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Psychoanalyzing fleeting emotive migrant encounters: A case from Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In existing scholarship on migrant encounters, there is a tendency to dismiss fleeting encounters between random strangers in public spaces as superficial, or to treat such encounters as insipid and ambivalent events. Little attention has been given to fleeting encounters that are antagonistic and emotively charged. This paper focuses on one such encounter that took place in a public bus in Singapore in 2012, involving intensely emotive verbal exchanges between a female migrant from China and an elderly local Chinese-Singaporean woman. Interpreting this encounter as a form of situational stratification, the paper draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to decode the symbolic logics underlying the heated verbal exchange, thereby revealing how migrant diversities in the Southeast Asian city-state are textured by the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race/ethnicity. The paper argues that psychoanalysis deserves more attention as an under-utilized perspective for reading fleeting encounters.

1. Introduction

In July 2012, a mobile phone-taken 4-min video clip entitled "Chinese Woman and Elderly lady quarrel"[1] appeared on YouTube and went instantly viral in the Singapore online space. Within just a matter of days, the video garnered more than 100,000 views. At the time of writing this article, the cumulative number of views of this video on YouTube approached 150,000, with more than 450 entries accumulated under the "comments" section.

The video shows a young female migrant from China quarreling ferociously with an elderly local Chinese-Singaporean woman on a public bus in Singapore. From the content of the heated exchange, one could deduce the trivial cause of this unpleasant encounter: the Chinese woman had been sitting on a priority seat (reserved for the elderly, pregnant and disabled) close to the bus door, for which the elderly Singaporean woman had apparently scolded the Chinese woman. The latter, carrying several grocery shopping bags, refused to give up her seat, arguing that there were other empty seats in the bus. At the beginning of the video, things had already heated up: the Chinese woman is seen ranting in an overpowering high-pitched voice, with her Mandarin carrying a distinctive northeastern Chinese accent. Judging the old Singaporean woman to be prejudiced against people from China, she vehemently accused —"You are just discriminating against Chinese nationals (*zhongguo ren*)! You are discriminating against your ancestors (*zuxian*)! Weren't you born of Chinese (parents) yourself?!" In a few moments, the Chinese woman called the old woman a *qiongminggui* (Chinese for "poor fate ghost"), alluding to the presumed fact that the latter still took a bus to commute to work despite her advanced age. The old woman, equally provoked, retorted bitterly in Mandarin that the Chinese woman wasn't any better-off because presumably she earned a living in Singapore by "spreading legs" (*kaijiao*). This remark threw the Chinese woman into a deeper fit of rage: she charged at the old woman so aggressively that strangers on the bus had to come to shield the old woman from her. She pleaded to the onlookers in the bus at the top of her lungs: "She thinks every Chinese woman in Singapore spreads their legs!! She's so shameless (*ta yaobu yaolian ah*)!!" Before long, she came up with the statement—"You ugly one (*choubaguai*)! You look down on me only because you see that I'm *young and pretty* (*nianqing piaoliang*)!" The gut-wrenching cursing exchange went on for a while more, and ended with the old woman exclaiming that Singapore society was being corrupted by "your kind of women from China", to which the Chinese woman responded fiercely by saying she would sue her for defamation.

While some may dismiss this brief dramatic encounter as little more than a sensational episode fit only for the tabloids, in this paper, I shall argue instead that not only is the encounter analytically significant, but it can also serve to illustrate fresh interpretive possibilities when approached from a thus-far marginal theoretical perspective, namely, psychoanalysis.

Having emerged at a time (circa. 2011) when local anxieties and discontent over immigration were at a height in the small city-state Singapore (Gomes, 2014; Vasu et al., 2014), this video-recorded quarrel

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on the bus encapsulates in a highly condensed manner various pivotal themes underlying the island-nation's recent psychosocial troubles with migrants. Gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity/race are seen to work in an intricately interwoven fashion, structuring the logics of prejudice and othering that are animated in this acrimonious encounter, which may in turn be taken as microcosmic of larger consciousness and processes in the society. Indeed, of late, a number of scholars writing about migration in contemporary Singapore have identified these very themes as central to understanding the evidently controversial consequences of migration, particularly migration from mainland China (Ang, 2016, 2017b; Liu, 2014; Yang, 2014b, 2017; Yeoh and Lin, 2013). The substantive analyses in this paper will inevitably echo these recent accounts to some extent; however, here, my focus of attention is on the *antagonistic* and intensely *emotive* quality of the encounter.

