriate women. Like Dagmar, women tended to quickly recite economic compulsions driving women to work overseas only to conclude that whatever the circumstances *they* would not leave their child. Constructing 'good' mothering narratives around a mother's physical presence in her children's lives buttressed non-employed expatriate women's sense of their own 'good'

mothering while distancing them from MDWs. The use of vocabulary such as ‘unnatural’ suggests that expatriate women were asserting not only differences in mothering practices but were alluding to broader differences in femininity.

However, not all expatriates were so quick to judge MDWs; some expatriate women recognised economic pressures resulted in some women having no viable option but to leave their children. Bree, a Canadian in her 40s, commented: *‘it’s an impossible situation—stay and no one does well or gets anywhere but at least everyone’s together. Or take a chance come work here and maybe your kids have a better life. As a mother you always want what’s best for your kids even if you have to make sacrifices—it’s a pretty huge sacrifice that these ladies make.’* Bree affirmed the magnitude and validity of MDWs’ ‘sacrifice’ and in doing so endorsed MDWs’ alternative constructions of ‘good’ mothering.

### **7.3 A ‘necessary evil’: Anxieties over delegating childcare**

Childcare is an area of heightened anxiety for most employers of MDWs (Stivens 2007:39). Expatriates, like other employers, were concerned about MDWs’ potentially negative influence on their children’s development. These discourses focused on two related components: the allegedly deficient character of MDWs and the role of the mother in guarding against their malign influence. Expatriate women complained that MDWs were lazy, lacked any sense of foresight, were irresponsible, and did things their own way. ‘Their own way’ encapsulated having strange (i.e. different from the expatriate’s) cultural notions and different processes of acculturating children. Several expatriate women described exposing their children to MDWs as a ‘necessary evil’ which involved risks to children’s social development which could be mitigated by a mother’s supervision but never completely removed. Expatriates’ identification of these risks illustrates the complexity of a relationship that is simultaneously between two women but also inextricably interwoven in global processes and inequalities. National disparity, Lan (2006) argues, is converted into class hierarchy domestic relationships (2006:18). Expatriate women’s anxieties were centred on MDWs adversely impacting childrens’ health, sexuality and class position.

#### **7.3.1 Retaining supervisory authority**

For mothers, hired domestic caregivers represent the medium through which their child rearing beliefs and practices are transmitted; much of mothers’ anxiety is caused by the fact that

another woman might contradict or contravene her practices (Macdonald 1998:34). The main way parental caregivers differentiate their childcare labour from the domestic workers' is by retaining supervisory authority (Macdonald 1998; Roberts 1997; Wrigley 1995). Employer anxieties over the influence of domestic workers on children are well-documented in both colonial literature (e.g. Buettner 2004; Stoler 1995) and contemporary domestic worker literature (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Lan 2006). Virtually every medical and household handbook in the Dutch, French and British colonies warned against leaving small children in the unsupervised care of local servants (Stoler 2002:74). In the Dutch Indies, it was the 'duty' of the 'modern white mother' to take the physical and spiritual upbringing of her offspring away from the *babu* (native nursemaid) and into her own hands (Stoler 2002:74). Stivens (2007) contends that the primary way Singaporean employers cope with having an 'inherently untrustworthy' foreigner working in their home is by enacting a detailed regime of rules, instructions and supervision (2007:39). Expatriate mothers employed tactics of reminding children that they should tell 'mummy' if their MDW did anything unusual, of asking older children about a MDW's interaction with younger children and of coming home unexpectedly to check what was going on. Stories circulated about expatriates coming home unexpectedly and finding MDWs watching pornography in the presence of toddlers, entertaining men and leaving children home alone. Some expatriates attempted to instruct MDWs on acceptable childcare practices by providing them with reading material on childcare. Some sent MDWs to First Aid courses and several had their MDWs take swimming lessons so they could supervise children swimming. Most preemptively forbid all forms of physical punishment.

### **7.3.2 Fears of harm and infection**

Gill (1994) suggests that in La Paz, Bolivia, women do not feel comfortable leaving their children under the unsupervised care of domestic workers because many fear that servants will infect, neglect and even abuse children (1994:91-92). Will, a self-described 'stay at home dad' in his 30s, for example, recalled: 'I came home and Annabelle [4 year old] was in Wisma's room and she was eating her deodorant so I mean I was livid and I let her know I was livid—Wisma was on her cell phone!' Some expatriate women had heard that pinching children was a common disciplinary practice in the Philippines and specifically forbid pinching. Others worried about inappropriate touching believing that it was common in *'their'* culture to sexually stimulate

male toddlers.<sup>33</sup> One of these mothers, a New Zealander with a toddler son said that her friend had experienced this problem with her former MDW; she was on '*high alert*' for indications of inappropriate interaction. She argued: '*They might be perfectly nice but you really have to watch these girls. I mean God knows what goes on where they come from.*' Expatriates' worries of inappropriate touching by MDWs echoed those of colonial employers who feared that native nannies would use 'repulsive methods' to soothe and comfort children when they cried or were distressed (Gouda 1993:330). I suggest that these discourses represent employer anxieties at children being physically and morally violated by outsiders who in both the colonial and contemporary examples are ethnically different from employers and usually marked as inferior.

The presence of servants around children has always been 'both valued and feared' (Foucault 1978:46). Worries that MDWs would bring disease into the home were expressed by some expatriate women. Several expatriate women described paying for additional medical screening for their MDWs because as an American woman in her 40s put it, '*you can never be too careful*'; these employers pointed out that '*there are other infectious diseases besides HIV and TB*' (these are included in MDWs' mandatory health screening). Other employers maintained rules about MDWs having short nails for hygiene reasons, reminded them to wash their hands with antibacterial soap regularly—especially after using the washroom, instructed them to wear deodorant and several stipulated that MDWs shower daily. Poor women are frequently stereotyped as dirty and unhygienic (Dickey 2000b:475). Dickey (2000b) contends that servants transgress household boundaries, which are conceived of both physically and symbolically, by bringing the outside in and by taking back outside what properly belongs inside: 'They may transport in dirt, disorder and disease, and contaminate children with lower-class habits and language; they may remove valued belongings and information through theft and gossip' (2000b:473). Expatriate women's critiques of MDWs' hygiene and potential as disease carriers evidence a concern with protecting themselves from difference but also with maintaining that difference as a crucial reminder of their own class, racial and national identity. These discourses show how distance based on class, race and nationality is (re)produced in a

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<sup>33</sup> Without studies documenting the actual occurrence of such incidents, it is difficult to explain the persistency of employer concerns. None of the MDWs I asked about pinching or sexually fondling children thought it was appropriate or culturally derived (it is unlikely though that anyone would have admitted to the practice—at least to me).

transnational employment relationship between developed world employers and developing world employees.

### **7.3.3 The dangers of 'childish' MDWs caring for children**

Expatriates, like Singaporean employers (Stivens 2007:39), worried about MDWs' suitability for caring for older children. These concerns are shared by other contemporary employers. In Colen's (1995) study, for example, employers in Manhattan believed that West Indian childcare providers would be warm and loving nurturers for infants but questioned their ability to provide appropriate acculturation for older children (1995:94). In Vancouver, employment agencies generalise that Philippine MDWs are best suited for caring for babies but ill-equipped to instil values in older children (Pratt 1997:164). Agents' discourses portray Filipinas as childlike and uncivilised themselves (Pratt 1997:164). Contemporary employer beliefs mirror the colonial; in the colonies European children supposedly thrived well 'only up to the age of six' when native influences came into stronger play (Stoler 1995:74). In the colonial era, Stoler (1995) observes that becoming an adult and bourgeois meant distinguishing oneself from that which was uncivilised and lower-class; 'the social grammar of prescriptions for making a child into a bourgeois adult entailed instilling practices of self-discipline and delayed gratification' (1995:151).<sup>34</sup>

These ideas linger in contemporary employer discourses. Some expatriate women explained that children rapidly intellectually 'outgrew' MDWs. Jodi, a British woman with three children who had lived in Singapore for 3 years, commented:

*'My 9 year old is starting to get intellectually more advanced and she recognises that they're [the family's two MDWs] not that bright. So sometimes she'll be a little bit condescending and they get into an argument and start shouting at each other—just like children... Sometimes I have to take her [her daughter] aside and say don't be rude to her, you're talking to her like she's 5 years old while she's poor and she's from another country and she's not educated, she's a mother and has two children and she had to leave her kids and come here to work so try to treat her with a little respect even though she isn't very intelligent. Sometimes it's a lot of work because you have to undo damage that's caused by someone else in your home environment.'*

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<sup>34</sup>The idea that the middle and upper-classes achieve economic security at the price of delayed gratification, controlling impulses and desires was well-established in late nineteenth century sociological theory (Illouz 1997:32).

Just as European colonialists worried that 'native' servants lacked the cultural sensibilities that would instil self-reliance and self-discipline in children (e.g. Buettner 2004; MacMillan 2007; Stoler 1995) contemporary employers, like Jodi, worried that MDWs will 'spoil' their children by transmitting the 'wrong' values and making them self-centred, entitled and overly-dependent on others (Gee and Ho 2006). Children are believed particularly susceptible to influence because they have not yet been fully socialised into the cultural practices of their own class (Dickey 2000b:475). In positioning her MDWs as less intellectually developed than her 9 year old, Jodi implies a significant difference in the intellectual capacities of herself and her MDWs. Her MDWs are depicted as incapable of carrying out higher level (in terms of cultural and national hierarchies) mothering tasks.

Sayer (2005) argues that the need to enculturate class is particularly strong in groups that are anxious about their position both in terms of how they are regarded from above and the risk of falling into the groups they despise and fear below them (2005:953). I suggest that expatriates' discourses emphasising MDWs' unsuitability to supervise older children not only emphasised distance between expatriates' class, national and cultural positionalities and MDWs' but also reflected expatriates' positional insecurities. Ehrenreich (1989) observed that American middle-class parents worried that lower-class domestic servants would 'contaminate them [middle-class children] with an easy going outlook fatal to middle-class achievement (1989:87). Stories of toddlers peeing in apartment lobbies, children speaking broken English and not knowing how to use a knife and fork warned expatriates of the dangers of leaving children too much in the care of MDWs. A piquant example of expatriates' identification of such spoliation that was repeatedly pointed out to me was the frequent sight of children (of all races) not carrying their own school bags and having 'maids' carry their backpacks. These narratives illustrate expatriates' anxiety that children who fail to learn the deportment and etiquette of their social group will be disadvantaged—especially, when they return to their home countries and have to compete with a peer group who likely experienced less coddled upbringings.

#### **7.4 Quasi-familial relationships**

Nevertheless, leaving one's children in the care of another person normally requires some degree of reliance, trust and dependency. Gregson and Lowe (1994) observed that even in households in which men helped with cleaning and childcare, the primary relationship was

between female employers and nannies (1994:200-01). Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) noticed that male employers who were stay at home parents or who worked fewer hours than their wives preferred 'professional' relationships with domestic workers (2007:177). I also observed that self-described 'stay at home dads' tended to frame relationships with MDWs as 'professional' only. The identification of the work of childcare with mothering (rather than fathering and parenting) causes MDWs' childcare to be conceptualised in terms of mother substitution (Gregson and Lowe 1994:204). While ideology that defines a father's relationship and involvement with his children primarily as a form of co-parenting that is interdependent with, in opposition to and at times lesser than mothering has been challenged (e.g. Aitken 2000, 2005); my participants, both expatriate and MDW, drew a parallelism between mothers' and fathers' familial roles; both groups of women had internalised this construct. MDWs were believed by expatriate women to enable them (not their husbands) to work, to volunteer and to enjoy leisure time.

Persistent cultural ideals of femininity and domesticity tend to foster feelings of guilt and obligation in female employers who delegate childcare to another woman and these feelings are manifested in relations of emotional support and practical care—forms of support which traditionally characterise kin relations (Gregson and Lowe 1994:204-05). Social relations between a female employer and *her* nanny are produced by and through the ideology of childcare (ibid). As Hochschild (2002) points out, MDWs interacting with an employer's children usually requires emotional involvement; in fact often entails a 'global heart transplant' or redirection of love that MDWs are unable to express in daily care of their own children to an employer's children (2002:22-23). This section shows how the transnational positionality of expatriate women and MDWs influences the construction of quasi-familial relationships. It shows how overlapping transnational contexts produce unique permutations in these relationships.

Female employers often characterise MDWs as adopted daughters (Weix 2000). Employer maternalism is widely criticised as a principle source of exploitation of domestic workers (Anderson 2000; Glenn 1992; Gill 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). However, numerous MDWs contended that being viewed as a 'daughter' or 'younger sister' had material and emotional advantages. They believed that employers who viewed them as 'daughters' or

'younger sisters' were more concerned about their well-being than were employers who viewed the relationship as professional or as merely utilitarian. In the absence of family, some MDWs said that they liked feeling that their employers were looking out for them and would worry about their well-being. I assert that MDWs' position as marginal women who migrate alone facilitates some expatriate women casting themselves as surrogate mothers. Gill (1994) describes how urban 'white' female employers dominate servants by integrating them into their homes as 'adopted daughters' (1994:115). This allowed them to justify controlling a MDW's social interactions and dictating where a MDW can go outside the home. Lan (2003) observed the same phenomenon of female employers viewing themselves as surrogate mothers of MDWs and thus claiming a right of intervening in their workers' private lives (2003:533).

Likewise, some expatriate women described their MDW as *'like another child'* and felt that they needed to set rules to *'protect'* her so that she would not *'get into trouble'*. Curfews were enforced to ensure MDWs' safety. Restrictions on MDWs social behaviour were *'for their own good.'* Heather, an American in her 30s, described insisting that Veronica, a Philippine MDW in her late 20s, not stay overnight at her Philippine boyfriend's flat (he was not allowed at the employer's residence). Heather felt that Veronica's mother would want her to *'look out for her.'* Claiming that forbidding boyfriends *'protected'* MDWs disguised expatriate women's self-interest; expatriates usually worried that MDWs would become involved with lower-class men who might induce them to steal from their employers.

Expatriate women often described paying for MDWs' children's school tuition and sending boxes of old toys and clothes to MDWs' families. I contend that these gestures tempered guilt that some expatriate mothers felt about delegating childcare and discomfort about larger global inequalities that necessitated MDWs leaving their own children in order to financially provide for them. Unlike other employers of MDWs (e.g. Colen 1995; Hochschild 2002) expatriates were generally inquisitive about MDWs' families. I speculate that this difference is because most expatriate women were unaccustomed to having close interactions with someone from a radically different background and were curious about MDWs' lives; also, expatriate women were usually mindful of the disruption and reconfiguration of familial relationships caused by migration.

Romero (1992) and Rollins (1985) are sceptical of the practice of employers giving gifts to domestic workers; Rollins (1985) asserts that gift giving 'like other manifestations of maternalism serves to reify the differences between the women: be they in terms of class, race or human worth' (1985:193). However, this overlooks that there can be an element of exchange in maternalistic dynamics (Weix 2000:146). Scott (1985) observed that when Malay peasants speak of false kin ties they enact a lost 'moral economy' to make claims on the well-off; privately they may gossip or deride the terms (Scott 1985:282-84). In many parts of Southeast Asia, Weix (2000) argues, social and emotional ties between servants and employers are predicated upon gifts (2000:140).

MDWs in Singapore seemed to associate idioms of kinship with receiving additional compensation. Far from feeling that their self-worth was impugned by receiving gifts from employers, many MDWs believed that gifts indicated that their employer held them in high esteem. For some MDWs being considered a 'member of the family' by expatriate employers signalled that employers would honour their expectation of receiving a Christmas bonus and/or a birthday bonus and would provide extra assistance for their families. For example, Trina, a Philippine MDW, had worked for a Dutch employer for 5 years and felt that her employer was not fulfilling the material obligations implicit in their quasi-familial relationship:

*'She used to be very good. You know expat employers pay a thirteenth month salary? She say she can't afford to this year but I know she can because I see how she spend on other things... She wants me to pay back some money she give me for my mother's medicine but before she always just give it to me so why should I pay back now? I've been part of their family for a long time they should appreciate me, yes?'*

Trina expected recognition beyond just her salary for the intangible services she provided as a 'part of their family'; which included providing her employers with peace of mind through being responsible and reliable as well as emotionally invested in her employer's family's well-being. MDWs emphasised that quasi-familial relationships with expatriates were based on exchange.

Some expatriate women attempted to form other personal relationships with MDWs; these relationships were described by expatriate women as 'mentor/mentee' or 'big sister' like in their dynamics. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) observes that bilateral relationships involving 'two individuals recognising each other not solely in terms of their role or office but rather as persons embedded in a unique set of social relations and with particular aspirations' are not necessarily

exploitative (2007:172). Gill (1994) points out that a strong personal relationship between employers and MDWs may increase the MDW's leverage in the relationship and give her some latitude within which to negotiate a work plan that meets her own interests and desires' (1994:85).

Some expatriate women sought to apply their understanding of 'women's issues' and 'women's empowerment' to their relationship with MDWs. These employers described putting effort into establishing a rapport with MDWs. Julie, an American in her 40s with a background in women's studies, recalled when Beth, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, first started working for her that she made a point of getting to know her in a 'non work' capacity:

*'So when we went for walks; it was every day; it was constant. I had really set aside that time in my life to work with her so I was obviously hoping for a long term relationship because I put a lot of effort into it. So I learned a lot about her family. For the most part she's very frustrated because people only contact her if they want money and we spend some time talking about money—you do not have to tell them how much money you make and you do not have to send them money each month. You have a right to keep what you earn.'*

Developing a personal relationship with Beth gave Julie insight into her life and also possibly influence over her decisions. Friendship between differentially situated women could end up being manipulative because there is a guise of solidarity, empathy or/and friendship (Stacey 1991:114). Julie's insistence that Beth has a right to keep her wages, while understandable from a Western perspective situates Beth as an individual without taking into account her membership in a family group. Cultures vary significantly in the extent to which the needs of the group predominate over those of individuals (Triandis 1995).

