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Bordering care: the care of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The story of the migrant worker population has always been told as a story of host/guest relations. Story-telling, as a way of making sense of the world, is a powerful tool, but global immigration debates have increasingly painted a picture of guest workers playing the sole role of ‘taking from’ the host, evoking fear and distrust amongst the host nations. The article will begin with a series of stories, which tries to put into practice what Lawrence Grossberg calls better story-telling, both as the premise and political responsibility of Cultural Studies, so that we can imagine new possibilities and enable better politics. This lens will be applied to the case of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, where I will be exploring their paradoxical status of being both foreign and domestic, in the wider context of the intimate labour of care workers. Reading Michel Serres’ *The Parasite* alongside these stories, I hope to demonstrate how the theme shifts with each change of perspectives, and in doing so, problematize the give/take relation such that their interdependent relationships of hosts and guests would be foregrounded. Beginning with the etymology of the word *para/sitos*, the being that eats alongside, I hope to approach the issue through a consideration of more universal questions of ‘living-together’.

KEYWORDS Care; migrant domestic workers; parasite; hospitality; borders; gift

Background

For the past four decades, Hong Kong has been sourcing workers from neighbouring SE Asian countries to fulfil the needs of domestic labour. This population of workers, known as Foreign Domestic Helpers,¹ came to Hong Kong in the early 1970s when the first labour agreement was signed by the then Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos. Today, the Philippines contribute 50 percent to the domestic labour force while Indonesia supplies the city with another 47 percent. The ubiquity of having a domestic worker in Hong Kong is clear – on average one in eight households contract domestic help and one in three households with children employ a full-time helper. To date, there are 360,000 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, constituting

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10 percent of the labour force, and the trend is expected to continue, with the labour minister predicting figures reaching 600,000 in the next 30 years (Siu 2017).

The affordability and accessibility of foreign domestic workers contribute to the ubiquity of having full-time help and is not necessarily regarded as exclusive a luxury as in other parts of the minority world.² Indeed, in spaces where domestic chores are carried out, such as supermarkets, wet markets, or outside school gates and tutorial centres, it is rather common to hear Tagalog or Bahasa being spoken as workers shop for groceries or chat with each other while waiting for the children of their employers to finish class. The mundane presence of these workers in the everyday spaces of the city is contrasted with their visible appearances on Sundays.

Since foreign domestic workers are required to live-in with their employers, they do not have a space to call their own; during their days off, public spaces are appropriated to create sites for social gatherings (see, e.g. Constable 2007, Knowles and Harper 2009, Law 2002, Tam 2016). Every weekend, a transformation takes place, in public parks and gardens, under sheltered thoroughfares and overhead walkways, makeshift resting areas are marked out by cardboard boxes and raffia strings. Some are chatting away, sharing food from their lunch boxes; while others lie back and rest, dosing in the semi-private space afforded by the shade of an umbrella. Some groups are singing along to music on their boom boxes, while others practice their choreographed dance moves in the reflection of appropriated mirrored walls. Little Manila and Little Indonesia as they are known locally, have become a 'spectacle of modern life in Hong Kong' (Law 2002, p. 1635).

The peculiar presence of foreign domestic workers has attracted academic attention across disciplines. In the Arts and Social Sciences, researchers have approached the topic from various perspectives: ranging from Marxist critiques on capital and the power relations involved; to the precarity of migration and labour in border studies; from accounts of exploitation and resistance in everyday lives of workers, to the urban spatial practices of the informal economy. In any case, the phenomena of foreign domestic workers offer cases worthy of further investigation. The focus and methods are not exclusive to disciplinary fields, as every study takes on a particular challenge, however, a general differentiation could be made between bodies of work that are concerned with unearthing power politics and those that are focused on the alternative practices in everyday life. Hage (2015) has made the delineation between anti-politics and alter-politics, the former describing a form of critical social analysis that is concerned with articulating forms of oppositional politics, and the other, critical cultural analysis that is focused on a political search for alternatives in ways of living. Hage argues that all critical writing is a combination of both, in so far as it is political, it is always a combination of anti- and alter-politics. This piece

addresses both traditions of critical social and cultural analyses, and in addition, attempts a third articulation of these relations to offer different perspectives and perhaps new imaginations of study.