As I revisited this video repeatedly for the purpose of writing the opening vignette, I found myself continuing to be affected by the intensive energies and negative emotions captured in it, and continuing to be intrigued by the young migrant Chinese woman's near-hysterical behavior. Thus, I argue that this seemingly trivial drama provides a rare opportunity for examining conflictual, emotionally charged yet fleeting encounters taking place in public space in urban settings of migrant diversity. Despite a palpable increase in scholarship dealing with migrant encounters across the social sciences in recent years, this scholarship seems to have relatively little to say about fleeting encounters that display intensive, antagonistic emotions. The naturally-occurring and transient character of such encounters seems to present certain methodological difficulties for treating them as proper objects of empirical analysis. Thus, such encounters are often used only as vignettes or anecdotes in support of analyses based on other, more "substantial", forms of "data". Seldom has the challenge of interpreting fleeting emotive encounters *per se* been taken up.

This paper posits psychoanalysis as a possible response – as an alternative approach that has the potential for rendering such encounters legible and meaningful. More widely used in the humanistic fields such as literature and film studies, psychoanalysis is not "mainstream" in migration studies or social research in general (Yang, 2017). The nature of the psychoanalytic interpretation can perhaps be best glimpsed from the title the discipline's modern founder, Sigmund Freud, gave to one of his canonical works – "the interpretation of dreams". Working with elusive and fleeting materials such as dreams, psychoanalysis is about using what can seem rather abstract and imaginative theoretical propositions to render such highly condensed materials more legible and meaningful. Its value lies principally in generating refreshing and sometimes provocative insights into even "thin" materials where other conventional analytical approaches may dismiss such materials as insufficient or trivial (Yang, 2017). I argue that these characteristics of the psychoanalytic approach make it uniquely suitable for interpreting naturally-occurring, short-lived, metaphorically condensed, and emotive encounters. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to see certain similarities between violent emotive outbursts on the one hand and dreams on the other, in that both can serve as the outlet of the unconscious, the repressed. If such is the case, what are the unconscious and repressed elements that surfaced in the 4-min video? And, what do these say about migrant diversity in contemporary Singapore?

To address this, in the rest of this paper, I first discuss existing scholarship on migrant encounters, pointing out the lack of direct engagement with fleeting yet emotively charged events. I then turn to look at migration in contemporary Singapore to provide the necessary context to this study, paying particular attention to Chinese migration and the question of "Chineseness". Next, in the main analytical section, I introduce some Lacanian psychoanalytic ideas, with which I then reread the bus encounter. Finally, I conclude the paper by highlighting how this account contributes to broader scholarships on encounters and migration in terms of foregrounding migrant agency and in demonstrating the interpretive possibilities revealed by the psychoanalytic lens.

It ought to be noted, although this paper centres upon an empirical encounter, its agenda is nevertheless mainly conceptual and propositional. The paper's aim is to propose an interpretive approach (i.e. psychoanalysis) and, more specifically, a theoretical position within this approach (i.e. the Lacanian position) for the reading of a particular type of encounters. To this extent, empirical material (primarily the bus vignette) in the paper serves to illustrate the working of the interpretive approach, but does not drive theorization in an inductive way. In short, while this paper builds around an empirical vignette, it does not rest on it.

2. Migrant encounters: towards fleeting, conflictual, emotive encounters as situational struggle

Geographer Massey (2005) famously says that the contemporary city is characterized by the "throwntogetherness" of diverse peoples, whereas Shapiro (2010, p. 1) remarks that the encounter between such diverse peoples is a "signature event of city life". For cities with large migrant populations (such as Singapore), thus, *migrant encounters*, or encounters involving migrant bodies, constitute an important site for understanding migrant diversity. Consequently, scholarship on migrant encounters has burgeoned in recent times.

An encounter assumes *difference*; it is a meeting where difference is not only heightened but also produced and negotiated (Wilson, 2016). Due to the unstable nature of encounters (Wilson, 2011), the production and negotiation of difference can take conciliatory/convivial, ambivalent, or conflictual tones. While earlier scholarship such as the "contact theory" (Allport, 1954) suggested that contact between different social groups could reduce negative consequences of diversity such as misunderstanding and tension, increasingly it is recognized that contact alone is insufficient to produce respect, nor does proximity necessarily lead to positive transformation of social relations (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008). Indeed, encounters between the unfamiliar could also entrench negative stereotypes and produce feelings of anxiety, fear and hate (Leitner, 2012; Listerborn, 2015; Valentine, 2008). In other words, the process and outcome of encounters are contingent and conditional.

Treating such contingency and conditionality of the outcomes of urban encounter as an opportunity,

> more recent research on geographies of urban encounter explores whether—and if so when and why—these urban encounters are capable of shaping forms of mutual understanding and respect. Consequently, most recent work on geographies of urban encounter turns to the semipublic realm of 'micropublics' (Amin, 2002, 959) […] in order to scrutinize the social processes of generosity and reducing stereotyping in contact situations. […] The aim of this particular area of research is to analyse the influences that the sites of encounter themselves have on the pathways of the encounters. (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2015, p. 487)

This prescriptive, if not normative, urge to understand how or under what conditions encounters might be turned into opportunities for building positive social relations across difference can be observed in research on migrant encounters too. One such example is Wise (2016), which examines the "becoming cosmopolitan" experiences of two migrant workers in two restaurants located in Singapore's Little India district. Through comparing the divergent experiences of the two migrant workers in the micro-public of workplace, Wise interrogates "under what labour conditions might an outward-looking cosmopolitan sensibility and a convivial openness to otherness emerge among migrant workers, as against a set of survival-based intercultural capacities" (p. 2289).