While these mentor/mentee relationships between expatriate women and MDWs may initially appear progressive I suggest a more circumspect approach. Some employers dwell on the travails and hardships of their employee's 'chaotic' lives; sometimes deriving voyeuristic pleasure from watching the 'soap opera' unfold (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007:182). Some expatriate women seemed to use their privileged insight into the private tribulations of MDWs to gain 'cultural' capital among fellow expatriates. A few became involved in MDW's family issues; an expatriate woman, for example, intervened in a land title dispute in the Philippines between her MDW and her MDW's estranged husband and another sent her MDW to a doctor to obtain birth

control pills prior to her visit home. According to the expatriate employer the MDW wanted the medication but did not want to risk buying fake pills on the black market in the Philippines and did not want her husband to know she was taking it. Feminist scholars have long cautioned that attempting to 'help' women from developing countries often entails assuming a privileged positionality which risks 'discursively colonizing the lives of others' (Mohanty 1991:53). All of these dangers are present in mentor/mentee or 'big sister' relationships. However, as Wolf (1992) points out, despite obvious differentials in power relations, those who seek to study a culture can be thwarted by their intended subject's non compliance (1992:143). I noticed that MDWs dealt with unsolicited advice or admonishment by ignoring it. In other situations, the women's relationships seemed sufficiently flexible to discuss issues without either woman imposing her views on the other.

#### **7.4.1 Explaining a new 'member of the family' to children**

Unlike children who grow up in cultures in which MDWs are commonplace, most expatriate children had not experienced living with a MDW before moving to Singapore. Expatriate mothers felt a need to explain a MDW's presence to their children. These narratives usually entailed offering children an explanation of where MDWs came from and why they worked overseas. Children frequently asked questions about MDWs' own families and, according to expatriate women, tended to be especially interested in why MDWs were not caring for their own children. Celia, a British woman in her 30s, recalled explaining to her 5 year old daughter, for example, that their MDW living away from her own children did not mean that she did not love them. Interestingly, in constructing narratives to justify MDWs presence in expatriate households to their children, expatriate women utilised MDWs' own narratives of 'good' mothering as entailing self-sacrifice.

An illustrated children's book with places to insert information and photos called *Love Goes 'Round the World* published by AIDHA (2008) was a popular tool that expatriate women used to explain to children why it was okay for mothers to delegate childcare to MDWs and for MDWs to be separated from their own children. As the book's title suggests, its theme is that love is not fixed in the same way that most material resources are fixed; it is a renewable as opposed to a distributable resource (Hochschild 2002:23). The book, written in a child's voice, has blank spaces for children to fill in the details of whom they live with and who 'help take care

of them'. It has pages for children to list the fun activities they do with MDWs. It explains that 'I'm not the only one that she takes care of. She takes care of her own family far away in \_\_\_\_\_ but she doesn't see them everyday like she sees me.' It articulates that the MDW

loves her family and is working to make their lives better. The book ends with 'I know she can love me and her own family at the same time. Her love is big. It does go 'round the world.' In rationalising that MDWs can love both groups of children seemingly equally, the book distracts employers and their children from the fact that while MDWs' own children may be loved equally (or more) in the abstract, their daily experience of motherly love is very different from the expatriate child's who has both her/his own mother and another child's mother to help care for him/her.

In a highly atypical employment relationship, the quasi-familial relationship between the two women was transported to the Philippines. Jen, an American in her 30s, who had lived in Singapore for 9 years and had employed Margo since the birth of her first child, brought her two daughters and Margo to Margo's village. I quote Jen at length because she provides insight into the complex interweaving of childcare and relationship dynamics between the two migrant women:

*'Margo kept saying she didn't want to go home. She said that she thought it would be too painful to leave them again. So she didn't see her daughter from when she was 11 to when she was 16. And I was thinking that is so horrible I can't deal with that. Their relationship is somewhat strained. I mean I guess they're happy to get money but I think they feel somewhat abandoned. So I told her we would go with her and she said that she'd have to give everyone money and I said fine I'll give them money. I gave hong baos<sup>35</sup> to all of her important relatives. It was a little funny to have her be the host and me the guest. I stayed in the nicest bedroom in her house. Basically her mother had to clear out. It was the room with a ceiling fan and a double bed and the girls and I slept in there and everyone else kind of reshuffled. So I stayed at her mom's house and Margo's children were there and her sister's children. It was funny we went to a city up in the mountains, a few hours inland from the house and I took all the kids so her two kids and her sister's kids and I took them to eat in a restaurant and it was the first time they'd eaten in a restaurant and they couldn't believe how expensive things were. I was like you can order whatever you want I don't care because it wasn't actually expensive. We had a fun time... Tina's [Margo's sister] house is incredibly rustic and has a dirt floor which Zara [Jen's oldest daughter] was astounded by. Of course we've been to other*

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<sup>35</sup> A 'hong bao' refers to the red envelope filled with cash handed out during Chinese New Year. In common usage giving someone a 'hong bao' means giving them cash.

*Asian countries and you drive past all this stuff on the road but she'd never gone inside a house like that. It really made a big impression on her that they were that poor that they had a dirt floor and that they got their water from a pump in the yard. When we got back she had a bake sale which was kind of cute for Tina's daughter who lives in the house with the dirt floors who is about Zara's age. We sold brownies and stuff and sent them the money. I thought it was nice for her [Zara] to see that kind of thing up close.'*

In the Philippines, Jen was both a guest and employer; she circumvented the normal practice of a returning foreign worker handing out money to relatives by giving money on behalf of Margo. This enabled Margo to retain more of her savings but emphasised Jen's status as her affluent Western employer. Treating Tina and Margo's children to their first meal in a restaurant illustrated the enormous gap between their economic positions. However, this gap was already evident and it would likely have been considered rude for a wealthy guest who received their hospitality not to make some gestures of reciprocation.

Jen's exposure to what Margo's life is 'really' like is similar to the experience sought by cultural tourists. Cultural tourists see themselves as members of the civilised world who have the resources, leisure time and adventurous spirit to travel to see less developed, more primitive populations (Bruner 2005:21). Jen compares her visit to the Philippines with previous trips in Asia noting that it is a more authentic experience because in the past they had driven by 'all this stuff' but never gone 'inside'. However, unlike tourists, Jen and her daughters had a longstanding relationship with Margo. They interacted with her family as individuals they had heard stories about for years and not as nameless 'poor' people. For Zara, seeing the living conditions that compelled her 'auntie' Margo to work overseas showed the link between Margo's quasi membership in her family and global inequalities in wealth. Seeing that Margo's children were much better off than her sister Tina's who had remained in the village illustrated the tangible financial motivations for working as a MDW. Jen's trip is an example of the complexities of personalising an asymmetrical power relationship and of the positional ambiguities encountered by employers who seek to integrate MDWs into their families. Her daughter's bake sale encapsulated the complex web of relationships: Jen oversaw the sale itself but Margo, not Jen, helped Zara make the brownies to be sold to benefit her sister's children.

However, for most expatriate women childcare was the only context in which MDWs were considered 'part of the family'. MDWs frequently participated in children's birthday parties

but were rarely included in activities which focused on adult family members. The inclusion of MDWs in children's drawings of their families was not unusual; these drawings were often affixed to refrigerator doors or to bulletin boards in kitchens. However, I noticed that family photographs which included MDWs were rarely displayed. This suggests that even in families which discursively framed MDWs as 'part of the family' inclusion was largely limited to child related projects and spaces.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

For both groups of migrant women, if they had children, mothering was central to their identity. As transnational mothers both groups of women constructed new scales for gauging the quality of mothering. This chapter provided new insight into the interrelationship between the two migrant groups' 'good' mothering narratives by illustrating how mothering narratives are used by both women to situate themselves in relation to their transnational community's mothering practices, 'home' mothering ideals and to the other migrant women's mothering practices. By performing different versions of mothering femininities, both groups of women simultaneously asserted their own social identity and defined differences between themselves and the other group. I argued that these performances are relationally constructed and reflect insecurities both groups have about their own transnational mothering practices.

Both groups of women shared an ideal of mother centred child-rearing. Unlike domestic worker literature, expatriate literature largely overlooks how transnational mothering practices differ from 'home' practices and how women negotiate mothering identities across contexts. Central to expatriate women's 'good' mothering ideology was spending increased time with children, facilitating children's activities and coping with living overseas. Expatriate women were aware that some relatives thought that they were shirking their mothering duties by delegating tasks to MDWs. I argued that expatriate women justified delegating mothering duties to MDWs by contending that having time to oversee children's activities and not having to expend energy doing menial tasks like picking up messes made them 'better' mothers. On the other hand, MDWs' mothering narratives centred on rationalising that the emotional costs of working overseas to themselves and families were outweighed by material gains. Themes of 'sacrifice' and selflessness that resonate with traditional notions of femininity and domesticity were

reconfigured in transnational mothering narratives (Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Medina 2001; Parreñas 2010; Pingol 2001; Sobritchea 2007).

I showed that a crucial difference in how the two groups of migrant women evaluated each other's 'good' mothering was in their perceptions of what constituted spending 'enough' time with children and what counted as an acceptable reason for not being physically present with children. Some MDWs highlighted what they considered expatriate women's neglectful mothering. This allowed them to distance themselves from expatriate women's inferior (in their view) version of mothering and to simultaneously align themselves with intensive mothering ideologies in the Philippines; implying that, if not forced to work overseas, they would practice intensive mothering. Expatriate women tended to acknowledge but not quite believe MDWs' explanation of being compelled to leave their children. Characterising MDWs leaving their children as 'unnatural' allowed expatriate women to distance themselves from MDWs both as mothers and as women by drawing on notions of femininity that encapsulated ideas of women being inherent physical caregivers. For both groups of women, the social myths of 'women's calling' and 'labour of love' manifested anxiety among women as mothers. Both groups of migrant women struggled to achieve 'good' mothering in their transnational as well as substitute motherhoods.

In some ways, expatriate women's delegation of mothering labour tended to follow well-observed patterns in which jobs associated with dirt and disorder are usually assigned to domestic workers. However, some tasks related to acculturating and socialising, such as reading books to children and assisting with schoolwork, which are often performed solely by mothers (Macdonald 1998), were, in expatriate households, performed by either woman. Nevertheless, by performing and prioritising certain duties and asserting a supervisory mothering role, expatriate women, like other employers, developed multiple domestic femininities inscribed by class and racial differences thus reinforcing distinctions between themselves and subordinate migrant women.

Expatriates, like Singaporean employers (Stivens 2007), and other contemporary employers of MDWs (Colen 1995; Pratt 1997) questioned MDWs' ability to provide appropriate acculturation for older children. Given that expatriates often experience temporary upward class mobility, this focus on correct acculturation and need to distance themselves from MDWs may

be particularly acute. I showed how contemporary expatriate employer beliefs about the inability of MDWs to provide children with the social skills necessary for them to develop into culturally acclimatised adults bear a disturbing similarity to colonial beliefs (e.g. Stoler 1995).

Contemporary societies' may have more exposure to migrants and foreign cultures, but this does not lead to the disappearance of social bias and discrimination. On the contrary, close contact in a highly personal domestic setting across national, ethnic/racial, and class divides seemed to stir up anxieties and uncertainties in both groups of women, prompting a desire to reclaim distinction and exclusion.

While quasi-familial ties between expatriate women and MDWs often resembled relationships between other female employers and MDWs (e.g. Gregson and Lowe 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007), I argued that such relationships need to be geographically and culturally contextualised. Drawing on research on gift giving practices and moral economies in Southeast Asia (e.g. Scott 1985; Weix 2000), I argued that these relationships were not necessarily solely for the employers' benefit. I showed that MDWs tend to associate idioms of kinship with receiving additional compensation and leverage in employment relationships. Building on research into domestic employer/employee relationship dynamics (Dill 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007), I suggested that some personal relationships between expatriate women and MDWs were not necessarily exploitative but depending on the individuals involved could be sufficiently flexible to benefit both women.

Expatriate women's efforts to explain to their children that employing a MDW was not depriving a MDW's own children of motherly love, have not been previously observed in expatriate literature and appear unique in domestic work literature. I argued that these efforts are prompted by expatriates' own transnational positionality. Explaining MDWs to children and attempting to discursively include MDWs in family dynamics sometimes rendered visible (although not always noticed by expatriates and their children) the processes of global inequalities that underlie and enable the women's relationship.

## Chapter Eight: The Influence of Discourses about Migrant Women's Sexuality on Expatriate Women's and MDWs' Relationships

### 8.1 Introduction

*'Caucasian women they get fat and don't pay attention to the husband, that's what I observe.'*

—Lorna, Philippine, married in her 30s.

*'To be frank, most maids here would steal your husband if they got the chance. They're desperate for a better life and white men are their best shot at it. Most of them will do absolutely anything.'*

—Caitlyn, American, married in her 40s.

In discourses about migrant women's sexuality, Southeast Asian women are hyper-sexualised and hyper-feminised whereas Western women are desexualised and defeminised. This chapter argues that discourses about migrant women's sexuality and femininity influence how expatriate women and MDWs understand each other and that these discourses form part of the cultural context that impacts their relationship. This chapter explains how migrant women's bodies are inscribed by discourses of sexuality, as well as how migrant women themselves utilise stereotypes in negotiating difference. It explores how and why women participate in mapping ideas onto the bodies of differentially situated migrant women. The first section situates both groups of migrant women amid long established tropes of Western and Oriental feminine sexuality; expatriate women's and MDWs' relationships take place in this context. The second section focuses on Western women's responses to sexualised discourses. McClintock (1995) observed in the context of colonialism that Western women simultaneously experienced privileges of race over colonised women and men but were subjugated because of their gender (1995:6).

I suggest that contemporary Western expatriate women experience a similar positional ambiguity in that they often enjoy privileges of class which align (although not exclusively— there are many privileged members of other races/ethnicities in Singapore) to being Western and white but at the same time are excluded from what Said (1994) refers to as a 'male power-fantasy' that sexualises a feminised Orient for Western power and possession (1994:206). Unlike white men who are frequently disembodied in sexualised discourses as amorphous racially neutral subjects representing success and security (Constable 2003; Kelsky 2006), white women are likely to be the embodied racialised objects of others' viewing. I contend that

the experience of being viewed and racialised by 'others' is disturbing for many white women and influences how they in turn look upon 'others'. The third section discusses the ways MDWs engage with sexualised discourses about Asian women. Kelsky (2006) illustrates how women may appropriate aspects of fetishised images of themselves as 'Asian' women to their own ends (2006:174). I show how MDWs' discourses emphasise certain aspects of sexualised stereotypes of Asian and Western women while downplaying others, reframing or diffusing images of sexuality and femininity to empower themselves.

## **8.2 Imagining Asian and Western women's sexuality**

Sexuality is a locus of control not only between men and women but across racial, class and national divides. Discourse about sexuality is important because it is a commentary on these relations of power and the broader institutional arrangements that permit them. Sexualised discourses are significant in shaping the everyday lived experiences of migrant women. Lingering colonial stereotypes haunt contemporary discourses on Western and Asian sexuality contributing to tenacious images of pliable sexually eager Asian women and frigid aloof Western women. However, these stereotypes are not hegemonic, other stereotypes have evolved featuring, for example, innocent traditional Philippine women who are models of respectability, morality and religious piety (Constable 2003:96) or stereotypes of powerful icy abrasive Chinese Dragon Ladies or of cruel sadistic martial arts skilled assassins (Prasso 2006:70-75). In some countries in south and southeast Asia, images of white female chastity and native female license have shifted dramatically in the post-colonial period so that Western women are cast as 'promiscuous and local women as restrained or sequestered' (Manderson and Jolly 1997:12). However, discursive processes are not necessarily of equal force or impact; in Singapore the dichotomy of highly sexualised Southeast Asian women versus desexualised Western women is the predominant juxtaposition in both migrant women's discourses. **8.2.1**

### ***Western projections of the exotic Asian woman***

Edward Said (1994) famously argued that the sexual subjugation of Oriental women to Western men 'fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that is enabled' (1994:6). 'The colonising subject,' Manderson and Jolly (1997) elucidate, 'is typically imaged male—in masculinist tropes of penetration of dark interiors or the virile extension of male members into foreign places' (1997:7). The Orient is

construed as separate from the West: eccentric, backward, fixed, indifferent, malleable and feminine (Said 1994:206). In nineteenth century travel writing and novels Oriental women are most often portrayed as more or less stupid and expressing unlimited sexuality (Said 1994:207).

The 'long libidinization' of Southeast Asia has its roots in colonial and post-colonial attitudes and policies (Manderson and Jolly 1997:17). Sexual arrangements, including the accommodation of brothels and the medical surveillance of the women who worked in them, were made to placate and maintain the workforce through the provision of recreational sex (Kramer 2006: 367; Manderson and Jolly 1997:18). The prevalence of commercialised sex in Southeast Asia, especially Western targeted sex tourism in Thailand and the Philippines, is often traced back to US and other military troops' demands for commercial sex while on leave. Over 40 years of American occupation in the Philippines, a thriving sex industry sprang up around military bases, offering poverty stricken women the chance to earn meagre wages as 'entertainers' or 'comfort girls' (Chang and Groves 2000:76). In her study of the sex tourism industry in Asia, Enloe (2000) argues that the Marcos government 'used the reputed beauty and generosity of Filipina women as 'natural resources' in the international tourism market' (2000: 38). In Singapore, sex workers comprise migrants mainly from China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand (Kitiarsa 2008: 601); with the exception of China, these are also source countries for MDWs (Rahman, Yeoh and Huang 2005: 233).

Segments of the sex industry catering to Westerners exploit fantasies of exotic, indulging, decadent Asian women who provide customers with a sexual experience not available with Western women (Prasso 2006:5). Manderson (1997) argues that on the night stages of Bangkok and other tourist centres, the erotic and the exotic are merged (1997:138). Performance repertoire draws on a wide range of misogynistic images of Oriental women's insatiability and in a panoply of 'ping pong pussy shows' and 'banana shows' reduces and ridicules women (Prasso 2006:3). According to Broinowski (1992), representing Asian women as hyper-sexualised reflects the crude collapse of a vague geography and moral essentialism into an Asia that is 'an Adventure Zone for adults in which civilized norms of Western male behaviour could be abandoned and taboos breached' (1992:39). These discourses are pervasive and taint not just how Asian women sex workers are perceived but how all Southeast Asian women, especially poor women, are imagined.