Border control – the production of strangers

The phenomenon of foreign domestic workers is often discussed with reference to their visible manifestation on Sundays – Little Manila in Central’s Chater Garden or Little Indonesia in Causeway Bay’s Victoria Park become emblematic of their presence in Hong Kong. The temporal and transient nature that characterizes these spaces also symbolize, to a large extent, the plight of the Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong – both share the liminal space of being an exception to the norm: domestic helpers are an integral part of Hong Kong’s labour force, but they are not necessarily recognized as such by the public or the government. Their particular social status recalls Partha Chatterjee’s concept of ‘populations’, which he defines as ‘empirical categories of people’ (2004, p. 136); in *The Politics of the Governed*, he explains that populations are ‘identifiable, classifiable, and describable by empirical or behavioural criteria: but they are not part of what the city considers as citizens;³ their specific social or economic attributes are relevant for the administration of developmental or welfare policies, but they are not included in the centre of politics’ (p. 34). This socially visible but excluded population is an oxymoron that has been termed aptly by Erni as ‘included-out’, referring to those who dwell as strangers in the sphere of home. As a core function of citizenship *management*, Erni points out that regulatory measures to exclude, serve precisely to reinforce the logic of governmentality so that ‘there is always something about citizenship left unanchored, always someone who is constitutively included-out’ (Erni 2016, p. 15).

The immigration and labour laws specific to Foreign Domestic Helpers is the formal juridical iteration of how the exceptional presence of these workers is produced. For these migrant workers, border control begins in their home countries, where health checks, domestic skill trainings, language exams are all part of pre-departure requirements⁴ before they could acquire their visas to work in Hong Kong. Once they receive their FDH visas and enter into the jurisdiction of the city, they are subject to other exceptions: they are first and foremost only allowed to work as domestic workers; and as such it imposes the live-in rule which states that workers have to reside with their employers; if the contract is terminated, the two-week rule comes into play which means that workers have to find new employment within the stated amount of time or their presence regarded as illegal; finally, their wages are set at the Minimum Allowable Wage of HKD \$4,410, which is lower than that of the Statutory minimum wage of Hong Kong workers (Hong Kong SAR Government).

These measures of exclusion had a significant impact on the case of Evangelina Vallejos (see Erni 2016, Tam 2014), a domestic worker from the Philippines who has been working in Hong Kong for 27 years (Li, Ip and Pomfret 2013). Despite fulfilling all requirements for the right of abode,⁵ Vallejos had to launch a judiciary review to fight for her application for permanent residency, which was initially rejected. She won her case in October 2011, only to have the Court of Final Appeal overturn the ruling in March 2012. The court denied the status of permanent residency that is available to other foreigners after seven years on the basis that domestic workers are not 'ordinary residents' of the city (Department of Justice 2013).

What this case demonstrates, is that borders are not singular, valid at all times in the same way for all individuals. What constituted as 'ordinary' living for Vallejos did not seem to fit the bill when it came to the judicial system of Hong Kong. Etienne Balibar in *What is a Border* refers to borders as 'polysemic', which means it does not offer the same meaning or experience for all groups of people (Balibar 2002). Borders serve both to include as they exclude; they are productive in the way they construct different subjectivities and identities. In simplest form, territorial boundaries are geo-political markers that mark out the national borders of a sovereign state. It enables the identification of citizens by recognizing those who are from within; and it also produces strangers, by imposing institutional rules on those who come from the outside. Balibar writes, 'to mark out a border is, precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it ... every discussion of borders relates, precisely to the establishment of definite identities, national or otherwise' (Balibar 2002, p. 76). Borders function as instruments that regulate the formal flow of identities, and immigration is one of the prominent functions of border control.