In contrast to the research attention given to such encounters in semi-public spaces or "micro-publics" (see also Peterson, 2017), much less has been said about random encounters between strangers in "ordinary public spaces"—such as street corners or public transport—in

the urban setting (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2015). The latter type of encounter, almost always fleeting and anonymous, are usually seen to be too short-lived and superficial to have any meaningful impact on people's appreciation of difference (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008). In other words, there is a tendency to regard fleeting encounters as ineffectual. More recently, Ye's (2016) work based on the Singaporean context has sought to challenge this somewhat dismissive view of fleeting encounter in anonymous public space, arguing instead that fleeting encounters can produce a certain *ambivalence* that represents what she calls a politics of "breathable diversity". Observing the ways in which mundane encounters with "others" in Singapore's Jurong West area are managed, Ye suggests that the notion of the "familiar stranger"—"personally unknown others of whom we have sufficient categorical knowledge" (2016, p. 78)—allows parties of encounters to acknowledge distance and limit contact, yet also render co-existence unremarkable, everyday, and unthreatening.

In this paper, I go beyond extant scholarship's portrayals of fleeting encounters in public spaces in terms of ineffectuality or ambivalence. As the heated quarrel on the Singaporean bus shows, encounters between random strangers in public space could at times be manifestly *conflictual* and *emotive*. Encounters are potentially emotive affairs: as Wilson (2016, p. 15) writes, "[e]ncounters are mediated, affective, emotive and sensuous, they are about animation, joy and fear, and both the opening up and closing down of affective capacity". It is thus surprising that research so far has seldom engaged directly with fleeting migrant encounters that are emotively charged, even though by now emotion represents a well-established focus for migration research (Conradson and Mckay, 2007; Svašek, 2010; Wise and Velayutham, 2017). One possible explanation for this disparity is perhaps methodological: observers who are focused on analyzing fleeting encounters *in situ* are typically not in a position to tease out the narratives and stories behind emotions which would usually necessitate further elicitation (through interview, for example). As a result, dramatic and emotive encounters are oftentimes used as a rhetorical device to highlight tension, but do not constitute the main focus of analyses (for a recent example, see Ang, 2016). The challenge, then, is how can transient, naturally-occurring, emotive migrant encounters in the public be somehow made sense of, *in* and *of* itself?

In this paper, I follow Dirksmeier and Helbrecht (2015) in treating emotively charged conflictual encounters as "situational struggles for interactional dominance" (p. 486); as "negotiations of status, distinction and power in contact situations" (p. 487). Based on micro-sociologist Randall Collins's theory of situational stratification, Dirksmeier and Helbrecht suggest that in any encounter, at stake is the relative prestige, status, and power between parties to the encounters. While social actors' prestige, status, and power have their deeper sources in broader material and symbolic structures in society, in any given micro event of encounter, "[s]tratification is […] a contingent entity and must be negotiated during the actual interaction" (p. 488). It is not difficult to see why such an approach is particularly useful for analyzing encounters that turn out to be conflictual, because such are scenarios where the situational struggles are hightened, just as shown in Dirksmeier and Helbrecht's analysis of a brief confrontational interaction between random strangers in a market in Berlin. Viewed from this light, the intense exchanges between the young migrant Chinese woman and the elderly local Singaporean-Chinese woman on the bus can appropriately be understood as their fierce struggle for prestige, status, and situational dominance.

However, a notable difference between the Singapore bus scene and the case described in Dirksmeier and Helbrecht (2015) is that while the latter is largely non-verbal, the former is elaborately verbalized. To render the non-verbal conflictual interaction readable, Dirksmeier and Helbrecht drew on affect theory to show how affects impact the situational struggle, and indeed conduct the "micro-mechanisms of power" in the encounter. In the case of the acrimonious verbal encounter in the Singaporean bus, on the other hand, a more productive approach would be to focus on the verbal content of the encounter, and to ask after the underlying symbolic logics. In other words, what made the migrant Chinese woman and the old Singaporean-Chinese woman say what they respectively said? What made their utterings effective tactics in the situational struggle? And how can this fierce struggle for prestige and status—that has the quality of an outburst of hyesteria—be deciphered? This paper posits that the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective is useful in this symbolic deciphering. Before I do so, however, the local context of migrant diversity must be explained first.