Poverty and desperation are powerful motifs in contemporary discourses about Southeast Asian women's sexuality (Manderson 1997:140-42). In these narratives old age, poor health or a large physique does not necessarily make a white man unattractive, as long as they have the ability to care and provide whether through their own financial resources or by providing access to potentially improved circumstances (Constable 2003:142-43). Hamilton (1997) points out that almost any Western man will have sufficient wealth to meet the needs of a poor Southeast Asian woman and those of her family (1997:152). Men who form relationships with 'poor' Southeast Asian women sometimes engage in 'rescue' narratives in which they buy women presents and pay their family's debts and expenses (Constable 2003; Hamilton 1997). Southeast Asian women's poverty facilitates Western men's self-esteem being enormously enhanced; men can select from a range of young beautiful women and be almost certain of sexual acceptance because that is what the relationship is predicated on. Even if a man is relatively poor and physically undesirable by Western standards he can feel powerful and superior both to the woman and to the society which has produced her (Constable 2003). **8.2.2**

### ***Commodification and sexualisation of Asian women in Singapore***

Immigration policies contribute to poor migrant women being viewed as commodities (Anderson 1993:1402). In Singapore, women working in domestic service are viewed first and foremost as workers; state policies in both sending and receiving countries often treat MDWs as no more than a form of commodified labour to be bought and sold on the open market (Yeoh and Huang 1998:584). Insight into the discursive commodification of MDWs can be gained from comparing the commodification of other categories of Southeast Asian women. Constable (2003) observes that in 'mail order bride' catalogues women are homogenized and presented as 'sexy and selfless' (2003:91). Anderson (1993) contends that the term 'mail order bride' contributes to the conceptualisation and treatment of Asian women as exotic, fungible commodities instead of individuals (1993:1407). Constable (2003) points out that the bride catalogues, which resemble MDW employment agency websites in their presentation of photos and information, participate in a largely one-sided sexual marketplace merging ideas about Asian women's feminine domesticity with sexual availability (2003:129). I argue that the use of similar methods of advertising Asian women essentialises women so that they all appear to be offering the same set of qualities and services. In both instances, women's bodies are

commodified; their biodata is given (weight, height, religion, eye colour, description of skin shade) and personal information is generalised to portray them as subservient, domesticated and pliable (McKay 2003:31). This is an example of what Piper and Roces (2003) refer to as a 'problematic blurring' between groups of Asian migrant women in which it becomes difficult to distinguish sex workers from 'mail order brides' and from domestic workers and factory workers (2003:6-7). These discourses of Asian women's sexuality encompass contrary images of women as pliable and submissive yet skilful and experienced, domestic yet sexy, innocent yet manipulative against a backdrop of overt and covert commerce (Manderson and Jolly 1997:17). Asian women are represented as not merely sexual but willing to carry out tasks associated with nurture and caring behaviour (Hamilton 1997:149).

As low-wage Southeast Asian service workers, the image of MDWs is linked with prostitution and uncontrolled sexuality (Chang and Groves 2000:77). This link is well-established in expatriate women's consciousness. For example, in the Singapore set novel, *In the Shade of the Tembusu Tree* (Greedy 2005) by an Australian expatriate woman, the British expatriate woman protagonist discovers through finding sexually explicit photos in her MDW's bedroom that her Philippine MDW uses her house as a brothel when the family is away. To compound the employer's sense of violation, she is nauseated by the sight of her new La Perla underwear, stolen by her MDW, lying on the floor soiled with 'dark crusty menstrual blood' (Greedy 2005:84). Her MDW's blatant, animalistic sexuality is portrayed as trespassing and contaminating her home and her psyche literally to the point of making her retch. The vignette is completed by the expatriate woman noticing the 'half-hidden framed photograph of a small, sad-eyed boy, a gaping hole where his smile should have been [he had a harelip]' (ibid). Greedy fuses stereotypes of MDWs' wanton sexuality with neglectful mothering.

Public debate about MDWs is framed largely in terms of the women's sexual reputation and moral virtue. Employers' discourses emphasise the need to shape MDWs' habits and curb their supposedly natural tendencies towards irresponsibility and depravity (Yeoh and Huang 1998a:590; Gee and Ho 2006:35). Employers worry that if given a day off MDWs will 'get into trouble' by going to bars in Orchard Towers or Geylang (Singapore's main prostitution areas). Concerns about MDWs' sexuality are paramount in ongoing public debates about whether MDWs' should be given mandatory off days. For example, a Madam Chua Lai Keow (*Straits*

*Times*, 4 Oct 2011) wrote to the newspaper that 'what my maid did explains why Singaporean employers may not be in favour of giving maids a day off.' Chua explained that her MDW's mandatory six month pregnancy test had shown that she had likely become pregnant on her day off which was only the second off day she had been given in 18 months of working for the family. Chua wrote:

*'The trust we the employer placed in her has been shaken and we wonder now whether she had invited her male companion into our home in our absence. Naturally we also worry whether she was infected and introduced the infection into our home... It was unfortunate that she realised the seriousness of her action only on the way to the airport. Her regret included feelings of shame, as well as having to face her loved ones. She is married with four children. I am writing this to appeal to maids to consider the potential consequences of their actions if they decide to have sex.'*

Chua characterises her former MDW as unable to control her sexual impulses; her MDW's sexuality threatened to violate Chua's home by introducing unpermitted guests and possibly infection. Like Greedy's fictional MDW, Chua's former MDW's irresponsible, rash sexuality is portrayed as having compromised her children's well-being. Chua's letter illustrates prevailing notions of MDWs as instinctual with inferior moral and cultural standards whose behaviour, if not contained, potentially endangers the sanctity of an employer's home and even an employer's health.

Researchers have written extensively about the sexualised threat MDWs are thought to pose to Singapore society (Yeoh and Huang 1998a, 2010; Teo and Piper 2009; Rahman Yeoh and Huang 2005). Discourses warn female employers about the dangers of a MDW's physical proximity to male members of an employer's household (Yeoh and Huang 2010). McClintock (1995) describes sex with servants as a threshold act 'somewhere between incest and exogamy' (1995:94). In discourses circulating among Singaporeans and Westerners alike, MDWs are portrayed as opportunistic seductresses alternatively seeking sexual gratification with no relationship prospects or sex with relationship benefits. Stories circulate of MDWs wandering around the house in bath towels in front of males and of deliberately leaving bathroom doors ajar while showering. I was told stories by several expatriate women (one first hand) about job interviews with MDWs in which MDWs had asked if the job had 'extra headache pay'; it transpired that this referred to a S\$50 monthly bonus for having sex with 'sir' if 'ma'am'

had a 'headache'. It is impossible to know to what extent 'extra headache pay' actually happens, but its discursive power lies in its influence on employers' opinions of MDWs' morality and sexual availability.

### **8.2.3 Stereotypes of Western women**

While MDWs as Southeast Asian women are stereotyped as subordinate and eager to satisfy male desires, Western women are discursively constructed as their opposite. In colonial discourses, Western women were encased in a model of passionless domesticity categorically disassociated from the sexual desires of Western men and disallowed from being desiring subjects in themselves (Stoler 1995:183). Western women were seen as custodians of morality and guardians of civility (Stoler 1995). Rafael (2000) contends that white colonial women were placed in the role of 'representing those [white men] whose claim to power rested precisely on administering the terms of representation' (2000:64). Whiteness was most secure when it seemed disembodied and distant, distinct from the appearance of native others (Rafael 2000:63). While European scientific texts engaged in what Stoler (1995) calls the 'pornographic aesthetics of race' describing the bodies of Asian women in titillating detail, few texts attribute any beauty to European women (1995:185-86). European women's superiority rested in power and privilege not in comparative physical form. Living in the tropics was believed to extort a high aesthetic and emotional price on European women (ibid). The discourse on respectable white women was framed by their functional role as mothers and wives in contrast to the sexualised discourse on Asian women (Stoler 1995:189).

In contemporary discourses, Western expatriate women's role as 'moral guardians' of the family is open to question (Willis and Yeoh 2002:565). In their explanations for seeking Asian 'mail order brides' Western men tend to argue that feminism and greater opportunities have turned Western women away from traditional family duties and that Asian women are more 'traditional' and willing to assume domestic roles (Constable 2003:100). In these discourses, Western women are described by Western men in comparison with Asian women as 'bitches' (Manderson 1997:141) or as 'too controlling' (Constable 2003:100). Western women are portrayed as castrating Western men with their demands, aggression and judgments (Prasso 2006:19). In Dubai, Walsh (2008) observes that Western expatriate women are discursively marked as 'Jumeira Janes' and trivialised as selfish creatures who shop, lunch and

indulge in a myriad of beauty treatments while neglecting their domestic responsibilities (2008:64). In Singapore, the phrase 'expat wife' carries the same connotations of frivolity and disregard for traditionally feminine duties. Kang (1993) suggests that part of the lure of imaginings of Asian women for Western men is that such images enable the complementary construction of a reassuring version of dominant masculine identity in an increasingly fluid and heterogeneous era of growing racial diversity, of threats to masculinity posed by demands of feminists in the West and of the declining status of Western hegemony (1993:7).

Contemporary discourses render expatriate women's bodies more visible than in colonial discourses. Western women are stereotyped as 'fat' and 'lazy' in comparison with Asian women (Constable 2003:100). In her study of Japanese women's attraction to white men, Kelsky (2006) quotes an international dating service executive who explains that white men 'want to get away from big, mannish, aggressive Western women. They know a Japanese woman is going to care for them and be feminine. Plus she'll keep her figure' (2006:179). As the nameless Big Girl complains in James Michener's novel *Sayonara*: 'It's no fun to be a State-side reject watching cute Japanese girls get all the American men... Damn them all!' These discourses diminish Western women's sexual appeal and femininity. Expatriate women in Singapore frequently described feeling more conscious of their physicality. The women I interviewed described feeling 'larger', 'sloppy', or 'sweaty and gross' in public spaces.

Expatriate women recounted being aesthetically evaluated by MDWs. Several expatriate women recalled walking or jogging by groups of MDWs and hearing women giggle and murmur what expatriates assumed were derogatory comments about their appearance or having MDWs pointedly stare at them from top to bottom in what expatriates' interpreted as a critical way. I suggest that subjecting white women to an evaluative gaze is a strategy for MDWs to harness the power of relative racial and sexual stereotypes of migrant women's bodies; as Asian women they are stereotyped as more desirable than white women and thus are well-positioned to fuel expatriate women's insecurities about their attractiveness.

Expatriate women's discourses perceived Asian male and female gazes differently; the female gaze was characterised as critical and the male as indifferent or even absent. Several women commented how they felt 'invisible' as sexual beings in Singapore. Alison, an Australian in her 30s, described jogging by bus stops and construction sites without men staring at her or

whistling: *'They barely look at you. It's nice to be able to go wherever you want without feeling threatened but after a while you get the feeling they're just not interested.'* Expatriate women described confusion in reconciling previous experiences of the male gaze with experiences of the Asian male gaze in Singapore. Some struggled to interpret how incidents like not being whistled at or being confused with other white women impacted their sense of their own uniqueness and sex appeal. Sybil, a British woman in her 40s, commented: *'Whenever you go into a store here they only look at your bag and your shoes. You're just another white person to them—they can't tell us apart.'* Sybil's comment expresses an insecurity shared by other expatriate women about being judged economically inferior to other racial groups such as Singaporeans and other foreigners such as mainland Chinese and wealthy Indonesians who travel to Singapore in increasingly large numbers for business, medical care and leisure activities like shopping and gambling. Her reference to bags and shoes alludes to discourses of Singaporean materialism and status derived from displaying expensive branded goods. Her implication is that without expensive accessories a white woman will be treated indifferently as just another representative of the mass of middling white people who work in Singapore.

Numerous expatriate women felt intimidated by Singapore's plethora of luxury shopping malls and by the affluent Asian women who frequent them. Expatriate women were ambiguously positioned in the cityscape; on the one hand, they were adjuncts of highly paid 'foreign talent' but, on the other hand, wandering around high-end malls on Orchard Road or Marina Bay Shoppes they often felt less well-off than the Asian women in these spaces. I suggest that expatriate women dealt with this dissonance through discourses which cast Singapore and Asians as materialistic and superficial in contrast with expatriates' 'home' which was characterised as having superior, more genuine wholesome values (and people). Espiritu (2001) observed that cultural and moral markers of superiority are the only markers available to groups who find themselves at a disadvantage both economically and politically (2001:415). I assert that expatriate women used cultural boundaries drawn on the basis of education, manners, tastes, intelligence and refinement (see Lamont 1992:88-90) and moral boundaries drawn on the basis of moral character to define differences between themselves and Asian women. Lamont (1992) shows that the dimensions of morality that are most salient vary greatly across contexts (1992:60). She found, for example, that upper-middle class Americans are

more concerned with Judeo-Christian definitions of morality (humility, conspicuous honesty, fidelity and straightforwardness) whereas upper-middle class French focus on personal integrity and altruistic displays of solidarity with other human beings (ibid). I suggest that expatriate women deployed cultural and moral boundaries to evaluate relative statuses between themselves and Asian women and that expatriates' moral boundaries tended to be drawn from characteristics akin to those Lamont (1992) identified among the American upper-middle class; 'wholesome' seemed to encapsulate key aspects of Judeo-Christian definitions of morality.

Expatriate women were resentful of the one-sidedness of sexualised discourses perceiving it as unfair that their bodies were not accorded the same discursive invisibility as those of Western men. Kelsky (2006) suggests that Western men represent a gateway to the 'universal' realm of the West through which Asian women can escape the expectations and restrictions of their own cultures (2006:145). The white man is not merely a financial sponsor but provides access to a more cosmopolitan world. In these discourses the white man achieves transcendence of race in that it is not bound by ethnicity (Kelsky 2006:147). Whiteness as it adheres to the bodies of men is deeply imbricated in histories of modernity, colonialism and white hegemony in the West and globally (Kelsky 2006:154). Frankenberg (1997) contends that white men are the possessors of a kind of global phallic authority that accords them the 'leverage... to manufacture a sense of inclusion... in the dominant' (1997:13-14).

In these discourses, privileges of gender and nationality make white men attractive to less privileged Asian women; however, a parallel sexual economy does not exist for white women. White women are stereotyped as not being attracted to Asian men (Kelsky 2006:239). Similarly, expatriate women characterised Asian men as not attracted to Western women. The overall population of men attracted to Western women was believed to be limited. Several single white women voiced a belief that single white men working in Asia prefer Asian women. Brittany, a single Australian in her 20s working in human resources, commented: *'Part of why the men come here to work is because they have Asian fetishes. It's so hard to find a Western guy who's interested in dating a Western woman.'* Married expatriate women described going to bars and not being approached by men. Jill, a British woman in her 30s and a regular attendee of the BA's monthly 'Ladies' night' (a night out once a month at a pub or bar), commented that women were generally left to themselves: *'It's great fun. But now that you mention it, it's*

*definitely not like when the men go out. We are not swarmed by Asian men or by any men for that matter (laughs).*' Several women I spoke with articulated Kelsky's (2006) observation that Asian men are perceived as being more tied to tradition than are Asian women (2006:175). Amber, a single Australian in her 20s working for an airline, commented: *'Even if I was attracted to a Chinese guy, he would have to be international—you know have gone to university in the West or worked there—because otherwise they're just too parochial and set in their ways.'* Thus Western women, unlike Western men, who are discursively cast as 'rescuers' who can save Asian women from the confines of their cultures and economic circumstances, risk being pulled into Asian culture rather than removing a partner from it.

Racialised discourses of sexuality and of appropriate and inappropriate desire and affiliation shape migrant women's experiences in Singapore. I assert that these discourses are particularly influential in the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs because the two groups of migrant women are positioned as competing bodies.

### **8.3 Expatriate women's discursive anxieties about Asian women**

*'I think most of us [Western women] feel a bit more conspicuous here. It's tough to describe it's like you're simultaneously more visible but less attractive... do you know what I mean?*

—Melinda, New Zealander, in her 40s.

For a lot of white expatriate women relocating to Singapore is their first experience of racialisation. Willis and Yeoh (2008) observed that in China being 'Western' was a clear bodily marker which usually gave women a more privileged position in Chinese society (2008:222). However, their racialisation as 'white' women meant that their bodies were compared with those of Chinese women or with female migrants from other parts of Asia (Willis and Yeoh 2002:562). Western women's feelings of unattractiveness were exacerbated by the often frank way Chinese women would discuss British women's appearances (Willis and Yeoh 2008: 222). Many Western women in Singapore are agitated at being placed in sexual competition (even if it is just theoretical) for white men's attentions with Asian women. Within expatriate women's discourses there is a dissonance between on the one hand arguing that they treat MDWs better than Singaporeans do and that MDWs should be respected as adults (as opposed to as children or chattel) and on the other hand the virulence and contempt that the prospect of MDWs as sexual beings dating or even being attracted to Western men provokes in many expatriate women. As Willis and Yeoh (2002) observed in China, within transnational spaces

there are clear sexualised and racialised boundaries between migrant groups and local populations that are expected to remain intact. The perception that Asian women competing for Western men transgresses cultural, racial and class boundaries is contextually driven and fuelled by other insecurities derived from relocation such as greater financial and sometimes psychological dependency on husbands and shaky self-esteem.

### **8.3.1 Contextualising expatriate women's anxieties about Asian women**

Expatriate women's anxieties usually did not focus specifically on MDWs but on lower class Asian women generally. These discourses echo broader global discourses which characterise Asian bar girls, entertainers and prostitutes as desperate, poverty-stricken women who use sex as a means to a better life (Tyner 1996:77). Husbands' frequent travel caused expatriate women's discourses to encompass anxieties not just about Singapore but all regional cities. Juxtapositions of 'Western' versus 'Asian' morality were reoccurring in expatriate women's discourses. Lamont (1997) contends that morality is a crucial site to study the cultural mechanisms of reproduction of racial inequality (1997:264). I argue that expatriate women drew boundaries on the basis of relative moral standing (according to their understanding of morality) in addition to along socio-economic lines. As Lamont (1997) observed, expatriates' delineation of moral differences tended to produce the same hierarchies as processes of racialisation in which non-members of the dominant group remained lower in status. Numerous women asserted that in Asian cultures casual sex is not morally problematic, as it is in the West, because Asians do not consider it infidelity. Claire, a woman in her 40s who had previously lived in Hong Kong, explained:

*I think women are way more conscious of adultery here than they are living in the West. Because of the degree of opportunity there is for men here in Asia... there are no ugly white men to begin with (laughs). You know that your husband's going to be like a mega target no matter what and if he's good looking an even bigger target. There's so much opportunity and the environment does not condemn it. Like in the US, there might be some wink wink in small groups like a law firm if they know people are fooling around. But it's never okay; it's not accepted in society. It's considered something that is off. It's not moral. Whereas here it's not moral but it's not totally immoral, it's much more qualified, so I think that the environment doesn't help. It's such a culture where men go out together and have a good time and they don't consider it infidelity. If you pay for it or if it's a one night stand it's not considered infidelity right. You'd be surprised the number of men who go 'but I only have massages with happy endings' and stuff like that.'*

Among Western men living in China, Farrer (2008) documented a relativistic and situational rather than absolute standard of fidelity. Discourses of culturally relativistic understandings of marital fidelity and an imagined looming presence of young Asian women seeking white men exacerbated expatriate women's insecurities about their marriages and challenged their confidence in the ability of their self-characterised Western values (i.e. marital fidelity, commitment, respect) to withstand a supposedly antithetical moral environment.