Borders exist outside of institutions and often form the basis of collective identification. During the ruling of the Vallejos case, protests took place with chants of 'Hong Kong is for Hong Kong people' being heard in the streets. 'Guest workers' are foreign, they do not belong and are not regarded as part of the host country even though some, like Vallejos, have lived and worked in Hong Kong for over 20 years. When borders are perceived to be under threat, discursive tools are often deployed to demarcate who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Often, discourses of reductionist othering are employed to bring meaning to bear on differences in order to justify and re-establish forms of hierarchy. In the case of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, the narratives revolved around their 'outsider' behaviour, emphasizing their foreignness by highlighting the difference in language and culture. Obviously, these only serve to hide the more general underlying fear that this landmark case could potentially open the 'floodgates' for foreign domestic helpers and their families, claiming that new immigrants will come and 'steal our rice bowls'⁶ and 'rob' us of our health, housing and education benefits (Cheung

and So 2011). This was not only the view of individual citizens but also of the government which claimed that it will appeal to Beijing to interpret the law as a last resort if the ruling would have been made in favour of Vallejos.

In the discursive space of sovereign borders, non-citizens are often portrayed as a nuisance, burden or threat for the host society. Foreigners, especially in the form of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed as profiteers of the host country. They are represented as welfare snatching, parasites who take from our plates and live off the host society. The parasite regarded as purely negative, destructive, or undesirable agent is largely associated with its metaphorical associations of taking without giving back. In the binary world of 'us' vs 'them', giving and taking is exclusively unidirectional, with hosts always playing the role of the contributor, and guests the benefactor. This trope is widely deployed to stigmatize and evoke distrust, for example, the blaming of economic problems and unemployment on migrant labourer's or benefit cheats. As Gilroy rightly notes, the sociopolitical narrative about the other often remains trapped within the discourse of 'risk and jeopardy' (Gilroy 2004). Risks need to be minimized and repressed, to be overcome and controlled thereby justifying the need to strengthen exclusionary measures in order to reinforce the imaginary borders of the territory.

Interruption: snakes and walls

The building of walls as a literal and metaphorical term for the reinforcement of borders has been widely mobilized in recent global politics (Pastor 2017, Gilmartin, Wood and O'Callaghan 2018). Most notable is the American President Donald Trump's political agenda to build a 3218 km concrete wall along the border between the United States and Mexico as a way of keeping out 'the wrong people' coming into 'our country' (Rosenburg 2018). The phrase 'build that wall' has become his supporters' standard chants. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump has systematically exploited the narrative that frames refugees and asylum seekers as threat. In his rallies, Trump would routinely highlight the dangers of refugees and terrorism, and then turn to read the lyrics from *The Snake* song, which tells the fable of Aesop's farmer and the viper. He uses it as an analogy to describe the current 'migrant crisis', warning his audience that if United States were to offer refuge, the immigrants, likened to the snake in this example, would turn around and deliver a fatal strike.

The lyrics read as follows:

On her way to work one morning
 Down the path alongside the lake
 A tender hearted woman saw a poor half frozen snake
 His pretty coloured skin had been all frosted with the dew

"Poor thing," she cried, "I'll take you in and I'll take care of you"

...

She clutched him to her bosom, "You're so beautiful," she cried

"But if I hadn't brought you in by now you might have died"

She stroked his pretty skin again and kisses and held him tight

Instead of saying thanks, the snake gave her a vicious bite.

The Washington Post recently reported that Oscar Brown Jr.'s family were upset at the misappropriation of the song as soul singer was a social activist who participated in anti-racist movements in the 1960s. 'The Snake: How Trump appropriated a radical black singer's lyrics for immigration fear mongering' criticized Trump's racist xenophobic stance as well as the decontextualization of the song from its historical roots (Rosenberg 2018). Apart from the anecdotal evidence of drawing from Trump's habitual fear mongering techniques, the parable of Aesop's farmer and the viper offers a deeper moment of discussion, one which I hope would turn the story on its head to become a pivotal moment that offers new perspectives.