3. Migrant Singapore, Chinese migration, and "Chineseness"

Like many other global cities today, Singapore is a magnet for migration. Over the past several decades, this tiny island city-state in Southeast Asia has experienced dramatic increases in migration. In 1990, out of the three million people in Singapore, 90 per cent were citizens; by 2017, of the more than 5.6 million living on the island, close to 40 per cent were non-citizens (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2017). This rapid rise in migration has been largely the result of the city-state government's proactive stratregies of using labour migration to address the manpower needs of a vibrant economy as well as to deal with the nation's demographic challenges associated with low fertility, emigration, and population ageing (Yang et al., 2017).

Singapore operates what Yeoh (2006) has called a "bifurcated" foreign labour regime, whereby low-skilled migrant workers such as those employed in the construction, service and domestic help industries are relegated to a perpetually transient status, whereas highly-skilled labour ("foreign talents") embodying rich human capital are deemed suitable immigrants, eligible for permanent residency and citizenship. Meanwhile, having inherited from its British colonial past a "multiracial" demographic categorization system (known as the "CMIO") with designated majority (Chinese) and minority (Malay, Indian, and "Other") "racial" groups, the Singapore state also manages and regulates im/migration through racial/ethnic categories. Pertaining to this, scholars (e.g. Yeoh and Lin, 2013; Yim, 2011) have noted, for instance, that im/migrants of Chinese ethnic stock tend to be favoured by the state because they help to shore up the Chinese "race" in Singapore, which has consistently had the lowest reproductive rates since at least the 1980s (Yang et al., 2017). At the same time, certain types of work are closed to migrants of certain ethnic or national backgrounds; for example, work in domestic help – a sector that employs as many as 246,800 young foreign women in the city-state (Ministry of Manpower Singapore, 2017) – is not available to female migrants from China. This has been interpreted as a recognition of the moral "dangers" of racial/ethnic proximity in the domestic sphere (Ang, 2016; Yeoh and Huang, 2010).

Migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) occupy a somewhat unique place in Singapore's present migration landscape because historically Singapore society had been populated by an ethnic Chinese majority as a result of migrations from the late-Qing and early-Republican China when Singapore was under British colonial rule. With this earlier Chinese migration at the heart of the formation of modern Singapore, recent Chinese migration from the PRC, which mainly took placed since the 1980s, has sometimes been dubbed "new Chinese migration" (Yeoh and Lin, 2013). After Singapore's Indpendence in 1965, state efforts on nation-building sought to forge a multiracial *Singaproean* national identity, which does not erase "racial" identification but incorporates racial community membership and racial self-awareness as integral parts of what being "Singaporean" is (Benjamin, 1976/1997). Furthermore, the state has also used policies such as mandatory "mother tongue" learning in schools to seek to ensure that younger generations of Singaporeans do not lose touch with their respective ethnic langauges, cultures and values. As a result, Singaporeans, while having a shared civic national identity, generally also retain a fairly strong identification with their own race/ethnicity. For the majority Chinese-Singaporeans, this means an identification as

"Chinese".

On this basis, migrants from China constitute a case of *co-ethnic* migration. From the Singaporean state's point of view, co-ethnicity is assumed to make integration easier (Ang, 2016), which is arguably one reason for mainland Chinese to have become one of the largest migrant groups in the city-state (as many as 700,000-800,000, according to Yim, 2011, p. 301) under a tightly regulated immigration system. However, of late, a number of scholars have echoed each other in questioning this assumption of co-ethnicity, finding that for many Chinese-Singaporeans the presumably shared ethnicity/race not only does not serve as a basis for identification, but in fact intensifies processes of othering (Liu, 2014; Yang, 2014a; Yeoh and Lin, 2013). In a recent account, Ang (2016) shows how local Chinese-Singaporeans women treat working-class migrant women from China as boundary-markers by constructing them as "unrespectable, un-middle-class, and un-Chinese". Through doing so, Chinese-Singaporean women assert their moral superiority and symbolic distinction. In another account, Ang (2017b) examines the ways in which a district in Singapore with a high concentration of Chinese migrants – Geylang – has been described derogatorily by Chinese Singaporeans as the "new Chinatown". Highlighting the similarities between this contemporary Chinatown discourse and colonial racist discourse surrouding the old Chinatown, Ang argues that the othering of Chinese migrants today is essentially a process of racialization, though paradoxically not based on "race".