Expatriate women argued that not only was infidelity not condemned but extra-marital sex was readily available—literally, above the expatriate's corner store.<sup>36</sup> Women frequently mentioned the legality of prostitution, often discussing the bars in Orchard Towers referred to as 'Four Floors of Whores'. Certain bars in Orchard Towers cater to MDWs and to male foreign workers on Sundays. The fact that some bars in a complex infamous for prostitution cater to MDWs encourages the conflation of MDWs with prostitutes. Most expatriate women had never been to these bars but nevertheless were able to provide descriptions of how MDWs received free drinks, danced provocatively on table tops in their bras and engaged in sexual acts with men. I contend that the geographic centrality of Orchard Towers and its proximity to expatriate spaces (it is in the main shopping district, a five minute walk from the American Club and 'Ang mo'<sup>37</sup> circle,' a cluster of apartment buildings catering to expatriates) causes it to loom larger in women's imaginations than commercial sex spaces located in less salubrious areas. I suggest that Orchard Towers was also disturbingly proximate to entertainment locales frequented by expatriates. Expatriate women were disturbed by the lack of clear spatial and social boundaries between sex bars and 'normal' bars. Jodi, a British woman in her 40s, explained:

*'At home a man might have a drink at the local pub after work or even go somewhere with colleagues but the environment is different. Even at Harry's [chain of bars catering to expatriates which has an outlet on the ground floor of Orchard Towers] you have 20 year old scantily clad girls pushing themselves on middle age men. At home you have to go to the red light district to find women like that but here they're everywhere.'*

As Jodi intimates, in expatriate women's discourses desperate Asian women are ubiquitous and infringe on expatriate women's social spaces making the sexual threat they pose impossible to

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<sup>36</sup>Jason's, a grocery store popular with expatriates, is located on the ground floor of Orchard Towers a building synonymous with prostitution. <sup>37</sup>Ang mo is a racial epithet describing Caucasians used in Malaysia and Singapore. It literally means 'red haired' and originates from Hokkien.

contain as opposed to in the West where such women are discursively confined to specific areas and establishments.

'Corporate entertaining' is very important in many sectors of business and made more so by the Asian focus on building personal relationships and trust. However, it tends to, explicitly or implicitly, exclude Western women (Willis and Yeoh 2008: 222). Expatriate women described having heard about or having being told by husbands about expectations of sexualised masculine 'play' in Asia which includes sexually oriented business entertainment and commercial sexual intimacies (Shen 2008:58). By demonstrating their sexual prowess and masculinity to other men by utilising the bodies of women, men may experience a boost in their social status within the group and bond with other men (Shen 2008:58). For many Western men, sexual performance, potency and experience function as a normative requirement of hegemonic masculinity (Williams, Lyons and Ford 2008:92). Stories of heterosexual sexual exploits are often 'an important part of homosocial male banter' (Flood 2007:15). Expatriate women worried that husbands might be pressured by colleagues to engage in sex acts with bar girls.

The majority of expatriate men responding to my online survey when asked whether they thought that living in Singapore provided men with increased opportunities to engage in extramarital sexual liaisons said 'yes'. Most thought they were more attractive to women in Asia than in the West. Randy, an Australian in his 30s, commented that even when he went out for an after work drink with male co-workers 'local' women 'always' approached their table. He commented: *'These girls aren't strictly speaking hookers but they make it pretty clear they're available to any white guy who wants them.'* Matt, a man in his 40s from the UK, wrote: *'I would say it is easier to cheat but also easier to be found out. It's a small island. Mostly I think men enjoy being more "attractive" to women than they would be at home. In many cases the men go out en masse and look but don't touch.'* Andrew, an American in his 40s, wrote: *'I've been surprised at how much more common it [going to establishments offering commercial sex] is. Interestingly it often seems to be led by the Asian men, and the expats appear to "follow their lead".'* Expatriate men's responses indicated that expatriate women's worries about male work socialising were not unfounded and that Western men share Western women's perception of Asian women as sexually available to Western men.

MDWs were aware of expatriate women's anxieties about Asian women. Some MDWs identified as fellow married women who had been cheated on themselves and shared expatriate women's viewpoint of the dangers posed by Asian women; particularly young sexy women. Others felt ashamed and resented that some Asian women were giving all Asian women a bad reputation. Yvette, a Philippine MDW in her 40s, commented: *'Some [women] are no good. Some Filipinas too they'll do anything. They go with men for fun only. We don't like these women also.'* Luisa, a MDW from the Philippines, recounted warning her Australian employer that her husband was spending too much time in Bangkok. Her employer dismissed her concerns but Luisa subsequently found lipstick on the husband's clothing and a condom wrapper in his suitcase. She described being torn over whether to hurt her employer's feelings by showing her the evidence or to stay silent and potentially put her employer's health at risk. She decided to tell her employer reasoning that in the same situation she would like to be told. However, in another instance, a MDW realised that she could exploit her employer's insecurities. She deliberately tormented the employer by asking *'ma'am where is sir so late at night?'* and by making comments like *'the white men they love the Asian women.'* How MDWs used knowledge of expatriate women's insecurities about Asian women really depended on their relationship with their female employer; this was an area in the women's relationship where some MDWs identified strongly with expatriate women and expressed allegiance through commiserating, being extra helpful with children and sympathetic in the event of marital discord or even in one instance in gathering evidence against husbands (for use in divorce proceedings) but others took pleasure in stoking expatriate women's insecurities or in observing disintegration of expatriates' marriages.

Non-employed expatriate women often lack conventional anchors of identity such as a career, established communities and long-term friendships. This sense of displacement can cause women to question their purpose and their value. Employing a MDW can add to this identity angst by performing many domestic tasks that a wife traditionally would do. In expatriate women's discourses questions of 'what do you do?' or a husband asking 'what did you do today?' are potentially loaded with judgment. Non-employed expatriate women often worry that they are perceived as useless and/or superfluous. It is against this psychological background that discourses of racialised competing female bodies circulate among expatriate women. A key

element in expatriate women's narratives was indignation at feeling like they were reduced to a commodity—to just another female body on the market.

Lucia, an Italian in her 30s, described an evening at Harry's Bar at Boat Quay with her husband and a group of friends. Boat Quay is a casual bar and restaurant area located near the financial district popular with tourists, expatriates and Singaporeans:

L: *'I don't think my husband is very drawn to Asian women but I found it very uncomfortable to see how all over him they would be in some situations. I found myself over and over again having to make it clear that he was mine. And I've never been in that situation elsewhere. Like if you're at a party you hardly ever have to go over to your husband and say 'he belongs to me' with body language. I've had to do it so many times here. And they get, they almost insist, and it gets really annoying I mean now I've talked about it with my husband and he's very good at sending the signal but I find it ridiculous that you almost have to do that because once you see a wedding ring or a certain situation you should back off but they don't. And they make all these comments about Ang mo women in front of me and I find that offensive.'*

B: 'What do they say?'

L: *'Ang mo women are fat'; 'you all look the same' or 'you age early'. I find it strange because I don't think I could ever go to them and say the same thing because I would feel I was being politically incorrect. But for them there's no issue. Now I've become quite rude back. In the beginning I wouldn't say anything. To be honest, I don't like the situation. I really don't enjoy it.'*

Expatriate women found the persistent behaviour and mocking comments of Asian women in bars upsetting. Part of expatriate women's irritation towards younger Asian women lies in their situating themselves as competition to expatriate women. As Lucia alludes, there are racial overtones to women's interactions. By Western beauty standards, Lucia was good looking and at 32 years old not 'old' but she was still subject to racialised generalisations like 'you all look the same', 'you're all fat,' and 'you age early.' In making these comments, the Asian women refused to see Lucia as an individual, recognising her only as another white woman.

Expatriate women resented what they viewed as the presumption of lower-class Asian women to racialise sexual appeal and to assess white women on that basis alone. Expatriate women felt that vital components of their identity (their educational, cultural, moral, and, even independent from husbands, economic attributes) were being ignored. Mavis, an Australian in her 40s, commented: *'They act [Asian women in bars] like we're all, forgive my language, a bunch of cunts competing for a fuck.'* Mavis' blunt assessment illustrates the bitterness that

some expatriate women felt at having young lower-class Asian women regard them as one-dimensional sex objects (much the way expatriate women tended to regard them) whose status was solely derived from a husband. In her discussion of the patriarchal exchange of women, Irigaray (1993) theorises that femininity is a role, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation (1993:131). In a patriarchal society, women are 'commodities' used and exchanged by men (Irigaray 1985:176-77). She explains that in order to have a 'relative value' a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity that serves as its equivalent (Irigaray 1985:177):

'Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man. Commodities among themselves are thus not equal, nor alike nor different. They only become so when they are compared by and for man' (ibid).

I contend that expatriate women perceived comparative evaluations of themselves with Asian women as discursively stripping them of all attributes of identity—except their sexual appeal—reducing them to sexualised bodies competing for male attention. I suggest that expatriate women were acutely troubled by the gendered social inferiority assumed and reinforced in such sexual exchanges and were cognisant that gendered asymmetries of power also existed in varying degrees in economic and social exchanges in general.

Expatriate women, who are predominantly white, were described by other expatriate women with Southeast Asian roots but Western upbringings as exclusionary in their social practices. Monta, a Norwegian who had been adopted as an infant from Thailand, described attending her first Norwegian playgroup at the Seaman's church:

*'There were only three mums and three children and this lady, a Norwegian tall blonde, and she looked at me and I said 'hello my name is Monta' in Norwegian and she pretended she didn't see. There were only three mums—it was impossible not to see. It was very rude. But I don't give up I never let that lady go away so in the end she have to put out her hand and start talking to me and was just like 'Wow okay you're Norwegian.' She thought I was some uneducated woman who'd married a white guy.'*

Monta's experience illustrates the processes of exclusion through which national and ethnic boundaries are maintained. Initially, her Thai appearance prevented her acceptance as 'Norwegian' and as a socially acceptable wife for a white husband. However, Monta established her Norwegian identity by displaying cultural proficiency thus differentiating herself from a much

derided category of Southeast Asian women who are stereotyped as sexual predators who target white men. Michelle, a Philippine American in her 30s, had a similar experience at a social gathering: *'None of the white women wanted to talk to me; they probably thought I was just some Asian tramp who'd latched onto a white guy...'* I spoke with a couple of Latina Americans, Chinese Canadians and an African American woman, none of whom felt that they had experienced racial prejudice from the expatriate community. I contend that for women who register as racially Southeast Asian sexual stereotypes form barriers to acceptance in predominantly white expatriate women's social networks.

Despite stigmatising Southeast Asian women who had relationships with white men, expatriate women, as Willis and Yeoh (2002:561) noted in China, tended to understand the economic imperative behind Asian women pursuing Western men. Kelsky (2006) points out that access to the West and all it represents is available only to a highly educated Asian elite through employment but also to a larger group through 'marrying in' by forming relationships with Western men (2006:175). Val, an American in her 40s, explained about MDWs: *'It's their best chance of improving their lives. It's all they've got so they use it. Even a good one, if given an opportunity with your husband, will take it. You can't really blame them.'* These narratives perpetuated ideas about MDWs being chameleon-like in the facets of their character that they revealed to expatriate women. Colleen, a Canadian in her 50s, for example, described seeing her neighbour's 'maid' waiting for the bus on a Sunday: *'So this very conservative girl was dressed so sexy, she looked like a different person. You never really know them, not what goes on in their minds. They want to survive so they only show us certain things.'* The belief that expatriate women can never fully trust MDWs was a constant theme in expatriate women's discourses. I assert that these tensions emanated from expatriate women's sense that MDWs' best interests and their own did not necessarily coincide and also from what expatriate women perceived as differences in their respective migrant group's moral characters.

In order to diffuse household tensions, expatriate women engaged in de-sexualising discourses. As with other female employers (e.g. Gill 1994; Lan 2006), the main argument of these discourses centred on the premise that MDWs' 'backwardness' mitigated against husbands being attracted to them. A number of women said that their husbands had told them that they would *'never be attracted to someone like that'*. Mike, an American in his 40s,

commented: *'I think if a guy wants to hook-up with someone like that they'll do it with a girl they meet in a bar. They're sexier than the maids and no complications—why dirty your own backyard.'* The phrase 'someone like that' has strong racial and class overtones, it implies that MDWs are not socially capable of competing with expatriate women. However, as Mike's comment implies, unlike among Taiwanese or Bolivian employers for whom strict racial hierarchies were believed by wives to discourage intimate contact between husbands and domestic workers (Lan 2006; Gill 1994), expatriate women are haunted by thoughts of Western men harbouring Asian fantasies. Western men's fantasies of Asian women are premised on racial difference and not bound by class differences—in some situations class difference appears to enhance men's fantasies of 'rescuing' women from poverty (Constable 2003). While Mike's comment recognises that MDWs' proximity to expatriate men's families mitigates against having casual sex with MDWs, he confirms expatriate women's general fears in stating that Western men wanting to 'hook-up' will select the most attractive anonymous Asian woman available.

### **8.3.2 Counter strategies: Cultivating an expatriate women's aesthetics**

Expatriate women were influenced by stereotypes that Asian women 'take better care of themselves'. Women remarked on the 'higher standards' of appearance in Singapore within the expatriate community and among Singaporean women. These 'higher standards' were articulated through dressier clothing, accessorising with jewellery and purses and grooming rituals. Most women said that spa services, such as manicures, pedicures, massages and facials were less expensive than 'back home.' Lower costs, having more time available and peer pressure were frequently cited as reasons why women utilised more beauty services. Women also believed that surgical procedures were more common in Singapore and less expensive. Expatriate beauty practices should be viewed in the context of the upward social mobility many experience as a result of relocation. Most expatriate women were not accustomed to regular spa treatments or personal trainers and viewed such activities as markers of a privileged lifestyle rather than as part of their 'normal' lives. Women used aesthetic rituals to define socio-economic statuses within the expatriate community. Increased affluence, leisure-time and peer pressure motivated some to devote more time to their appearance.

Fechter (2007a) argues that the loss of identity that many women experience as a result of giving up careers and being separated from social networks in their 'home countries' contributes to expatriate women's bodies attaining a heightened significance (2007a:95). This greater focus on shaping and grooming bodies was evident among expatriate women in Singapore. Veronica, an Australian in her 40s, commented:

*'I know a woman who works out six days a week. 47 or 48 years old, she looks amazing. She's so physically fit but she works out for several hours a day without fail. She takes Saturday off and that's it. What she says is it's her job to look nice. This is what she does. My perception is a lot of these women feel like it's their job.'*

Developing on Fechter's observations, I suggest that for some expatriate women maintaining an attractive physique was a strategy to minimise the threat posed by Asian women. The comment 'it's my job' suggests that a wife looking 'nice' is expected by some husbands and for some women could be part of the carefully calibrated balance of contributions to a relationship aimed at off-setting not contributing financially. Linda, a Canadian pilates enthusiast in her 40s, commented: *'You hear all the time about Asian women being small and sexy but there isn't a muscle on most of them. When they get past 35 everything falls apart. There's only so much facials and slimming treatments can do. There's nothing sexy about a saggy bum (laughs) even if it's small.'* Expatriates like Linda used fitness narratives to challenge Asian women's supposed aesthetic superiority.

Toned upper arms and taut abdominal muscles were also deemed indicators of women's economic status. Exercise classes and equipment are costly and exercise programmes require leisure time. This investment of time and money is not possible for all expatriates; it is definitely not possible for MDWs. Anne, a British woman in her 50s and avid tennis player, contended: *'The maids think they're so sexy but I mean really a lot of them are rather fat have saggy boobs and bad skin.'* In these discourses, a well-maintained body capitalised on the socio-economic gap between expatriate women and MDWs, constructing the former as more attractive—especially with age. Casey from the UK observed of her former MDW: *'She'd get all tarted up in her tight jeans with tons of make up thinking she was the hottest thing ever but she was mutton dressed as lamb (laughs) with her muffin top, greasy skin and missing teeth.'* In these discourses expatriate women utilised their superior economic

resources to manage the aging process; they also reaped aesthetic benefits from leading less labour intensive lifestyles.

#### **8.4 MDWs' discursive rebuttals to narratives of 'bad' Asian women**

MDWs are conscious that Singapore popular culture characterises them as morally deviant and sexually promiscuous. The climate of concern about MDWs' sexuality is such that it is considered reasonable to fire or refuse to employ a MDW for mere suspicion of having sexual relations. When a MDW is seen with a white man, onlookers immediately assume that their relationship is based on money and sex and hence a derivative of prostitution. In other circumstances, one might expect women's greater economic independence to lead to greater sexual freedom but that is not the case when women's economic well-being is predicated on an occupation that demands as a condition of employment that their sexuality be repressed. Still, even given government policies restricting MDWs' sexual involvement and public opinion, MDWs are not passive objects of discourse but are actively involved in negotiating their sexual reputation and moral identity. MDWs adopted different strategies to counter socially pervasive discourses about MDWs' moral laxity.

Some women emphasised their faith, drawing on notions of service, sacrifice and chastity. Christian and Muslim workers participated in parallel chastity discourses within their own national communities. As Chang and Groves (2000:79) observed in Hong Kong, self-identified religious Philippine MDWs tended to congregate in all-female groups on their days off and to avoid places that they identified as morally suspect. These MDWs were critical of others whom they characterised as tarnishing the reputation of all MDWs by having boyfriends and wearing sexy clothing. In conversations they stressed that they were '*not available*'. Religious conviction was not the sole reason given for being chaste; family or marital commitments or their plans for their own future such as applying to work in Canada or saving to start a business back home were also given as reasons precluding having sexual relationships in Singapore.