In the common telling of the story, the idiom of 'nourishing a viper to one's bosom' teaches the lesson that one should be wary of strangers, as kindness could be met by betrayal. The unfortunate deployment of the tale in the discussion of stranger relations has cast an overtone of general distrust and fear. However, another story can be told from the same series of events. In *The Parasite*, the French philosopher Michel Serres retells the story:

A while back, a passer-by came in, frozen stiff. Chilled, iced, stiff, immobile, exhausted – it is the snake stretched out on the snow one winter's day. It asked for nothing; it was hibernating perhaps. A villager walking by, on his own land, gathers up the snake, brings it inside, stretches it out by the fire, where it immediately begins to awaken. From the outside to the inside, from numbness to life, from sleep to anger, from indifference to hatred, from cold to hot. (Serres 2007, p. 22)

Serres's simple variation of the story powerfully demonstrates how radically different the events appear when told from the perspective of the snake. The snake was peacefully sleeping away the winter when it was rudely awakened. Not having even moved, the snake wakes to find its home gone, and it stands on foreign soil, 'more than being given a spot, his own has been taken away' (Serres 2007, p. 23). The villager who walked home from his farm remained 'in his own land', from his perspective, 'he never changed territories, never crossed a border'. Messandra and Nielson has referenced the slogan used by Latinos in the US 'we did not cross the border, the border crossed us' (2013, p. xi), to describe citizen or migrant worker struggles caused by tension of unstable and often blurry borders. Moreover, the snake 'asked for nothing', yet it was answered without having called; it did not demand for shelter or food but was given both; the uncalled for help created a benefactor and a debt, the poor snake woke up to find itself indebted without

having borrowed. 'You live with no other need and suddenly, someone claims to have saved your country, protected your class, your interests, your family, and your table. And you have to pay him for that, vote for him, and other such grimaces. Thus, the serpent awakens obliged to another' (Serres 2007, p. 23).

This story, which tells another tale, muddles our understanding of who the perpetrator is in the story. A debt has occurred, and a bill has to be tallied, but it is no longer clear who is going to settle it. Serres asks 'who is the host and who is the guest? Where is the gift and where is the debt?'⁷ Who is hospitable, who is hostile, again the same word, the same thing ... the host is less a host than he thought. Less hospitable than he thought' (Serres 2007, p. 23).

Drawing from its etymological roots, Serres points out that the word *hôte* corresponds to both 'host' and 'guest'. Jacques Derrida (2000) also makes the same point in his book *Of Hospitality* and the discussion of the foreigner question. The hosts and guests both give and receive, offer and accept, invite and is invited.

In the retelling of the story, Michel Serres demonstrates a different logic of social relationships, of communication and cohabitation which offers an alternative to certain established ways of approaching cultural-economic interactions, in particular those based implicitly or explicitly on the notion of unidirectional giving/taking (host/guest). At the most basic level, Serres's method begins with telling the story from another's perspective, with each retelling of the tale he demonstrates that a different story could be told. Depending on what is conceived of as the plane or environment upon which the series of events are told, the logic of social relationships i.e. the role of a host and guest; giver and taker, creditor or debtor could be inverted or reversed.

Story-telling plays a strategic role in the fabrication of the world as it creates a way of understanding society and justifications of borders. The following section would try to put into practice what Lawrence Grossberg calls better story-telling, both as the premise and political responsibility of Cultural Studies, so that new possibilities can be imagined to enable better politics.