Such intense differentiation and othering between the two groups of "Chinese" underscore the privileged status of "Chineseness" in Singapore, which makes it a desirable object, and hence a locus of contestative claims. In a society with an ethnic Chinese majority, to be "Chinese" is to belong to the invisible mainstream, bestowed with certain majority privileges in the mundane sense (boundary2.org, 2015). More importantly, as shown by various scholars in their analyses of the official discourses on "Asian Values" and Confucianism in the 1980s-90s (e.g. Hill, 2000; Kuah, 1990; Kuo, 1996), the postcolonial Singapore state, in an effort to assert Singapore's unique, if not superior, cultural and ideological positionality vis-à-vis the West (i.e. former colonial master), has in effect valorized certain aspects of Chinese culture and civilization, which supposedly underpin the city-state's economic progress, social orderliness, and political stability. In examining the state's management of Chinese identity and culture in post-Independence Singapore, Tan (2003) identified a "creeping Chineseness" in the otherwise multicultural city-state since circa 1980s, whereby the social and cultural dominance of the Chinese became more pronounced due to the state's positive re-orientation to Chineseness. Interpreting this re-orientation psychoanalytically, sociologist Daniel Goh (2012) argues that it is the Singaporean elites' discomfort with colonial hybridity that has driven them towards an "imaginary identification with the putative original nation" (i.e. China) (p. 1041), manifested in a fetishization of the Confucian *junzi* identity as a way to recuperate certain "Oriental purity". In a separate analysis of elite schooling and masculinity, Goh (2014) traces the formation and evolution of elite masculinity in Singapore from colonial to contemporary times, arguing that hegemonic masculinity in Singapore is racialized—associated with the Chinese. Suffice it to say, resulting from a combination of simple demographic majority and the state's various policies in the realms of ideology, culture, and language in the final decades of the 20th Century, Chineseness emerged as a privileged signifier in Singapore relative to other ethnic/racial labels, and hence something of a sign of desirability. Importantly, this Chineseness is an elite or hegemonic Chineseness constructed by the elites with a certain dose of idealization, and thus should be distinguished from non-elite forms of Chineseness such as those associated with low-brow or folk Chinese culture and practices. Indeed, as shall be argued further in the following section under a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, this idealized Chineseness can be said to have become a quality that is strongly desired yet almost impossible to achieve.

Idealization notwithstanding, Chineseness is open to appropriation by all those who claim to be "Chinese". Migrants from the PRC, who are by definition "Chinese", thus can be seen as a potential threat to Chinese-Singaporeans' monopoly ownership of the privileged sign. To exacerbate the matter, as both Goh (2012) and Tan (2003) point out, it was by no accident that Singapore's positive re-orientation to Chineseness took place in the broader context of China's rapid rise as an economic and strategic powerhouse regionally and globally, which is perceived to present Singapore with opportunities that it cannot afford to miss. This meant that the valorization of Chineseness as cultural and symbolic capitals in Singapore often referenced China as the source and the gold standard. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in language policies, with mainland Chinese conventions of romanization (*hanyu pinyin*), simplified characters, and Mandarin pronounciation/accent accepted as the official standards in school educaiton and public communication in Singapore. In turn, this has the effect of heightening further the Chinese migrants' threat, as aptly illustrated in the ways in which Chinese migrants endorse the Singaporean state's constructions of authentic Chineseness in order to challenge Singaporeans' claim over Chineseness (Ang, 2017a).

In short, despite the appearance of co-ethnicity, Chinese migrants represent a potentially unsettling presence for the majority Chinese-Singaporeans because of their claim and contestation over the privileged signifier "Chineseness" – a signifier that has been constructed in the Singaporean discursive space increasingly with reference to an ascendant China.

4. Psychoanalyzing the emotive bus scene: the struggle of un/desirability, and hysteria as vulnerability

In this section, I seek to integrate the above discussion of Chineseness as a sign of privilege and desirability with a theory of race based on the thinking of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Relatedly, I also offer an interpretation of the hysterical quality of the migrant Chinese woman's behavior in the bus encounter in terms of vulnerability.

One central concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis is the notion of *lack*. Resulting from the castration suffered by a pre-subject as it enters into the symbolic order, lack is the "original loss" that coincides with the emergence of subjectivity (Žižek, 1989); it is the void that fundamentally defines the subject of desire as an actor that constantly seeks an object of desire (the "*objet a*"). However, this subject of desire always ends up being disappointed, because to lack and to exist as a subject is in fact coterminous under the Lacanian schema (Fink, 1997/1995). In Lacan's own words, desire is always directed at "something else" (Lacan, 2006, p. 431); put otherwise, desire paradoxically desires its own frustration and unfulfillment. Indeed, as Lacan also suggests, it is not lack that troubles people, but precisely the *lack of a lack* that is the real problem (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 45). In short, the object of desire has to remain unobtainable so that the flames of desire is kept burning; and the subject strives on.