Another group of MDWs cultivated a sexually androgynous image. I encountered these women mainly at basketball games. Androgynous women referred to themselves as 'tomboys' and had short hair, wore no make-up and wore baggy long shorts and men's sports jerseys. These 'tomboys' were called 'boyfriends' by women they referred to as 'girlfriends' who wore their hair long, wore clothing that emphasised their feminine figures such as low cut or tight tops

and fitted shorts. They referred to their relationships as '*special friendships*'. The term 'lesbian' was not used by the women and some seemed averse to labelling their relationships in a way that they perceived as oppositional to heterosexuality. As Sim (2010:39) observed in Hong Kong, MDWs in these partnerships tended to mirror heterosexual gender roles with one assuming a masculine identity and the other a feminine identity. The masculine women were generally more assertive and appeared to dominate their feminine partners. Sim (2010) argues that by recreating the conditions of heterosexuality in what she calls 'neo-heterosexuality' domestic workers enact familiar romantic/sexual scripts for meaningful relationships during labour migration (2010:40).

I suggest that these relationships in part represent a rejection of narratives of MDW heterosexual promiscuity and that they provide a 'safe' outlet for sexual and emotional expression that is usually under an employer's radar. Expatriate women worried about MDWs becoming pregnant or inviting 'suspicious' men into their homes. Expatriate women tended to believe that MDWs normally attracted either Bangladeshi workers who employers perceived as culturally and economically inferior, or '*the dregs*' or '*leftovers*' of white men (also inferior). However, most expatriates permitted MDWs to have female friends over and some allowed friends to stay over on Saturday night (Sunday being most MDWs' day off). Most expatriate women said that it had not occurred to them that MDWs might engage in same sex relationships. This blindness might be because immigration restrictions and the self-selection process that determines which expatriates are willing to relocate to Singapore constructs an overwhelmingly heterosexual expatriate community and members of this community just assume that other migrants are also heterosexual. I contend that in the context of a restricted prejudicial environment towards heterosexual relationships, MDWs' same sex relationships can potentially evade employer censorship and be kept private under the guise of friendship.

However, most MDWs' discourses sought to counter images of promiscuity and deviance without rejecting heterosexual or sexual identities. MDWs' relationship narratives usually involved white men. Although numerous women described having relationships with Asian foreign workers, MDWs were concerned that migration restrictions would make it impossible for either partner to move to the other's home country and some worried that men might be married and/or were looking for 'just sex.' Singaporean men were conspicuously

absent from most MDWs' relationship narratives. I spoke with Anna a MDW whose sister (a former MDW) had married a Singaporean man. Anna explained: *'he's an orphan so no one cared who he marry with.'* Anna's sister had to wait in the Philippines for over 2 years until the Singapore government granted permission for her to migrate as a spouse. Most MDWs contended that racial and class prejudices against MDWs and the high barriers that the Singapore government erects to prevent MDWs' permanent settlement deterred involvement with Singaporean men.

In contrast, white men were considered likely to seek permanent relationships with MDWs. The prospect of emigrating to a Western country was appealing to some MDWs. MDWs' reasons for seeking relationships with Western men were varied. Some women believed that Western men were more *'open minded'* and less bound by cultural traditions than men from their own countries. Sita, an Indonesian MDW involved with a British boyfriend, explained: *'Western men treat you better. They don't think "oh you're just a maid or just a stupid woman".'* For women like Sita, Western men embodied an imagining of the West imbued with notions of individualism and equality. None of the MDWs I spoke with said that they would become involved with a man just for money. As Constable (2003) observed in examining 'mail order brides' reasons for seeking Western husbands, MDWs often articulated the importance of love but were not resistant to the idea that marriage or relationships involved other personal, geopolitical and economic considerations (2003:116).

#### **8.4.1 Narratives of feminine appeal as opposed to overtly sexual attractiveness**

In MDWs' discourses performing their job became an exhibition of femininity. MDWs constructed an idea of femininity based on warmth and kindness of character and superior domestic skills in cooking and cleaning. These discourses downplayed specific references to sex while tapping into ideas about Asian women's innate femininity, caring natures and considerateness. Glodava and Onizuka (1994) contend that there is a risk that those who are accustomed to following a behavioural script of deference will naturalise the view of themselves as subordinate: 'In fact this subordinate role is not only entrenched in the minds of men, it is also accepted by women as their lot in life' (1994:40). However, Kelsky (2006) illustrated how Japanese women appropriated aspects of fetishised images of themselves as 'Asian' women to

their own ends (2006:174). Even within traditional patriarchal cultures women express agency, resistance and choice within cultural perimeters (Constable 2003: 82).

Constable (2003:82) described how Philippine 'mail order brides' deliberately referenced stereotypes of Asian women as less confrontational than Western women in using the 'silent treatment' to achieve their own ends in relationship disputes (2003: 82). I suggest that MDWs consciously referenced stereotypes of Asian women in constructing narratives of competing Asian and Western femininity and domesticity. Although, to what extent my positionality as a white woman inhibited MDWs' discussion of sexualised stereotypes and counter narratives I have no way of knowing, MDWs appeared to speak candidly—especially in groups when my presence seemed almost forgotten.

MDWs' narratives often juxtaposed a caring hardworking MDW with an expatriate woman who was rarely home and paid little attention to her husband. Gina, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, commented:

*'I have a friend she works for a Filipina who got married with the sir. A European sir. I think that the wife doesn't have enough time for the husband. She did not look after the husband maybe the husband is looking for someone who knows how to look after the husband (giggles). And mostly of the Asian people, in the Philippines if the husband come back she give him the slipper some shorts, you know they ask 'did you eat?' you prepare the husband's food. They look after the husband. But you know other wife they don't care. They go out and not there when the husband come back from travels but the Filipina is there. So the husband will look for the one that look after them. How many times, my ma'am here goes out with the girls. But if my sir is here she doesn't go out. You must give attention to your husband. If more important is the friends than the husband so you cannot blame the husband. Filipinas are so loving and sweet—they look after you. Filipinas will help the husband to relax when he comes home. A lot they make the European people a stepping stone. Because even though old man once they are there they can divorce him.'*

While Gina acknowledges that some women have ulterior motives for being solicitous towards Western men, she nonetheless presents a narrative of Philippine women as innately domestic and nurturing as opposed to Western women who can be negligent in performing domestic duties. Kelsky (2006) observed that some Asian women characterise themselves as possessing a special ability to care for and please white men and to liberate the 'inherent' masculinity in them that has been suppressed by white women (2006:171).

Gina's assertion, *'you cannot blame the husband'* for leaving neglectful Western wives was repeated by numerous MDWs. Some MDWs argued that Philippine MDWs were not calculating but that Western men fell in love with them without any special efforts on their part. Esme, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, reasoned: *'You cannot control love. It just happens you cannot blame the maid.'* Unlike expatriate women's discourses of Asian women's involvement with white men which rarely admitted the possibility of genuine emotional attachment, MDWs' discourses focused on 'love' and emotional connections. Some MDWs suggested that Western women's unfeminine behaviour 'they are always yelling and screaming' and appearance were off-putting to Western men once they saw how Asian women comported themselves. Nora, a Philippine MDW in her 30s, explained:

*'Western men they like the Asian looks. White women they don't make an effort to look nice for the man (laughs) they have short hair—like a boy! (Indicates chin length hair.) They get fat and hide themselves in big t-shirts. They boss the husband all the time. Men they want someone to take care of them.'*

Through these narratives MDWs distinguished Asian women's performances of femininity and domesticity from those of white Western women.

## 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter contributes insight to domestic work and expatriate studies by showing how discourses of feminine sexuality influence relationships between differentially positioned (e.g. on multiple spatial and social scales such as nationality, class, race/ethnicity, developed/developing world, employed/non-employed) migrant women. Feminist theorists recognise that systems of difference are constructed in place and different systems are constructed in different places (Pratt and Hanson 1994). Focusing on the relationship between usually white expatriate women and Southeast Asian MDWs in the context of Singapore shows how residual Orientalist discourses and contemporary imaginings of Asian and white women's sexuality are utilised by both groups of women in constructing differences.

This chapter adds nuance to domestic work studies' understanding of how power operates in domestic relationships. On the one hand, it argued that MDWs are not passive objects of sexualised discourse but that they appropriate aspects of sexualised stereotypes while rejecting or downplaying others. Competing discourses of Asian and white women's sexuality enabled each group of women to wield (or at least attempt to) certain forms of

discursive power, even as they were dominated by others. In the context of their relationship with white expatriate women, some MDWs capitalised on discourses portraying white women as less feminine and less sexually attractive than Asian women to enhance a white employer's sexual and body insecurities and perhaps lower her self-esteem.

On the other hand, expatriate women countered discourses portraying Asian women as more feminine and sexually attractive by highlighting moral and cultural differences. Lamont explains (1992) that markers of socio-economic, cultural and moral boundaries are often elided in mental maps used to evaluate relative statuses (1992:5). I suggest that expatriate women's use of words like 'wholesome' and 'backgrounds' are indicative of blurring of categories of difference in that they encompass a melange of interwoven social criteria. Expatriate women argued that particular aspects of their cultural style, as they defined it (e.g. being educated, practicing marital fidelity, being equal partners to Western men) rendered them superior to most Southeast Asian women—MDWs included. Some attempted to rebut stereotypes of Western women as unattractive by engaging in aesthetic procedures and exercise regimes.

This chapter contributes to expatriate studies by elaborating on white women's gendered experience as a racial/ethnic minority in Singapore. Fechter (2005; 2007) and Leonard (2008; 2010) show that just as migration is experienced differently by men and women, whiteness is also experienced differently. For expatriate women, the gendered experience of being white was often unsettling, especially when juxtaposed against the experience of white men who are discursively positioned as wielders of a sexualised gaze as opposed to objects of it. I developed on Kelsky's (2006) research and on Willis' and Yeoh's (2008) observations of how Western expatriate women were racialised in China by exploring in depth how expatriate women respond to being racialised and discursively reduced to female bodies competing for the attention of white males. I argued that expatriate women's discourses of Asian women's sexuality embody a broad range of insecurities about how relocating to Singapore has impacted the power dynamic within their marriages and disturbed their sense of their own gendered positionality. Importantly, I showed how sexualised discourses circulating in the Singapore context impacted relationships between differentially situated migrant women. I illustrated how both expatriate women and MDWs utilise these context-specific discourses in defining differences between each other. Moral boundaries, Lamont (1992:238) contends, are

underexplored and often overlooked. However, in the context of gendered sexualised discourses, drawing moral differences was a key way of establishing boundaries between migrant women—especially for expatriate women. Conceptions of acceptable morality seemed integral to performances of various femininities and linked to understandings of social class.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

### 9.1 Introduction

I began with a simple motivation, to understand how two migrant women from very different backgrounds, expatriate women and MDWs, relate to each other in the context of domestic employment relationships. Years of personal observation and later participation in such relationships convinced me that overlapping transnational fields impacted how both groups of women dealt with class, racial/ethnic and cultural differences and how they negotiated versions of femininity in their daily domestic interactions. However, the subjective experiences of gender, class, racial/ethnic and national differences in everyday life tend to be entangled. An intersectional theoretical approach enabled me to explore the array of social divisions that shapes the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs without positioning myself within a theoretical framework which might privilege one category of social difference over another.

In contrast to most expatriate and domestic worker literature which focuses separately on migrant groups or on either domestic workers or employers, I have studied the *relationship* between two migrant women, an expatriate woman and a MDW, focusing on interrelated processes shaping migrant subjectivities. In this concluding chapter, I revisit my main research questions and discuss the significance and contributions of my research along four dimensions. First, returning to the rationale introduced in Chapter One, I examine how shared migrant status is utilised by expatriate women and MDWs in their respective distance-making processes. Second, I explain how through performing domestic labour both expatriate women and MDWs are 'doing' different versions of femininity that are simultaneously accomplishments of class and racial identities. Third, I focus on how sexualised and racialised discourses about migrant women's bodies permeate expatriate women's and MDWs' relationships. Finally, I link my study of the micro-politics of migrant women's relationships with the larger context of increasing transnational migration and globalisation.

### 9.2 How shared migrant status shapes the relationship between expatriate women and MDWs

My research was guided by the premise that expatriates' and MDWs' overlapping transnational fields promote interactions and dependencies not seen in relationships in which the employer is comfortably ensconced within their 'home' cultural framework. The relationship

between expatriate women and MDWs takes place against a backdrop of government policies that foster tensions along the axes of race, gender, class and nationality between differentially positioned categories of migrant women. In Singapore, both groups of migrant women are minorities (racial/ethnic and/or cultural and national) and members of the subordinate gender, albeit differently positioned. Domestic employment has historically brought together members of different races, classes and nationalities within the private spheres of the dominant classes and races. These relationships have been described by phrases such as 'domestic enemies' and 'distant companions' (Hansen 1989; Ozygin 2001) which evoke the simultaneous experience of distance and closeness. This thesis raised the question of how does shared migrant status affect this distance and closeness?

As I explained in Chapter Two, I approached this relationship as a mutual construct in which MDWs and expatriate women participate equally, thereby offering a relational concept of power. I argued that approaches to domestic work studies that infer a direct mirroring of power relations between women according to the structural conditions of domestic employment are misleading. The empirical chapters show that MDWs and expatriate women were both capable of deploying a variety of strategies and resources to pursue their own interests. Power was constructed, maintained and negotiated interactively by and between expatriate women and MDWs.

I contributed to migration studies by showing how MDWs used their shared migrant status with expatriate women to their strategic advantage. Working for newly arrived expatriates with little or no experience with domestic help provided MDWs with an opportunity to influence how their daily schedules were structured, to shape their employer's' expectations and to organise households. I added to Paul's (2011) research documenting the stereotyping of Chinese employers in Hong Kong by Philippine MDWs, by demonstrating that sharing stories of 'Chinese' employers' behaviour with expatriate women was a primary way in which MDWs conveyed their ideas about acceptable and unacceptable employer conduct to expatriates in a non-threatening way. I argued that the point of sharing these stories was to educate expatriate employers, who sought to differentiate themselves from 'Chinese' employers, on how 'good' employers should behave (in the view of MDWs). This strategy was effective because both MDWs and expatriates used stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers as a device for covering up

and making manageable some of the differences in status and class that structure their relationship. Criticising 'Chinese' employers was a joint exercise in asserting their shared difference from Singapore society's dominant group. I showed that both groups used stereotypes of 'Chinese' employers to further their own psychological ends.

Expatriate women, rightly, believed that MDWs were well placed to observe enormous differences between their lifestyles and those of their employers. I suggested that the ambivalence that many expatriate women expressed about shifting class statuses between 'home' and Singapore contributed to some expatriates being especially conscious of disparities between their 'expat lifestyle' and MDWs' standard of living. In their daily interactions, some expatriate women sought to manage the class, racial/ethnic and national inequalities that are manifest in their relationship with MDWs both by characterising themselves as 'better' than Singaporean Chinese employers and by creating quasi-familial ties.

Like other employers, expatriate women tended to use MDWs' status as unaccompanied women as the basis for forming these ties. As domestic work literature has noted, some employers find fulfilment in exercising power or influence over another woman's life. However, I contended that the relationships between two migrant women were often more nuanced than the literature usually portrays. Some expatriate women became actively involved in their MDW's personal life; while these interactions sometimes had distasteful maternalistic overtones, I argued that they were not always to MDWs' detriment. Both expatriate women and MDWs said that forging a 'good' relationship with 'open' communication was 'very' important; for both women cultivating friendly relations seemed to minimise positional differences or at least make them less grating.

Instances such as when an expatriate woman and her children accompanied their MDW to her village in the Philippines suggested that to fully understand the benefits of quasi-familial relationships for MDWs one must look beyond the relationship between the MDW and her employer. As the village visit example suggested, an employer's generosity or patronage can be a resource that MDWs use to gain respect and status at home. Many MDWs described redistributing gifts of used clothing, toys, books and linens from employers to family and friends thus assuming the role of gift giver themselves. Unlike most cases in domestic work literature, my research showed that unreciprocated gift receiving was not considered demeaning by

MDWs. On the contrary, receiving gifts and additional compensation were understood by MDWs to indicate their importance to employers.

I argued that unlike other employers who are accustomed to employing MDWs, expatriate women's own migrant positionality caused them to develop narratives for their children explaining MDWs' separation from their own children. Framing MDWs' separation from their children in terms of economic necessity as opposed to in terms of deficient mothering, reduced distance between the two migrant women's identities as mothers. Both groups of women shared an ideal of mother-centred child rearing. However, migration resulted in MDWs and expatriate women performing mothering roles in very different circumstances.

Nevertheless, in some circumstances, such as when expatriates attempted to reconcile their own and MDWs' disparate standards of living and relative life opportunities, drawing on their shared status as migrants created tensions. In this instance, expatriates sought to distance themselves from the other migrant community by utilising the language of cultural difference to emphasise supposedly unbridgeable socio-economic differences between themselves and MDWs. While expatriates did not use overly racist arguments they tended to refer to differences in 'backgrounds' to justify status differences and differences in life opportunities between themselves and MDWs. 'Cultural differences' featured prominently in expatriates' discourses. Culture, Lamont (1992) argues, is 'shaped above all by class and thus particularly by economic and related inequalities' (1992:1). Among expatriates, 'cultural differences' were mobilised to justify exclusionary practices that maintained migrant group hierarchies. I showed expatriates' tendency to 'culturise' differences of income and economic power. Through comparative evaluations of 'their' culture and the culture (as they characterised it) of lower tier migrants expatriates asserted their group's dominance within the macro-political and economic context and also in the domestic context; 'cultural differences' were used by expatriate women to establish, justify and reinforce dominant and subordinate femininities.