Another story

Less than forty years ago, Hong Kong's economy was primarily industrial, generating its wealth through textile, plastic and other types of light manufacturing. Meanwhile, China was undergoing marketization and opened up its borders through economic reforms that aimed at attracting businesses to move North of the border. Factory owners were lured away as costs lowered in the otherwise labour and land intensive industry. With capital draining away from the manufacturing industries, Hong Kong found its niche to develop into a service economy which China was not yet ready

for. However, the fast-growing city was facing labour shortage, and women were seen to be an untapped pool of resources. For the literate and educated middle-class housewives, the job market became more appealing as working conditions improved and options were no longer restricted to manual labour. The city's need for a larger labour force was answered in part by working women, but demographic changes of a modernizing economy also created gaps in other areas: working parents of nuclear families in small urban apartments lacked support for everyday domestic chores, elderly or childcare. As women joined the workforce, the result was an increase in dual-income households with dispensable income in need of assistance for domestic chores, elderly, care and childcare. Thus the 1973 policy that allowed foreign nationals to come and work as domestic helpers was regarded as an all-round positive solution to Hong Kong's modernizing economy: migrants filled the gap in household needs, enabling more people to join the work force, which in turn solved the labour shortage problem the city was facing (Constable 2007).

More than just a welcome solution to the modernizing economy, having the means to hire foreign domestic labourers allowed women to get out of the bonds of domestic chores. In a recent report, the International Labour Organization reported that globally women perform 76.2 percent of the total amount of unpaid care work, 3.2 times more than men (ILO 2018). Silvia Federrici (1975) has been critical of unwaged domestic labour, where housework has been imposed on women as part of their gendered roles as housewives, 'it (housework) has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character' (Federrici 1975, p. 2). As a Marxist feminist, Federrici's stance is that the unwaged condition of housework has been capital's most powerful tool in convincing us the 'housework is not work' but that it is 'labour of love' (Federrici 1975, p. 2). Men's contribution to unpaid care work has increased in some countries over the past 20 years, but as the ILO study shows, between 1997 and 2012, the gender gap in time spent in unpaid care declined by only 7 min (from 1 h 49 min to 1 h 42 min), based on the projection, it will take 210 years to close the gender gap in unpaid care work. To date, unpaid care work still constitutes the main barrier to women's participation in the labour force (ILO 2018).

Unlike other types of work that are defined by tasks, domestic work is defined by the work place. Domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and maintaining the household are expected in addition to the provision of relational care services – direct, personal care for children, older and disabled persons, including tutoring young children, nursing or geriatric care (Tam 2018). As society ages due to drop in birth rates and higher life expectancies, Hong Kong is bracing itself for the effects of an increase elderly dependency

ratio. According to the Hong Kong Population Projections 2015–2064, in less than 50 years, 36 percent of the population will be aged 65 or above, coupled with a declining birth rate and consequently a shrinking workforce, it is predicted that the elderly dependency ratio will increase from 198 to 567, meaning that each elderly person will only be supported by 1.8 person of working age (Mok 2018). With a lack of investment in infrastructure in both elderly and childcare, Hong Kong turns again to outsourcing, exploring new markets such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Bangladesh in anticipation for the changing demands of an ageing society (Siu 2017).

As Mezzandra and Nielson in their book *Border as Method* makes clear, the development of capitalist markets plays off on the unequal opportunities of labour markets. This is certainly the relationship between Hong Kong and its poorer SE Asian neighbours such as the Philippines and Indonesia. The effects on the movement of labour power across nation states contribute to the emergence of more porous and multiple borders within and between labour regimes. Labour power is a peculiar commodity that cannot be separated from the living body of the worker, hence migration is pivotal to the encounter between labour and capital. One of the central claims in the book is that the globalizing processes of the past twenty years did not lead to the diminution but to the proliferation of borders. The multiplication of labour, through outsourcing and extending geographically the division of labour allowed the extraction of surplus value to be intensified, diversified and heterogenized (Messandra and Nielson 2013). Work days could be lengthened or expanded with the support of domestic workers, and production diversified to include the reproduction of care, with social and legal regimes changing to accommodate the exceptional migration schemes that is required to bring bodies across borders.

The figure of the female migrant domestic worker encompasses two types of mobilities, one is the mobilization of their labour power and the other is their gender. Typically travel discourse open up opportunities to explore different roles – on the one hand, as Patterson has argued in his piece, leaving their home countries allowed these women to leave behind the geographically bound normative gendered practices and labour hierarchies, to escape from the ‘natural’ straight time of maternity and unpaid domestic labour for their own family. But insightfully, Patterson also points out that in this forcibly queered time as breadwinners, these women’s roles as care-takers often become the trope that is again used to reinforce a form of ‘heterosexual belonging’, that is, addressing their sacrifices as mothers rather than the exploitative and non-normative labour and migration conditions into same sex communities.