Based on these core Lacanian psychoanalytic tenets, Seshadri-Crooks (2000) develops a Lacanian perspective on race/racism, in which racial hierarchy is understood in terms of lack vs. *fullness*. Due to the Euro-centricity of the modern world, the category at the apex of the racial hierarchy has been, and still is, the white. Hence, Seshadri-Crooks (2000, p. 1) defines race as "a system of difference organized around a privileged term, Whiteness". Whiteness signifies fullness; and difference or deviation from Whiteness signifies lack, and hence inferiority and relative undesirability. As Seshadri-Crooks (2000) explains, Whiteness is "a master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusion and exclusion constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (pp. 3–4). Crucially, however, Whiteness (with a capital "W") here does not literally refer to the white or Caucasian features, but designates the *privileged signifier* of desirability that corresponds with the imagined yet unattainable fullness. In other words, it is a Lacanian *objet a*.

Racial hierarchy incites desire: the subordinate race desires the attributes of the privileged race, as if attaining those attributes would lead to fullness. Indeed, the white/Caucasian also desires Whiteness and the fullness it supposedly brings, insofar as fullness is an imagined entity inaccessible even to the white/Caucasian. The effect of race and racial hierarchy, then, is to set up a chain of desiring/desirability and thus power, founded on a perpetual lack pointing towards an imagined perfection. In converse, racial hierarchy also implies intense competition, rivalry, and struggle for positions along the hierarchy. This leads to race/racism becoming a "*regime of looking* that thrives on 'major' and 'minor' details in order to shore up one's symbolic position" (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 2, emphases added). For subjects occupying positions that are close to each other or nominally the same along the racial hierarchy (for example, two groups both claiming to be "Chinese"), minor differences are then magnified, and become the battle lines where symbolic distinction and superiority must be fought over (see also the discussion of "narcissism of small differences" by Blok, 2001).

This Lacanian perspective on race/racism is pertinent to the Singaporean bus scene for, I maintain, the prejudice and discrimination that mainland Chinese are subjected to in Singapore are essentially racist, despite their supposedly shared "race" with the majority of Singaporeans (Ang, 2017b, has arrived at the same conclusion, though via a more historical approach as opposed to the psychoanalytic one used here). In fact, I suggest that "Chineseness" corresponds with the Lacanian Whiteness in Singapore, namely, the signifier of privilege and desirability which all other racial attributes or visibilities are measured against and hierarchically positioned in relation to. Taking this argument a step further, one could even posit the elitist and idealist construct of Chineseness as post-colonial Singapore state's *objet a* – something that is found to be impossibly desirable yet always unachievable. This *objet a* of Chineseness stems from Singapore's fundamental lack of "roots" and therefore also lack of ontological legitimacy due to the nation's inception as a result of Western colonialism – an experience of castration that leaves an enduring void.

In such a context, migrants from China represent the greatest threat to Chinese Singaporeans' racial privilege in a double sense: they not only contest Chinese Singaporeans' monopoly of the privileged signifier, they also threaten to debase the idealized Chineseness by associating it with their "undesirable" traits and characteristics, thus potentially upsetting the entire symbolic order on which Chinese Singaporeans' superior position rests. As such, to guard their racial privilege, it is necessary for Chinese Singaporeans to *racially otherize* mainland Chinese. This is evidenced in the prevalence in Singaporean parlance to refer to Chinese migrants as "PRCs", "China people", "China woman", etc., where the name of a country is used as the equivalent of a racial slur (Yang, 2017). The migrant Chinese woman on the bus seemed to have grasped this logic of racial othering, even if only subconsciously. This explains her characterization of the old Chinese Singaporean woman's alleged discrimination against her as *simultaneously* a matter of nationality and race – "You are just discriminating against Chinese nationals (*zhongguo ren*)! You are discriminating against your ancestors (*zuxian*)! Weren't you born of Chinese (parents) yourself?!" Nationality slipped seamlessly into race for the migrant woman, for she understood subconsciously (and correctly, for the most part) that the Chinese nationality has indeed been racialized in Singapore. Thus, on one level, the strategic intent in the migrant woman's response was to seek to re-establish a racial sameness with the Singaporean woman, in an effort to eradicate the grounds of the latter's symbolic violence based on racialized nationality. On another level, in light of Singapore's desire for "Oriental purity" as a result of its ontological hybridity, the migrant Chinese woman's mention of China as the land of the Singaporean woman's "ancestors" could also be read as not-so-subtle an assertion of her "purer" origin and greater legitimacy as "Chinese" and, therefore, symbolic superiority.