I contribute to transnational studies of the experience of 'whiteness' by adding depth to our understanding of how migrants who are categorised as 'white' function as transnational racial minorities—particularly in relation to an 'other' transnational minority group. White expatriates tended to assume that socio-economic hierarchies between themselves and MDWs were obvious and were puzzled (and defensive) when I asked them about potential positional

similarities. I argued that this assumption reduced the amount of boundary work that they engaged in to differentiate themselves from MDWs relative to Asian employers. I contended that expatriates' understandings of 'whiteness' (whether or not overtly acknowledged)—its perceived economic status and association with Western nationalities—shaped expatriates' expectations of status hierarchies and class performances. For expatriates who were mostly white and came from white-dominated societies, whiteness, even when a minority in an Asian city, still tended to specify the cultural construction of what Frankenberg (1993) characterised as a structural position of social privilege and power. Expatriate women tended to assume that racial differences between themselves and MDWs signalled significant—even unbridgeable—economic, cultural and class differences. Conversely, MDWs perceived that expatriate women engaged less in status differentiating processes than Asian 'Chinese' employers and inferred that this meant that expatriate employers viewed such boundary making practices as unimportant.

Expatriate women's discourses were often more complicated than they initially seemed. For example, narratives about encouraging a MDW to develop her skill set and seeking a 'good' relationship with her were often asserted simultaneously by expatriate women with other narratives which revealed the contrived nature of much of expatriate women's behaviour that was designed to mitigate the unequal nature of the domestic employment relationship. These narratives took the form of candid exchanges between white expatriate women. (I suspect in this instance that my 'insider' status was useful in helping me tease out contradictions in expatriate women's discourses.) Many expatriate women firmly believed that MDWs were ultimately not like them and should not pretend that they were or aspired to be so. For many expatriate women, the pretence of commonality between migrant women of different classes, nationalities and races/ethnicities was confined to the sphere of intimacy that the domestic work relationship required.

For both groups of migrant women the cartography of class was located beyond a single country and across multiple social settings. Both women's sense of where they stood in their respective migrant communities was developed and reinforced through their interactions. I provide new insight for migration studies by showing that the social status of each migrant woman in her respective community was in a sense tethered to the migrant women's

relationship with each other. For expatriate women, employing a MDW facilitated outward manifestations of upward social mobility. For some expatriate women, such as the one with a bell waiting to call her MDW, daily domestic interactions characterised by class inequality and the implications of national and racial/ ethnic difference affirmed and buttressed their experience of temporary status elevation as a result of migration. For MDWs, working for an expatriate employer helped some women achieve prestige or status within their own community. However, importantly, I observed that MDWs sought to work for expatriates not only because of the symbolic status gained from associating themselves with 'Western' employers, as Paul (2011) argued, but rather because they believed these employers were more likely to pay higher salaries and provide more generous fringe benefits and better treatment. MDWs also believed that these employers, although transient, would have contacts who would provide future jobs.

### **9.3 'Doing' gender and class in domestic labour**

My research, like other studies of domestic work, shows that domestic employment does not diminish but consolidates the gendered division of domestic labour—domestic labour is usually either performed by or delegated by women to other women. I argued that viewing the labour of both MDWs and non-employed expatriate women as points on a structural continuum of domestic labour (Nippert-Eng 1996) showed how when doing domestic work expatriate women and MDWs performed different versions of femininities and simultaneously engaged in the carrying out of other social identities that defined differences between them. Most studies of domestic work overlook the primary earner's (usually male) influence on household dynamics and the shaping of domestic femininities. My research addresses this gap by arguing that the particular characteristics of expatriate masculinity help sustain and maintain traditional gender roles.

Accomplishing gender refers to the 'ongoing task of rendering oneself accountably masculine or feminine...The task of measuring up to one's gender is faced again and again in different situations with respect to different particulars of conduct' (Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman 1991:294). By including non-employed expatriate men in my study as well as primary earner expatriate men, I showed how engaging in remunerated work was a primary practice through which hegemonic masculinity was performed. Expatriate men made themselves accountably masculine by going to work and avoiding household duties. Non-

employed expatriate women and MDWs made themselves accountably feminine by doing household work and childcare. This division of labour was consistent with many expatriate women's and MDWs' internalised normative beliefs. However, 'doing gender' did not always entail preserving the status quo. MDWs as primary earners themselves sought to 'do gender' in a way that enlarged the legitimate territory of women's gender practice and femininity as well as associating themselves with elite migrants and distancing their labour from the unpaid domestic labour of their non-employed female employers. For these MDWs gender principles were usually intransitive: while they may allow themselves as primary earners to move into a sphere of activity defined as 'manly' (their employment in domestic service, of course, renders the move less transgressive) they still expressed scepticism at the possibility of men functioning competently in 'womanly' roles of nurturing and childcare. If expatriate men sought to actively involve themselves in childcare and household routines, for example, MDWs often bristled that they were transgressing expected gender roles.

Likewise, numerous expatriate women believed that performing childcare well entailed preserving a gender status quo which elevated mothering over parenting and fathering in importance to a child's development. I argued that this line of reasoning helped shore up expatriate women's sense of self worth. However, I contended that non-employed expatriate women's general acceptance of the gendered division of household labour, did not mean that they understood their domestic position as 'natural' or as an integral part of their feminine existence. Many expatriate women would have preferred a more equal sharing of domestic work; some missed the sense of personal fulfilment they had experienced through pursuing careers. I explained how non-employed expatriate women resented that through their daily interactions with MDWs they tied themselves more closely to a subordinate feminine role as opposed to their husband's hegemonic masculine role. The increased gendered inequality in participation in household routines caused by relocation constituted a source of marital conflict and tension as well as acted as a catalyst for expatriate women's more general positional insecurities.

I showed how MDWs and expatriate women drew upon their common, gender-based qualities as wives and mothers (as culturally recognised intimacy makers or caregivers) and used patriarchal gender beliefs in their interaction as they negotiated the terms and conditions

of the work arrangement. For example, expatriate women introduced husbands into the relationship to provide excuses for requiring extra help ('He really needs to rest this Sunday...can you help out...') or to set restrictions over MDWs' use of household space or amenities ('He doesn't want you around the pool' or 'Keep the volume low on your TV, the chatter bothers him'). The two groups of women described commiserating about the pernicky demands of male primary earners but ultimately agreed their needs must be catered to—effectively reproducing their own subordinate status while appearing to assert their discontent with their superiors.

Still, it would be simplistic to conclude that in performing subordinate femininities both groups of women just accepted a patriarchal gender order that implicated both groups of migrant women. Instead, I illustrated that they selectively utilised and negotiated patriarchal gender beliefs in numerous, subtle, equivocal ways in their day-to-day interactions with each other. Through such experiences and from different positions within gender and class hierarchies, expatriate women and MDWs constructed a language to discuss and negotiate domestic labour processes and reconcile the diverse experiences of their lives. Complicatedly, they connected one to another and sought to assert their differences in their simultaneous efforts to both reinforce and alleviate the consequences of class inequalities and differences in femininities.

I argued that MDWs anticipated a gendered hierarchy with a range of femininities— ranking female employers above MDWs—below hegemonic masculinities. MDWs' daily interactions with expatriate women—especially non-employed women—produced narratives repeatedly illustrating the ways in which their employers failed to 'do' their gender or class status appropriately. While these critical discourses are common in all domestic employment relationships, I contribute to migration studies and domestic work studies by showing that expatriate women's status as migrants and as Western women influenced how MDWs evaluated relative feminine domesticities. MDWs, for example, frequently judged expatriate women's displays of feminine domesticity as deficient asserting that as Asian women they were more innately adept at care-giving and cultivating an appealing (to men) feminine persona. MDWs objected to expatriate women's tendency to play 'good' cop/'bad' cop because it brought male authority into the female sphere of domestic work. In MDWs' view, the classed feminine

gender role of 'ma'am' entailed being able to manage MDWs. However, MDWs did not expect female primary earners to engage in as personal a relationship with MDWs as non-employed women. I suggested that this was because MDWs were ideologically invested in believing that the financial provider role should take precedence over domestic roles.

I contended that pointing out expatriate women's temporary status as 'ma'am' and ineptitude at performing the appropriate classed feminine role discursively reduced MDWs' sense of class inequality and reaffirmed their own identity as women who understood the culturally appropriate correlation of class and feminine roles. The transparency of expatriates' upward class mobility to other migrant groups has not been previously observed but, as I showed, impacts relationships between migrant women. Some MDWs did not view the gulf between themselves and expatriate women as being nearly as vast as it is portrayed in domestic worker literature or in migration literature which approaches upper-income and lower-income migrants through distinct lenses.

I argued that both expatriate women and MDWs used mothering narratives to situate themselves in relation to their transnational community's mothering practices, 'home' mothering ideals and to the other migrant woman's mothering practices. While both groups shared the same ideal of intensive mothering, they drew distinctions between their respective mothering performances. Expatriate women's delegation of mothering labour tended to follow well-observed patterns in which by performing, delegating and supervising aspects of mothering roles employers reinforce class distinctions and ideals of womanhood. I observed that expatriate women tended to acknowledge but not quite believe MDWs' narrative of being compelled to leave their children. Characterising MDWs' leaving their children as 'unnatural', allowed expatriate women to distance themselves from MDWs' both as mothers and as women by drawing on notions of femininity that encapsulated ideas of women being inherent physical caregivers. On the other hand, MDWs' comparative narratives focused on how expatriate women, despite being physically present, lacked meaningful involvement in their children's lives (unlike themselves who maintained close ties despite distance) to the detriment of their children. In asserting their own groups' version of mothering femininities which they articulated through their attitudes and practices, I argued that both groups of women were consolidating their own identity through defining differences between themselves and the other group.

#### **9.4 Discourses about migrant women's sexuality and femininity**

I contribute to migration studies by showing how discourses of feminine sexuality influence relationships between differentially positioned (e.g. on multiple scales such as nationality, class, race/ethnicity, developed/developing world, employed/non-employed) migrant women. Revealing the operation of these discourses in the two women's relationship adds nuance to our understanding of how power operates in domestic relationships. Predominant sexualised and racialised discourses subjugate MDWs but they also function as resources that enable the assertion of agency. Developing on research focusing on MDWs' range of responses to negative sexual stereotyping, I argued that MDWs are not passive subjects in this process but actively participate in mapping ideas onto the bodies of differentially situated migrant women. For example, I argued that subjecting white women to an evaluative gaze is a strategy for MDWs to harness the power of relative racial and sexual stereotypes of migrant women's bodies. I showed that MDWs are aware of expatriate women's insecurities and that how they used that knowledge really depended on the women's personal relationship—some commiserated or downplayed expatriates' fears while others stoked them.

I add to expatriate studies by elaborating on white women's gendered experience of racialisation in Singapore. Privileges of gender and nationality make white men attractive to less privileged Asian women; however, a parallel sexual economy does not exist for white women. I argued that for expatriate women the gendered experience of being racialised as 'white' was often unsettling, especially when juxtaposed with the experience of white men who are discursively positioned as wielders of a sexualised gaze as opposed to objects of it. I suggested that while white women often anticipated enjoying the privileges of race—as evidenced, for example, by the belief that their status as 'ma'am' was obvious—they were nonetheless ambiguously positioned in that while they experienced, perhaps to different degrees, privileges of race and nationality they lacked expatriate men's gendered power. I explored in depth how 'white' women responded to being racialised and discursively reduced to female bodies competing for the attention of white males. I showed how the experience of racialisation and sexualisation combined with a broad range of insecurities about how relocating to Singapore had impacted the power dynamic within their marriages and disturbed expatriate women's sense of their own gendered social role as 'wife'.

I provide insight into how white expatriate women used supposed moral differences as a means of distancing themselves from Asian women and asserting their superiority. Expatriate women emphasised what they characterised as moral divisions not just between themselves and MDWs but between their home cultures in the West and Singapore culture and more broadly Asian cultures. I suggested that these criticisms were indicative of the positional insecurities that some Western expatriates experience when situated in an affluent, non Western global city. Expatriate women's moral criticisms of MDWs cast a wide net; they covered hygiene, sexuality, honesty, self-control and consumption habits, among other qualities. In these narratives, expatriate women, like other employers, stressed the moral superiority of their own group's (as defined by class, nationality, and culture) values and actions.

I argued that a key element in expatriate women's narratives about the experience of feminine whiteness in Asia was indignation at feeling like they were commodified—to just another female body on the market. In expatriate women's sexualised and racial discourses about Asian women, sexual relationships tended to have commercial connotations; Asian women were characterised as pursuing expatriate men either overtly as prostitutes selling sex for money or more covertly as girlfriends making the same exchange. In expatriate women's discourses emotional attachment was not a component in these relationships; although it was the *raison d'être* of their own marital relationships (money was not mentioned). I suggested that the blurring of boundaries between sex, commerce and love was problematic for many expatriate women; it heightened their own positional insecurities and raised questions of how their intimate relationships differed from how they characterised those between Asian women and Western men. For expatriate women, the porous boundaries between paid and unpaid domestic labour further blurred distinctions between commerce and labours of love—between wifely and MDW roles.

## **9.5 Final thoughts**

My study contributes to migration studies by showing that relationships between differently situated migrant women can (and do) influence the construction of each group's respective subjectivities. Most studies document the experiences of a single migrant group (e.g. MDWs or expatriates) without considering whether cross-migrant group interactions influence each group's subjectivities. I have demonstrated that migrant employers and employees face

unique quandaries and develop distinct patterns in their boundary making practices. I showed how many of the two groups' boundary making practices were actually derived from their structural proximity as 'migrants'. Shared migrant status functioned as a strategic device for managing the subjective proximities of both women; it could be deployed to accentuate or diminish differences depending on the situation.

By taking the domestic as my focus and examining private and personal space as not only an employer's home but a MDW's workplace I have problematised the classic dichotomy between public and private spheres. As Colen and Sanjek (1990) point out, studies of domestic work 'force us to acknowledge...that, worldwide, millions of homes are working places, and millions of workplaces are homes' (1990:179). Focusing on two groups of migrant women highlights how gender ideologies associated with domestic labour remain powerful and may actually be accentuated by women's migration. Gender norms governing the household division of labour rest in part on women's lack of collective economic and political power to persuade men and society in general to help bear the costs of caring for the home and the family (McKay 2005:305).

Globally, paid domestic work is on the rise, rather than declining, across the Western and non Western world (Hansen 2003:285). As increasing numbers of people of all migrant categories seek work internationally, more and more individuals will find themselves living with an 'other' migrant. In order to understand how migrant identities are shaped it will become important to understand how relationships between migrant groups, not just with host societies, shape identity processes. For expatriate women and MDWs, living together as transmigrants did not reduce boundary making practices but rather contextualised these practices in terms of overlapping transnational fields. National, ethnic/racial, class, cultural differences were important to both groups of women and acted as barriers between them. The household becomes a contested terrain for the reproduction of global inequalities and social boundaries.

The empirical chapters have shown that the conundrums of personal relationships between expatriate women and MDWs are not only the results of personal identity politics but are also the outcomes of much larger social, economic and political processes. Importantly, studying the micro-politics of expatriate women's and MDWs' domestic employment relationship, allows us to see how different dimensions of identity are co-mingled and

intertwined, so much so that it is often challenging to speak of these separately. Perhaps most significantly, it illustrates that identity in general and the specific identities of social difference—be they class, race/ethnicity, gender or nationality—are processes rather than static categories. These processes involve multiple shifting pieces and often divergent facets. I argue that migration renders more visible the shared work of negotiating identities among people; these negotiations determine who ‘maids’ and m’ams’ are. This point is perhaps obvious but it is often overlooked in studies that approach groups, migrant or employer/employee, in an isolated way. I suggest that close attention to interactions allows us to determine what the rights, obligations and status of each participant are, and the intricate ways in which each of these is determined. Understanding how difference is produced opens up possibilities for dismantling and challenging the terms on which it is constructed.

My focus on Western expatriates and MDWs limited my exploration of how different migrant groups interact with each other. Further ethnographic studies could consider how transnational movements shape proximity and distancing processes between other migrant groups such as between Philippine MDWs (the MDW group most researched) and non-Western expatriate employers such as Indian nationals or could focus on workplace interactions between Western and non-Western expatriate migrants of similar job seniority. Such studies would add to our understanding of the multiple and conflicting identities of migrants and of the cultural and social landscapes embedded in a globalised city.

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## Appendices

### Appendix One: Foreigners in Singapore

The estimated number of foreigners residing in Singapore and estimated average duration (if available) according to respective embassies or consulates. Jan. 2010.

<b>Western Countries</b>	<b>Estimated number of nationals</b>	<b>Average length of stay</b>
Australia	20,200	n/a
Belgium	1,050	1-2 years
Canada	5,000	2-3 years
Denmark	1,050 plus 15%*	~ 3 years
Finland	750	n/a
France	8,000	4 years
Germany	5,200	2-3 years
Ireland	2,000-4,000	n/a
Italy	2,000	3-4 years
Netherlands	3,600	~ 3 years
Norway	1,454	n/a
Russia	< 1,000	n/a
Spain	300	n/a
Sweden	1,700	n/a
Switzerland	2,269	2-3 years
United Kingdom	22,000	~ 3 years
United States	20,000	2-3 years.
<b>Non Western Countries</b>	<b>Estimated number of nationals</b>	<b>Average length of stay</b>
Bangladesh	90,000	n/a
China	Did not respond	n/a
India	278,600**	N/a
Indonesia	109,388***	n/a
Japan	24,000	2-3 years
Korea	13,000	3 years
Philippines	158,231****	n/a
Myanmar	30,000	n/a

\* Denmark: 15% is an estimate of those who have been overseas more than 10 years and have severed most ties

\*\* No breakdown between Work Permit, Employment Pass and Permanent Resident was available.

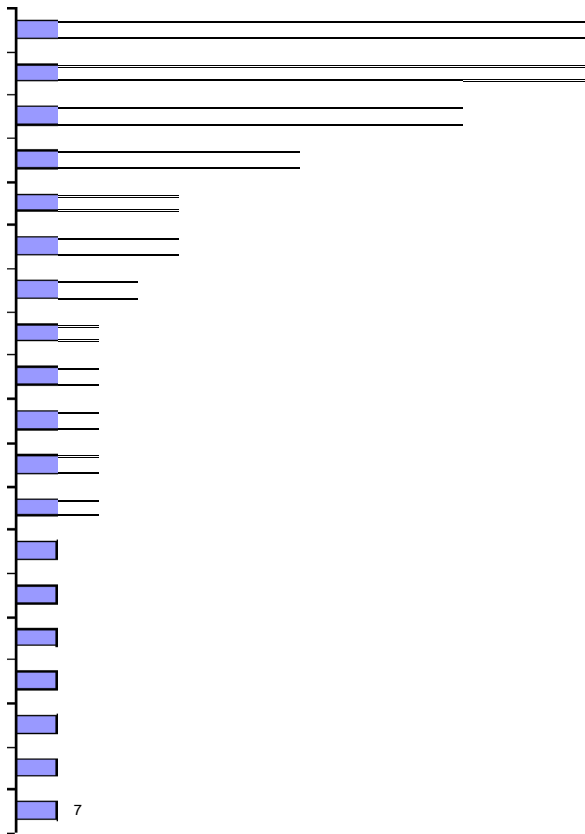
\*\*\* Registered voters

\*\*\*\* Registered voter distribution: Permanent 35,820 (Immigrants or legal PRs whose stay does not depend on work contracts); Temporary 66,411 (stay is employment related and who are expected to return at the end of their work contracts). Irregular 56,000 (those not properly documented or without valid residence or work permits).