According to the International Labour Organization, more than 50 percent of migrant workers are women, and this increase in women’s participation in migratory movements have been attributed to the feminization of labour.

Federrici's critique of the naturalization of housework remains true today. Despite the women's movement that won women a place in the waged labour force, the struggle falls short of recognizing domestic work as work. Many women employers of domestic workers claim that they could not pull a 'double shift', meaning to take on cooking, cleaning and tidying the house after a day at work. While women from first world economies such as Hong Kong can circumvent the sexual division of labour by hiring women from poorer countries to do the menial jobs, outsourcing housework has created a huge demand for women to migrate as mothers or wives. Arlie Hoschild used the term 'global care chain' to refer to 'a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring' (2000, p. 131), a typical chain would resemble: 'an older daughter from a poor family who cares for her siblings while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a migrating nanny who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country' (2000, p. 131). Indeed, this is very often the case for domestic workers in Hong Kong. Many of the migrant women who left to seek better wages in Hong Kong have employed their distant relatives from the provinces or other women to take care of the families they left behind.

However, the hiring of foreign domestic workers is more than just the outsourcing of labour power as the jobs of domestic work go beyond the normal physical chores of cooking, ironing and cleaning. As Hoschild writes in *The Managed Heart*, emotional labour which is the management of emotions are also at the heart of daily labouring processes (2012).

Increasingly the most sought after skills in domestic workers go beyond the traditional definition of domestic work. Elderly care and childcare which involve patience, tolerance, kindness and love lie at the heart of care labourers. The hiring of a foreign domestic worker in Hoschild's terms would be the transnational transfers of 'motherly labour'. The 'global woman' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002) shows the continuities between the experiences of nannies, maids and sex workers in this internationalization of care as commodity as part of the globalization processes (Anderson 2001, Chang and Ling 2000, Chin 1998, Cock 1984, Benhabib and Resnik 2009, Yeates 2004, amongst others).

The affective and emotional nature of many tasks and activities required from foreign domestic workers demonstrate the blurred boundaries between labour regimes. This is particularly the case when it comes to childcare. As mentioned at the beginning of the piece, one in three household with children employ a full-time domestic worker. Parents often rely on their 'jeh jehs' to take care of their children when they are working. Most of the waking hours of the child is spent in the company of their care givers, and it is very common to see a strong bond develop between the two. In the quieter moments of discussion, many employers would admit this causes

anxiety amongst parents, or even feelings of guilt when they realize that not enough time has been spent on taking care of their own children. Domestic workers as well, often speak of the love they have for their children, while shedding a tear for their own whom they have left behind. 'We also give this love to our employers and their children' one domestic worker spoke softly.

The official term Foreign Domestic Helper is eerily accurate, as it literally encompasses the state of constant border crossing. 'Foreign' is something external, strange, alien and unacquainted; 'domestic' on the other hand is used to describe the intimate and familiar.

Foreign domestic describes the inherent tension between the alien and the citizen; public and private; formal and informal; strange and familiar; exceptional and ordinary. Many in the NGO sector contest the term 'helper' (see Kuo 2014), as the term brings to mind informal work, a helping hand to assist in handling menial jobs, while also denoting a lower position; 'workers' on the other hand, formally recognizes the work as jobs, as waged labourers, they toil under contract with rights and protection. Socially, in everyday parlance, most employers refer to their helpers as 'jeh jeh' (older sister) instead of the previously demeaning terms of 'bun mui' (Pinoy girl) or 'fay yung' (Filipino maid) where ethnicity and labour power have been confounded. 'Jeh Jeh' is pseudo-familial, she is close but not blood related; she is 'family', but not quite.