As much as this symbolic struggle revolved around the privileged signifier "Chinese", it was equally evident that class and gender/sexuality were factored inextricably into the calculus of desirability/undesirability that structured the emotively intense encounter. In the video, the migrant Chinese woman first brought up the issue of class by humiliating the old local woman on being doomed to taking bus all her life. In retaliation, the local woman drew on a prevalent sexualization of Chinese female migrants in Singapore and called the young woman a prostitute. This move sought not only to return the class insult meted out by the migrant woman, but also to place the latter on a despicable position on a hierarchy of moral probity, founded on a traditional ideology about gender and sex (i.e. sex work is shameful). Interestingly, the Chinese migrant woman's reactions to this, apart from a vehement protest against being characterized as a prostitute, was to reason aloud, somewhat bizarrely, that she was discriminated against only because she was "young and pretty" (*nianqing piaoliang*). At an immediate level, this claim to youth and beauty can be seen as the Chinese woman's assertion of possessing certain assets in the face of having been depicted as someone who possesses little. Appealing to the hierarchy of youth and beauty—an alternative logic of desirability—also gives her obviously greater odds of winning, for the old Singaporean woman was characterized as an "ugly one" (*choubaguai*). This process thus illustrates how symbolic struggles over un/desirability can entail intersections of multiple symbolic hierarchies (in this case, race, class, gender/sexuality, and even age and appearance) and their mobilization. It is worth noting, however, that the alternative logic of desirability that the Chinese migrant invoked—that of "youth and beauty"—is founded, at a deep level, on a patriarchal social order. Nevertheless, this seemed to be a price worth paying—if indeed the Chinese migrant woman did so consciously—to counter the slight of the Singaporean woman.

Lastly, the extraordinary level of intensity of the young Chinese migrant woman's behavior—her barking at the top of her lungs, her piercing high-pitched voice, and her aggressive bodily postures and movements—is worth dwelling upon. Indeed, this intensity appears to be one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of the video in the more than 450 viewer comments on YouTube. While most comments condemned this intensity as disproportionate reaction or simply as being too "noisy", one commentator ("choonie yuppie") actually associated it with libidinal energy by saying "imagine that level of energy on the bed". This sexualization of the Chinese female migrant body in Singapore has been noted elsewhere before (Ang, 2016; Yang, 2017). Another commentator ("justgiveme") alluded to the nearly surreal quality of the intensity, remarking "Damn, is she on helium?"

How can one interpret this near-hysteric performance of the Chinese migrant woman? Without opening the can of worms that *hysteria* undoubtedly is, here I merely quote Bronfen's (1998, pp. xii-xiii) following powerful interpretation of hysteria as a coded language of *vulnerability*:

> hysteric performance [is] a language that allows the subject to voice both personal and cultural discontent. My wager is that […] by returning to Sigmund Freud's initial interest in finding a traumatic rather than a sexual etiology of hysteria, this conversion of psychic anguish into a somatic symptom can be interpreted as the enactment of a message in code. *Yet what the hysteric broadcasts is a message about vulnerability* – the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of paternal law and social bonds); *the vulnerability of identity (the insecurity of gender, ethnic, and class designations)*; […] (emphases added)

Indeed, the "hysteria" of the young migrant Chinese woman on the bus arguably stems from her deep senses of vulnerability of embodying an intersection of stigmatized identities in Singapore – a "*PRC* Chinese", a PRC Chinese *female* (therefore morally suspicious categorically), and likely a migrant worker of low socioeconomic means. Embodying these designations renders her vulnerable to mundane slights and subliminal insults – whether real *or* perceived – in everyday life and encounters. In a sense, it matters little whether the Singaporean woman was indeed motivated by prejudice in picking on the migrant woman; the fact that the latter immediately characterized their trouble as identity-based

discrimination betrays the migrant Chinese woman's deep vulnerability concerning her identities. Indeed, pursuant to the psychoanalytic logic adopted here, it may well be posited that her hysteric outburst was a pent-up reaction against the cumulative mundane insults and injuries of pride that she had been vulnerable to in general, whereas the bus encounter served merely as a trigger.

Furthermore, I argue that a hysterical outlet was resorted to because migrant vulnerabilities to mundane symbolic violations (real or perceived) such as subtle slights and subliminal insults have no proper channels of being addressed or resolved, despite a rising consciousness and concern about migrant welfare in Singapore of late. Here, political philosopher Estelle Ferrarese's theory about the expressivity of vulnerability is useful. Ferrarese (2016) argues that there is a certain "incompatibility of grammars" between the language of vulnerability and the language of politics: "Vulnerability is affected by political unsayability and political impertinence on account of the *pathetic* forms of its discursive expression" (p. 157; emphasis added). Recent discourses that mobilize concepts such as law, rights, and policy to address migrant worker issues in Singapore (e.g. Bal, 2015; Neo, 2015) essentially seek to rationalize and logicalize issues of migrant exploitations in the language of formal politics and tangible interests. Vulnerability of identity and, specifically, vulnerability to symbolic violations that are much more intangible and subliminal in nature, however, cannot seem to be expressed or addressed in such a political grammar. This may be why, although the migrant Chinese woman made various attempts to counter insults discursively (such as by establishing racial sameness or superiority), eventually she also had to *embody* her fierce struggle through intense bodily performances – her overbearing postures, aggressive movements, and an overpowering voice. It was as if she somehow knew that none of those "logical" or "rational" arguments about race, class and gender (i.e. language of argumentative politics) would be enough to help her win the uphill situational struggle with the Singaporean woman; she had to go beyond the verbal/symbolic and reach for the emotive/somatic. As Ferrarese (2016) put it, the expression of vulnerability is *pathetic*. In the final analysis, the migrant Chinese woman's seemingly vigorous performance in the bus perhaps does not so much mask than it actually reveals the *pathetic* nature of her struggle against vulnerability.