Appendix Two: Expatriate Women and MDW Interview Participant Demographics

Expatriate Women interview participants: 74 total  
MDW interview participants: 59 total  
Expatriate Men interview participants: 5 total (data used only where noted)

2.1 Expatriate women interview participants' nationalities



2.2 The Profile of Research Participants

Table One: Characteristics of Expatriate Women Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Age Range	Marital status	Employment Status	Duration of stay in Singapore at time of interview	Education*	Children	Number of Children	Previous overseas experience	Previous live-in DW experience	Current MDW(s) nationality	# of previous MDWs
Anna	USA	40-45	Married	Non-employment	Less than a year	University	Yes	2 children Over 5	Yes. UK	Weekly cleaner	Phil	0
Rebecca	USA	30-35	Married	Non-employment	18 months	University	Yes	2 children Under 5	No.	None	Phil	0
Jayne	USA	30-35	Married	Non-employment	Almost 2 years	University	Yes	1 child Under 5	No.	None	Phil	1
Alicia	USA	40-50	Married	Non-employment	Over a year	High school	Yes	2 children Grown-up	Yes. Hong Kong ; mainland China	Yes.	Phil	0

Beth	USA	40-50	Married	employed Non- employed Pre- Singapore Full-	Over 2 years	University	Yes	2 childre n Over 5	No.	None	Phi	1
Heather	USA	35-40	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore ; Full-time	3 years	University	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	1
Caitlyn	USA	40-50	Married	Part-time Pre- Singapore ; Non- employed	Over 8 years	High school	Yes	3 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	2
Lisa	USA	35-40	Divorce	Full-time Pre- Singapore: Full-time	Over 4 years	University	No	None	Yes. Hong Kong	Cleaner	Phi	2
Vicky	USA	35-40	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore e Part-	Over 2 years	High school	Yes	2 children Under 5	No.	None	Phi	3
Julie	USA	40-50	Married	Non- employed Pre Singapore: non — employed	Over 2 years	University	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	0
Jen	USA	35-40	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore In graduate	9 years	PhD	Yes	2 childre n over 5.	No.	None	Phi	2
Joy	USA	50+	Married	Non- employed (retired) Pre Singapore: Full-time	Over a year	University	Yes	2 children grown- up.	No.	None	Phi	0
Marisa	USA	40-50	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore ; Part-time	Over 3 years	PhD	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	0
Ruth	USA	40-50	Married	Non- employed Pre Singapore: non — employed	3 years	University	Yes	2 childre n Over 5	Yes. Hong Kong.	Yes.	Phi	0
Betty	UK	40-50	Married	Non- employed Pre Singapore: Non- employed	2 1/2 years	University	Yes.	2 childre n Over 5	Yes. Africa, Hong Kong,U K	Yes.	Phi	0
Mega	UK	40-50	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore: Part-time	3 years	High school	Yes	2 childre n Grown- up	Yes. Europe	Cleaner	Phi	0
Karen	UK	40-50	Married	Part-time Pre- Singapore: Full-time	Almost 7 years	University	Yes	2 childre n Over 5	No.	None	Phi	2
Keira	UK	35-40	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore: Full-time	Over 4 years	University	Yes	3 childre n under and over 5.	No	None	Indon.	0
Casey	UK	50+	Married	Non- employed Pre Singapore: Non- employed	22 years	High school	Yes	2 childre n grown- up	Yes. USA	None	Phi	7
Cara	UK	30-35	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore: Full-time	7 years	University	Yes	3 children under 5	Yes. Kenya	Yes.	Phi	3
Lucy	UK	35-40	Married	Part-time Pre- Singapore e Full-	3 years	High school	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	0
Jill	UK	35-40	Married	Non- employed Pre- Singapore: Part-time	Almost 5 years	University	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	1
Sybil	UK	40-50	Married	Part-time Pre- Singapore: Part-time	Almost 4 years	University	Yes	2 childre n over 5	No	None	Phi	1
Celia	UK	35-40	Married	Part-time	5 years	University	Yes	1 child over 5	No	None	Phi	2

				Pre-Singapore : Full-time								
Jodi	UK	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	3 years	University	Yes	3 children under and over 5.	No	None	Phil	0
Abigail	UK	25-30	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Over 4 years	University	Yes	2 children under 5	No.	None.	Phil	1
Carol	UK	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Almost 4 years	University	Yes	2 children Over 5	No.	None.	Phil	0
Yvette	UK	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Non-employed	'just' over 3 years	University	Yes	3 children Over 5	Yes. Norway : Nigeria	Yes.	Phil	1
Meredith	AUS	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	almost 2 years	University	Yes	3 children Under and /over 5	No.	None.	Phil	0
Katie	AUS	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	Almost 4 years	University	Yes	3 children under 5	No.	None.	Phil	0
Heather	AUS	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	Over 2 years	University	Yes	3 children Over and under 5	No.	None.	Phil	0
Alice	AUS	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	3 years	MA	Yes	3 children under 5.	No.	None.	Phil	0
Veronica	AUS	40-50	Married	Part-time Pre-Singapore : Full-time	Almost 5 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	No	None	Phil	1
Alison	AUS	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Full-time	5 years	University	Yes	1 child over 5	No	None	Phil	0
Janet	AUS	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Part-time	3 years	University	Yes	3 children under and over 5	Yes. UK	None	Phil	1
Mavis	AUS	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Part-time	Over 12 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	No	None	Phil	3
Margot	AUS	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Full-time	Almost 6 years	University	Yes	3 children under and over 5.	No	None	Phil	1
Annie	AUS	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Full-time	4 1/2 years	University	Yes	2 children under 5	No	None	Burma	1
Sadie	AUS	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore : Full-time	Almost 4 years	University	Yes	2 children under 5	No	None.	Phil	1
Sally	CND	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	'just' over 2 years	University	Yes	1 child over 5	Yes. Japan	None.	Phil	0
Chantal	CND	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	18 months	University	Yes	3 Under r and over 5	No.	None.	Did not employ a MDW.	—
Colleen	CND	50+	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	Over 3 years	High school	Yes	3 children Over 5	No.	None.	Phil	0
Linda	CND	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore:	3 years	University	Yes	4 children over 5 and grown-	Yes. USA	Yes	Phil	1

Yantha	CND	35-40	Married	Part-time Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	2 34 years	University	Yes	up 3 children under 5.	No.	None	Sir Lanka	1
Harmony	CND	25-30	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	5 months	University	No	None	No	None	Did not employ a MDW	—
Bree	CND	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	2 34 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	Yes. USA; Malaysia.	Yes	Phi	0
Valerie	Other	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	3 years	University	Yes	3 children Over 5	No.	Bi-weekly cleaner.	Phi	0
Gunilla	Other	30-35	Married	Full-time Pre-Singapore: Full-time	3 years	University	Yes	2 children Under 5	No.	None.	Phi	0
Justine	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Non-employed	7 years	University	Yes	4. Under and over 5	No.	None.	Phi	1
Katarina	Other	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	Over 4 years	University	Yes	1 child. over 5	Yes. UK, USA	None.	Phi	1
Lea	Other	50+	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Almost 8 years	MD	Yes	3 children over 5 and grown-up	No	Cleaners	Did not employ a MDW	—
Lisa	Other	35-40	Married	Full-time Pre-Singapore: employed Full-time	Almost 6 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	No	None	Phi	1
Michelle	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	9 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	None	Sri Lanka	1
Klaudia	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	3 years	University	Yes	3 children over and under 5	No	Cleaner	Phi	0
Ines	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Non-employed	4 34 years	High school	Yes	6 children over and under 5	Yes. USA	Yes	Phi	1
Gabriele	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	2 34 years	University	Yes	2 children under and over 5	No	None	Phi	0
Christina	Other	35-40	Married	Part-time	11 years	University	Yes	4 children over		Yes	Phi	1
Dagmar	Other	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Non-employed	5 years	University	Yes	4. under and over 5.	Yes. UK	None	Phi	3
Elise	Other	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	3 34 years	High school	Yes	2 children Over 5	Yes. Europe and mainlan d China	Yes	Phi	0
Claire	Other	40-50	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	Just over 2 years	MA	Yes	3 children over 5	Yes. European countries, USA, Australia.	Au pairs	Phi	0
Lilly	Other	35-40	Married	Part-time Pre-Singapore: Full-time	3 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	None	Phi	1
Melinda	Other	40-50	Married	Part-time Pre-Singapore: non-employed	Over 2 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	Yes. USA	None	Phi	0
Madeline	Other	50+	Married	Full-time	16 years	University	No	1 child grown-	Yes. UK, Europe,	None	Phi	2

				Pre-Singapore Full-time				up	Japan			
Thirza	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Non-employed	3 years	University	Yes	3 children over and under 5	Yes. Thailand	Yes.	Thai	0
Lucia	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	Over 6 years	University	Yes	4 children over and under 5	Yes. UK	None	Phl	1
Monica	Other	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	18 months	University	No	None	No	None	Phl	1
Monta	Other	30-35	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Just over 6 years	University	Yes	3 children under 5	No	None	Phl	0
Monique	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	4 34 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	nanny	Phl	0
Deborah	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Part-time	Almost 7 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	None	Phl	2
Dorothy	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Over 3 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	None	Phl	0
Kathleen	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Over 4 years	University	Yes	3 children over 5	No	None	Phl	1
Isabelle	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	6 34 years	University	Yes	2 children over 5	Yes. Europe	None	Phl	2
Nancy	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Almost 3 years	University	Yes	4 children over and under 5	No	Cleaner	Phl	0
Anja	Other	50+	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: non-employed	7 years	High school	Yes	3 children grown-up.	Yes. UK; South Africa	Yes	India	1
Birgit	Other	35-40	Married	Non-employed Pre-Singapore: Full-time	Almost 5 years	University	Yes	3 children over and under 5	No	None	Phl	0

This table includes only those formally interviewed; not those who participated in more informal interaction. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants from smaller national groups, I have classified those from countries with fewer than five participants as 'other'. 'Other' includes: New Zealand, Sweden, France, Holland, Germany, India, Italy, Norway, Belgium, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Ireland, Finland, South Africa and Switzerland. I have not provided charts for male participants as there were too few.

\*Employment status generally correlates with paid/unpaid employment. However, some participants classified volunteer work as 'full-time' or 'part-time'. Inquiries into whether these activities were indeed volunteer or paid work tended to be interpreted as diminishing the value of their work. I have classified women's employment status as they did.

\*Education indicates the level of education participants said they had attained. 'High school' indicates completion of secondary school.

\*I did not include husbands' industries because in some cases, combined with other data, it would have compromised anonymity.

**Table Two: Characteristics of MDWs**

Pseudonym	Nationality	Duration of stay in Singapore at time of interview*	Age range	Marital status	Level of education*	Children	Previously worked overseas	Previously worked for Chinese Singaporean employer
Jocelyn	Philippine	Over 4 years	30-35	Unmarried	Some university	No	No	Yes
Mary	Philippine	5 years	30-35	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Grace	Philippine	11 years	40-50	Separated	College	Yes	Yes. Hong Kong.	Yes
Timah	Indonesian	Over 6 years	Under 25	Unmarried	High school	No	No	Yes
Ellen	Philippine	Over 11 years	40-50	Unmarried	High school	No.	Yes. Kuwait.	Yes
Michelle	Philippine	9 years	40-50	Married	High school	Yes	No.	Yes
Dida	Philippine	Over 6 years	30-35	Unmarried	College	Yes	No	Yes
Jose	Philippine	7 years	25-30	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Gina	Philippine	17 years	40-50	Divorced	High school	Yes	Yes. Hong Kong	Yes
Melissa	Philippine	13 years	35-40	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Trina	Philippine	7 years	30-35	Married	University	Yes	No	Yes
Theresa	Philippine	8 years	35-40	Married	College	Yes	Yes. Kuwait	Yes
Minda	Philippine	Almost 5 years	25-30	Married	University	Yes	No	Yes
Glades	Philippine	Over 8 years	35-40	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Rosanne	Philippine	6 months (came to replace relative in	35-40	Married	Some university	Yes	No.	No.
Anna	Indonesian	Over 4 years	35-40	Married	High school	Yes	No	Yes
Jessica	Philippine	Over 6 years	30-35	Unmarried	University	No	No	Yes
Linda	Philippine	9 years	30-35	Unmarried	Some university	Yes	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Lorna	Philippine	Almost 10 years	35-40	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Vivian	Philippine	Over 12 years	40-50	Married	College	Yes	Yes Qatar	Yes
Jovita	Philippine	8 years	30-35	Married	Some university	Yes	No	Yes
May	Philippine	19 years	40-50	Separated	High school	Yes	Yes. Hong Kong	Yes
Rosemarie	Philippine	7 years	35-40	Married	Some university	Yes	No	Yes
Rea	Philippine	Over 4 years	25-30	Unmarried	College	Yes	No	Yes
Siri	Indonesian	Over 10 years	30-35	Married	College	Yes	Yes Dubai	Yes
Anna	Philippine	Over 8 years	30-35	Married	Some university	Yes	No	Yes
Gina	Philippine	Over 10 years	40-50	Separated	High school	Yes	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Ruby	Philippine	9 years	30-35	Married		Yes	No	Yes
Angel	Philippine	13 years	40-50	Separated	College	Yes	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Esme	Philippine	18 months (came to work with cousin in 2 MDW household)	30-35	Unmarried	Some university	No	No.	No.
Luisa	Philippine	Just over 6 years	25-30	Unmarried	Some university	No	Yes Dubai	Yes
Faye	Philippine	9 years	35-40	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Nora	Philippine	Over 8 years	30-35	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Tita	Philippine	More than 10 years	30-35	Separated	College	Yes	Yes Dubai	Yes
Yvette	Philippine	Over 12 years	40-50	Married	High school	Yes	No	Yes
Moir	Philippine	Almost 9 years	30-35	Unmarried	University	No	No	Yes
Adinda	Indonesian	Over 4 years	25-30	Unmarried	College	Yes	Yes Kuwait	Yes
Imelda	Philippine	Almost 12 years	40-50	Married	High school	Yes	No	Yes
Rocita	Philippine	Just under 4 years	Under 25	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Noemi	Philippine	Almost 10 years	35-40		College	Yes	No	Yes
Fey	Philippine	Over 6 years	25-30	Unmarried	Some university	Yes	No	Yes
Elvie	Philippine	9 years	35-40	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Suzanna	Philippine	11 years	30-35	Separated	Some university	Yes	Yes Kuwait, Hong Kong	Yes
Margarita	Philippine	10 34 years	40-50	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Adora	Philippine	8 years	30-35	Unmarried	College	Yes	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Jessie	Philippine	10 34 years	35-40	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Marie	Philippine	11 years	35-40	Married	College	Yes	Yes Dubai.	Yes
Anamarie	Philippine	5 years	25-30	Unmarried	Some university	No	Yes Dubai	Yes
Fela	Philippine	Just about 15 years	40-50	Separated	College	Yes	No	Yes
Joy	Philippine	Over 8 years	30-35	Married	College	Yes	Yes Malaysia	Yes
Helen	Philippine	Over 12 years	35-40	Married	Some university	Yes	No	Yes
Isabella	Philippine	Over 6 years	30-35	Unmarried	College	No	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Dian	Philippine	Over 12 years	35-40	Married		Yes	No	Yes
Christina	Philippine	Over 3 years	Under 25	Unmarried	College	No	No	Yes
Carita	Philippine	Almost 10 years	30-35	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes
Rutchelle	Philippine	13 years	40-50	Married	High school	Yes	Yes Hong Kong	Yes
Evelyn	Philippine	7 years	30-35	Separated	College	Yes	Yes Malaysia	Yes
Nilda	Philippine	3 years	25-30	Unmarried	Some university	No	No	Yes
Mercy	Philippine	11 34 years	40-50	Married	College	Yes	No	Yes

This table includes only those formally interviewed; not those who participated in more informal interaction.

\*This indicates the number of years participants said they had been in Singapore. These years are not necessarily continuous.

\*\*Level of education was difficult to pin down with MDWs. 'College' referred to education between 16-18 years old but was often used interchangeably with 'university' as it is in the US. 'High school' indicates those who stayed in school until 16 years old or less. Sometimes, the level of education stated and the number of years in Singapore did not seem to add up.