Living in others' lives without belonging is part of the daily experience of domestic workers. Their guest worker status as migrants at the macro level is replicated at the micro level within the employers' families. The term 'jeh jeh' might have offered employers a way out of the awkward situation of having a staff at home, but in the entangled presence of living together, workers still have a tricky path to navigate the borders and surf the space in-between through the world of household practices. From their physical presence to demeanour, habits of dressing, to ways of eating and resting, to public and private activities, to personal and professional demands, domestic workers play the insider from an outside world. They 'deal with the underside of hygiene and laundry habits, emotional states, and tangled familiarities. What is this like? How does it work from the maid's perspective?' (Knowles and Harper 2009, p. 157).

During the week, domestic workers often dress in a muted way, shapeless t-shirts and loose trousers that permit them to carry out the daily chores of washing and cleaning. But more than just the practical quality, these items of clothing permits employers to retain their status as socially superior. One of the common 'faux-pas' that many the young women make as new arrivals is to dress fashionably in their daily work. Very often, this would invite criticism, particularly from female employers, questioning their 'appropriateness' of their taste in choices in clothing. This also explains why on Sundays, women

would wear their 'Sunday best', for many Catholics, this is indeed the time for worship, but it is also the only day they could express their individuality in the clothes they wear.

Other boundaries are harder to navigate, for example, with the live-in arrangement, working and living occur within the same space, and boundaries between labour time and leisure time is not clear. Even on their days off, workers are often given a curfew to return home before a certain time in the evening (usually between 7 and 9 pm); upon their return, there is usually a pile of dirty dishes in the sink, and work begins again. In a recent report conducted by the Justice Centre,⁸ the average hours of foreign domestic workers is reported to be more than 70 h a week. The difficulty in regulating meant that that long working hours have become commonly associated with precarious conditions of work. Playing multiple roles could be complicated, as Riza, an outgoing young woman from Llocos Norte in the Philippines, told me one Sunday:

"I am so happy my employer didn't scold me," she exclaimed. Sharing her sense of relief, I asked her to tell me what happened. Riza recounted her usual routine where she picked up the daughter of her employer from school and took her back home, prepared her afternoon snack and proceeded to go through the homework. The six-year-old was particularly difficult that day and did not cooperate with what has been asked of her. After a lot of effort was spent encouraging and coaxing the child, Riza turned to discipline, and raised her voice to the child. The child burst into tears and at that moment, her employer came back home. Riza told me, at the moment 'my heart stopped, I was so scared!' She was terrified as the situation did not show her in a good light. Her employer must have heard Riza raise her voice in the corridor and walked into the wailing cries of her own daughter. The employer could have reprimanded for being too harsh on the child, for overstepping her boundary as a domestic helper. "But I was so lucky," Riza said, "so lucky because I have a good employer, she let me explain what happened and did not scold me for making her child cry."

At employment agencies for foreign domestic workers, many employers' express preferences for behavioural, cultural, linguistic traits thought to bear on the quality of service provided. In the early days, Filipinos were considered good hires because their qualities of being more 'submissive' and 'docile'. They have also traditionally been more popular with local employers because their English skills can offer 'an added value' to the household. In recent years, many employers reported that Filipinos have learnt 'new tricks', they have become too 'clever' and difficult to manage while Indonesians are more 'obedient and easier to control'. These cultural and behavioural expectations continue to define tasks and standards for performances required from workers in their various roles. A 'good' domestic worker is someone who is expected to be obedient; as an 'effective' tutor or nanny, they are expected to be efficient and disciplinary. The daily routine of a

domestic worker demands the individual to put on different hats to play different roles and take on different responsibilities. While this might be generally considered quite common in the workplace where an employee might take on several roles, this becomes problematic in the undifferentiated time and space of home.

When does the domestic worker move into the role of a tutor? When is she expected to be docile and when can she exercise discipline? Riza's emotional reaction to the series of events she described reveals the complexities of negotiating the blurred of boundaries of these roles.