5. Conclusion

This paper began by describing an emotively intense quarrel that took place between a female Chinese migrant and a local Singaporean Chinese woman on a public bus in Singapore in 2012. This acrimonious encounter is interpreted as a form of situational struggle, involving fierce negotiations of status, prestige, power, and dominance between the two parties. Focusing on the verbal content of this encounter, psychoanalytic theories of the Lacanian persuasion are used to decode the symbolic logics underlying the intense verbal struggles. The analysis reveals that the symbolic meanings are embedded in intersections of gender/sexuality, class, ethnicity/race (particularly the privileged signifier of being "Chinese"), which adds to our understanding of the complex logics underlying migrant diversities in the Southeast Asian city-state. In addition, the paper also interpreted the non-verbal intensity of the encounter drawing on theories about hysteria and vulnerability. Despite the paper focusing on a single event, this event should be noted as one among a string of similarly provocative migrant encounters that have surfaced in the online space in Singapore over recent years (see Ang, 2016, who describes another case at the beginning of her article); more broadly, it also reflects the rising trend of mediatization of emotions through social media as noted recently by Giaxoglou and Döveling (2018).

Through offering this analysis, the paper's main aim has been to address a notable gap in current research over fleeting, emotively intense, and conflictual encounters in public space. The existing scholarship's lack of direct engagement with such encounters is thought to reflect a tendency to portray fleeting encounters as either ineffectual or ambivalent. Furthermore, transient and naturally occurring events are usually dismissed for being methodologically insubstantial or inappropriate for meaningful analysis. This paper demonstrates that not only can these perceived limitations be overcome or at least mitigated with appropriate analytical approaches—in this case through psychoanalysis—but also that analyzing such micro and fleeting encounters can lead to unique insights about larger social processes and power dynamics. Accordingly, this paper suggests that fleeting migrant encounters deserve more attention in future research agenda.

Moreover, by focusing on a manifestly conflictual encounter and viewing it as a micro process of negotiations of power, status, prestige, and symbolic dominance, this account has sought to accentuate migrant *agency*, thus restoring to migrants an equal subjectivity vis-à-vis the migrant-receiving society/people. Against the backdrop of neoliberal hegemony and backlash against immigration worldwide, increasingly immigration and citizenship regimes across the world treat migrants based on utilitarian and calculative rationalities, as economic resources. However, as human beings, migrants are also social beings whose wellbeing and welfare are manifested in the *symbolic* realm—the realm of meaning. Powerless and disadvantaged migrant groups in capitalist global cities are often not only materially exploited, but also symbolically deprived or violated. They stage their own forms of symbolic struggles, in the only ways they know of, or through the only means they can afford. Thus, instead of dismissing the migrant's overly emotive struggles for dignity hastily as "incivility" or expressions of "low human capital", this account suggests that it is worth reading into the injuries and vulnerabilities underlying the migrant's emotive—indeed "hysteric"—behaviors. Of course, my intention here is not to condone or justify aggressiveness in situations of encounter. Far from it, I merely raise the question whether intense emotiveness in conflictual encounters might not also be read as vital signs of self-assertion by migrants as equal subjects deserving respect and recognition.

Finally, with this psychoanalytically informed analysis, I contend that there is potential for psychoanalysis to make more contributions to "mainstream" scholarship on migrant encounters, and migration studies in general. Despite an enthusiastic uptake of the psychoanalytic perspective in certain strands of urban studies (e.g. Kingsbury, 2003, 2004; Pile, 1996), there remains to be very limited conversation between psychoanalytic thoughts and broader migration research (though for two recent exceptions see Shubin et al., 2014; Yang, 2017). One misconception about psychoanalysis, according to Kingsbury (2003), has been that it is only relevant or useful to the individual, the personal, and the subjective. Correcting this impression, Kingsbury (2003) maintains that psychoanalytic thought, obscure and protean as it may seem, can nevertheless be a powerful tool for launching cogent critiques of the social, the spatial, and the intersubjective. It is in the spirit of this argument that I have attempted, in this paper, to use the psychoanalytic lens to render clearer some of the social and cultural forces that structure a fleeting, emotive, conflictual migrant encounter in Singapore.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Chinese+woman+and+elderly+lady+qurrel ± last accessed 22 May 2018.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.05.011.

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