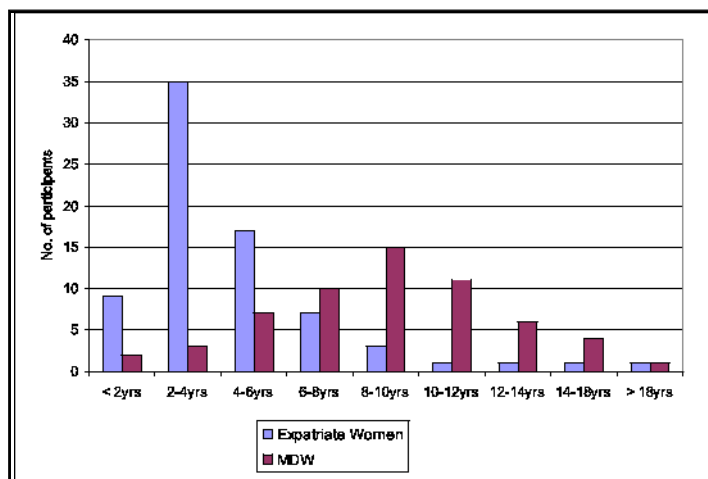
### 2.3 Nationalities of MDWs employed by the expatriate participants

Philippine	73
Indonesian	3
Sri Lankan	2
Burmese	1
Indian	1
Thai	1
Did not employ a MDW	5
(Includes MDW employed by women and men expatriate interview participants)	

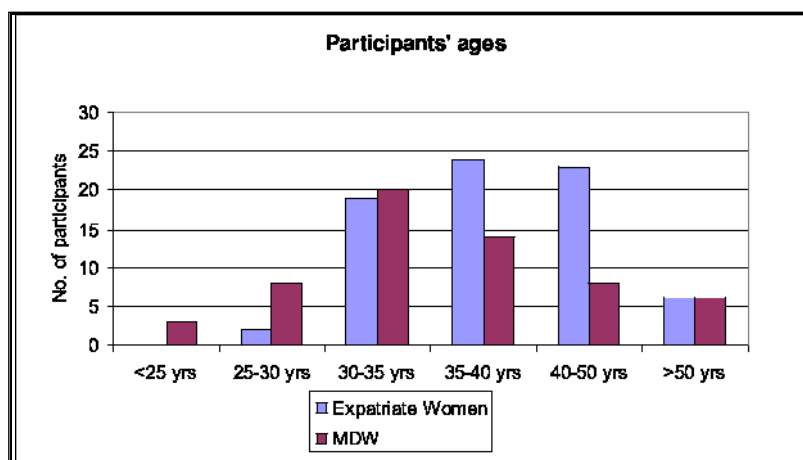
### 2.4 MDW Interview participants' nationalities

Philippine	55
Indonesian	4

### 2.5 Participants' duration of stay in Singapore



### 2.6 Participants' ages



### 2.7 Expatriate participants' number of children

2 or less	36
3 or more	34

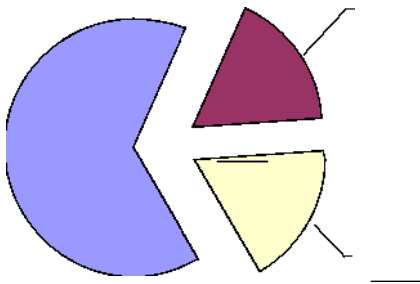
### 2.8 MDW interview participants with children

No children	15
Children	44

### 2.9 Marital status

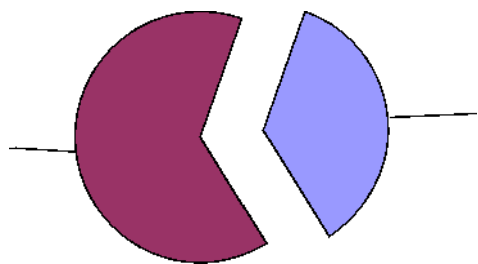
<i>No of participants (% of)</i>	<b>Expatriate Women</b>	<b>MDW</b>
Married	73 (99%)	27 (46%)
Separated / Divorced	1 (1%)	9 (15%)
Not Married	0	23 (39%)

### 2.10 Expatriate women interview participants who had previously lived overseas

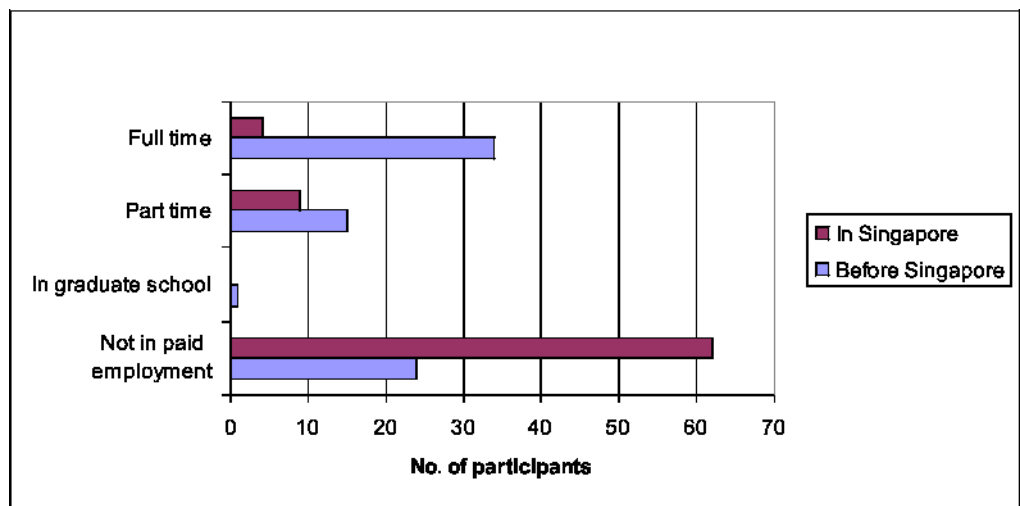


\*some women who lived overseas in a non-Western country had also lived in Western countries.

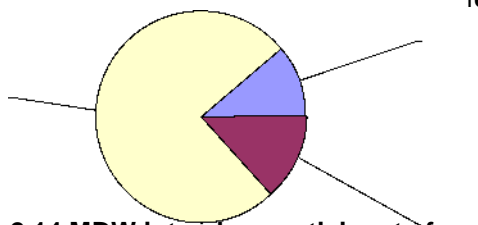
2.11 MDW interview participants who had previously lived overseas



2.12 Expatriate women interview participants' employment status



2.13 Expatriate women interview participants' experience with domestic cleaning services prior to moving to Singapore



2.14 MDW interview participants for whom current expatriate employer was first employer in Singapore

No. of Participants	
No	57
Yes	2

### Appendix Three: Expatriate Men Survey Results

Survey carried out anonymously using [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). There were 33 respondents. Unless otherwise noted the total number of respondents per question was 33, and the % noted are a proportion of the respondents per question.

<b>1. What is your nationality?</b>	Respondents	%
American	5	15%
Australian	5	15%
British	12	36%
Canadian	5	15%
French	3	9%
German	1	3%
New Zealander	1	3%
No response	1	3%
<b>2. How long have you lived in Singapore?</b>	Respondents	%
0-2 years	6	18%
2-4 years	9	27%
4+ years	18	55%
<b>3. Please select which description most applies to you</b>	Respondents	%
Married	12	36%
Married with child or children	20	61%
Single	1	3%
<b>4. Was your career the primary reason you moved to Singapore?</b>	Respondents	%
No	9	27%
Yes	24	73%
<b>5. Do you have an 'expat' package?</b>	Respondents	%
Company pays rent, tuition, car, home leave etc.	9	27%
Company pays rent.	4	12%
Company provides allowance for housing and for some expenses but I top up.	6	18%
No package.	14	42%
<b>6. How do you feel financially since moving to Singapore compared to where you were living previously?</b>	Respondents	%
About the same.	9	27%
Better off.	22	67%
Worse off.	2	6%
<b>7. Do you have an 'expat' package?</b>	Respondents	%
Company pays rent, tuition, car, home leave etc.	9	27%
Company pays rent.	4	12%
Company provides allowance for housing and for some expenses but I top up.	6	18%
No package.	14	42%

**8. How would you describe your work environment in Singapore as compared to your previous work environment?**

**(Please select all the apply.)**

<b>Role</b>	Respondents	%
I have a lateral role here.	8	24%
I have a more senior role here.	20	61%

**Travel**

I travel more frequently.	19	58%
I travel less frequently.	3	9%

**Hours**

I work longer hours.	15	45%
I work the same hours as before.	9	27%

**Stress**

I have less work related stress	8	24%
I have more work related stress.	14	42%

**9. Please rate the cost of the following compared with your previous posting.**

<i>No. of respondents</i>	<b>Rent Tuition</b>		<b>Dining out Groceries</b>		<b>Services and utilities</b>	<b>Child care</b>
Included in my package but less expensive	5	4	0	0	1	0
Included in my package but more expensive	8	8	1	1	1	0
Less expensive	7	3	24	15	14	13
More expensive	12	9	8	17	17	4
N/A or Did not respond	1	9	0	0	0	16

<i>% of respondents</i>	<b>Rent Tuition</b>		<b>Dining out Groceries</b>		<b>Services and utilities</b>	<b>Child care</b>
Included in my package but less expensive	15%	12%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Included in my package but more expensive	24%	24%	3%	3%	3%	0%
Less expensive	21%	9%	73%	45%	42%	39%
More expensive	36%	27%	24%	52%	52%	12%
N/A or Did not respond	3%	27%	0%	0%	0%	48%

**10. Do you feel more responsibility for your family's economic and social welfare since moving here?**

	Respondents	%
No	10	30%
Yes	23	70%

**11. Does your wife expect you to make most important decisions here?**

	Respondents	%
No	19	58%
Yes	14	42%

**12. Many expatriate women discuss how being classified as dependents and how not working outside the home impacts their self esteem. Has your wife had difficulty finding a fulfilling role here?**

	Respondents	%
No response	1	3%
No	25	76%
Yes	7	21%

**13. Which statement best describes your wife's attitude towards living in Singapore?**

	Respondents	%
This is a vacation	0	0%
Life here is fantastic but it isn't 'real' life	7	21%
There are pros and cons to living here	25	76%
Counting the days until you move	1	3%

**14. Which statement best describes your perception of your wife's life here? (lease select all that apply)**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (32 total)	% of respondents
Its great. She doesn't have to do much of anything.	2	6%
She continues to pursue her career.	13	41%
She enjoys being a stay at home mother and wife.	10	31%
She enjoys looking after the children BUT misses the stimulation of working	2	6%
She has a fantastic time focusing on her interests.	8	25%
She misses intellectual stimulation.	11	34%

**15. Do you employ a domestic worker(DW)?**

	Respondents	%
No	8	24%
Yes	25	76%

**16. How does having a DW live with you impact your life?  
(please select all that apply)**

No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	Not			
	Absolutely	Somewhat	much	Not at all
More going out	12	10	0	2
Loss of privacy	2	0	0	0
Increased couple time	8	12	2	3
No chores on weekends	13	7	3	1
Less arguments about doing/not doing household stuff	10	6	/	2
More entertaining at home	5	8	8	4

% of respondents	Not			
	Absolutely	Somewhat	much	Not at all
More going out	48%	40%	0%	8%
Loss of privacy	8%	0%	0%	0%
Increased couple time	32%	48%	8%	12%
No chores on weekends	52%	28%	12%	4%
doing/not doing household stuff	40%	24%	28%	8%
Less arguments about				
More entertaining at home	20%	32%	32%	16%

**17. How would you describe your relationship with your DW?  
(please select all that apply)**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	% of respondents
I express interest in her but I don't share information about myself.	11	44%
I instruct her in her household tasks.	6	24%
I joke around with her.	3	12%
I say 'good morning' and 'hello' and that's about it.	11	44%
I'm comfortable exchanging personal confidences with her.	2	8%

**18. How often do you see your DW?**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	% of respondents
Everyday. She's always around helping out.	15	63%
A few times a week. She's usually finished her work when I get home.	8	33%
I don't really notice; she's practically invisible.	1	4%
As little as possible. I don't want to see her.	0	0%

**19. Which tasks does your DW perform?**

<i>No. of respondents selecting this statement (26 total)</i>	She does all of this	She does most of this	Split with my wife	Split with me and my wife	She doesn't do this
Laundry/ironing	18	6	1	1	0
Cleaning	18	8	0	0	0
Cooking	4	9	2	4	7
Childcare	0	0	4	12	10
Gardening	2	1	1	2	20
Misc.chores (car washing, bike cleaning, shoe polishing etc.)	3	3	0	4	16

<i>% of respondents to this question</i>	She does all of this	She does most of this	Split with my wife	Split with me and my wife	She doesn't do this
Laundry/ironing	69%	23%	4%	4%	0%
Cleaning	69%	31%	0%	0%	0%
Cooking	15%	35%	8%	15%	27%
Childcare	0%	0%	15%	46%	38%
Gardening	8%	4%	4%	8%	77%
Misc.chores (car washing, bike cleaning, shoe polishing etc.)	12%	12%	0%	15%	62%

**20. When there's a difficult situation with your DW how do you handle it?**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	% of respondents
My wife and I discuss how to approach it and then I take the lead in talking with the DW.	8	32%
My wife and I discuss how to approach it and then my wife takes the lead in talking with the DW.	11	44%
My wife is her boss she deals with it.	5	20%
`My wife tells me the situation and I deal with it. We do 'good cop'/'bad cop'	1	4%

**21. Who do you think your DW views as the more approachable/sympathetic person to talk to?**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (24 total)	% of respondents
Both equally	1	4%
Me.	5	21%
My wife.	18	75%

**22. Do you worry that your children's manners and attitudes will be influenced by having a DW?**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	% of respondents
No	10	40%
Yes	15	60%

**23. Some expat women worry about their DW's sexual charms.  
How do you think most expat men feel about their DWs?**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (25 total)	% of respondents
Not my type at all.	23	92%
Occasionally attracted to her.	2	8%
Resistance is futile—she's hot.	0	0%

**24. Has your DW's behaviour ever implied a willingness to have more than a professional relationship with you?**

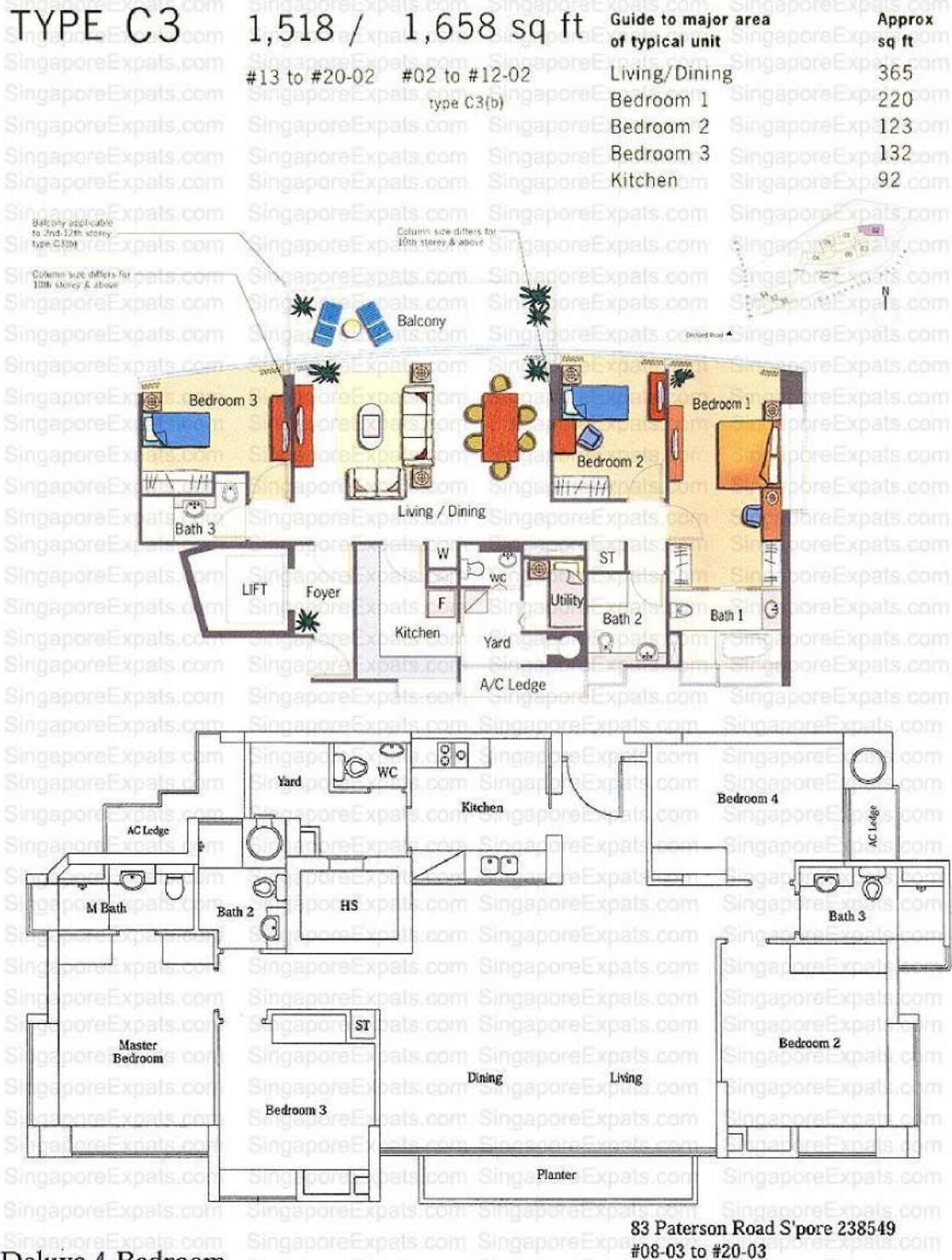
	No. of respondents selecting this statement (24 total)	% of respondents
No. She knows where the boundaries are.	11	46%
No. I don't think she thinks of me in that way.	13	54%
Maybe. She flirts with me sometimes.	0	0%
Maybe. She's implied that she thinks I'm attractive.	0	0%
Maybe. She wanders around in skimpy clothes.	0	0%
Yes. She came onto me.	0	0%

**25. Expatriate women often express concern about the 'aggressiveness' of local Asian women. These fears appear to be augmented by a work culture of going out for dinner and drinks without wives. It is difficult to gage how valid these concerns are. In your observation: (Please select all that apply)**

	No. of respondents selecting this statement (30 total)	% of respondents
Most stories are rubbish. When we go out for work dinners or drinks we interact with people from the industry not random women.	13	43%
Men who cheat will do so where ever they live. The working culture here does not promote it anymore than it does in any other city.	18	60%
I can understand why expat women are worried. I've noticed that some Asian women are very friendly to expat men who aren't necessarily out seeking that sort of companionship.	6	20%
For some expat men there is a 'boys will be boys' attitude that winks at having a little on the side with a local woman.	5	17%
There's good reason to worry. I've seen women swarm expat men when they're out. Most men have had a few drinks and are quite receptive to some flirting.	2	7%
To use the words of one expat wife, 'it is candyland here for expat men' - opportunities to cheat are far more numerous and one off encounters are more tolerated socially than they would be at home.		3 10 %

## Appendix Four: Typical Singapore Expatriate Rental Apartment Floorplans

Note: MDWs bedrooms are labelled 'Utility' or 'HS' (Housing Shelter), they will have a WC adjoining and be situated off the 'Yard' which is where the clothes washer/dryers and air-conditioning units are. The 'Yard' is situated off the Kitchen.



### Deluxe 4-Bedroom

type E (1,658 sqft / 154 sqm)