Conclusion

I began this article with the discussion of foreign domestic workers and the border regimes that produce their exceptional presence in Hong Kong – the borders that are imposed through state policies and rule of law are also replicated and multiplied in the discursive space of everyday lives. Living under the shadow of inequality produced by the forces of global capital and labour markets, workers nevertheless develop tactics to navigate the murky waters of being foreign/domestic; in/out; host/ guest; give/take. In the attempt to put into practice what Grossberg calls better story-telling, and moving beyond the dichotomy of what Hage has termed anti/alter-politics, I have drawn from the work of Michel Serres to offer a different articulation, retelling the story of Hong Kong and its migrant domestic workers from different perspectives. In the following concluding paragraphs, I will offer my reflections based on such practice.

The myopic vision of those who call for stronger border control or regimes that focus on tightening state policies and juridical regulations to constrain human mobilities regard borders as sovereign walls. But as Balibar has made clear, 'borders are never purely local institutions, never reducible to a simple history of conflicts and agreements between neighbouring powers and groups, which would only concern them, bilaterally, but in fact, are always already "global", a way of dividing the world into regions, therefore places, therefore a way of configuring the world' (2010, p. 316). The case of importing domestic labour to meet the demands of a changing society operate on an interdependent network that is not merely between Hong Kong and Indonesia or the Philippines. The borders that are drawn into the global care chain are never simply between nation states; it is also that between rich/poor, rural/urban, men/women, paid/unpaid, mobilizing labour supply down the economic ladder. The global supply chain of intimate labour, or global care chain as Hoschild appropriately describes it, is not a wall or a fence, but a chain of interlocking circles, which seem to offer a new dimension to the anti or alter politics in the discussion of migrant domestic workers.

'There is no system without parasites'

If migrant workers and asylum seekers are amongst those who are deemed 'parasitic' to the host country due to its perception of taking without giving back, Michel Serres offers again another lesson. The fable of the *Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* was conventionally told as a story to teach children about the virtue of a modest life, that simple peace and quiet is better than a life of richness and opulence filled with danger. The moral of the story is demonstrated through two meals: the first meal takes place in the country mouse's abode where the town mouse, appalled by the bare meal of stalks and roots, invited his country cousin to show him the good life in the city. While dining on a feast of fruit and cheese, they were interrupted by a noise, which sent them scampering away. This occurrence happened several times which prompted the country mouse to leave the city for good and return to his 'bare plowlands' where he can live in simplicity but without fear.

In his book *The Parasite*, Serres retells the story in a slightly different manner: the country mouse accepts an invitation to eat at his cousin's expense, who hosts with pickings from the farmers' table. The tax farmer, fills his belly through gorging on the labour of others as he produces neither ham, nor oil, nor cheese but feeds from this chain of exchange. In this version, the lesson gleaned from the story is no longer that a simple and peaceful life is preferable to that of opulence and danger, but Serres shifts out attention to the salient theme of dining at another's table. In Serres' account of the tale, our focus is directed to the pairings of the host and guest, between citizen and tax farmer, tax farmer and town mouse, town mouse and country mouse, where each of these pairings are chained upon each other, effectively eating off or parasiting from the other's plate. 'The host is not a prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite' (Serres 2007, p. 7).

Serres plays with the etymology of the word *para/sitos*, the being that eats alongside, and proposes a paradigm in which the interdependent relationship of hosts and guests are foregrounded. In his book, Serres' take on the parasite engages with three definitions of the word: (1) a biological parasite – the parasitic relation of one entity hosted by another, e.g. a worm hosted by a cat; (2) a social parasite – the metaphorical association of someone who takes without giving back and (3) the informational parasite – interference, static, noise. For the story ends with an interruption, a noise which brought a halt to the feast of the mice.

Instead of treating parasites, be it biological, social or informatic, as inherently negative and subtractive in its relations (Brown 2002), perceived as threat, or contaminant, experienced as interruption, disruption, pollution, therefore warrants expulsion and termination; can we reconfigure into our

thinking to regard interruption as potential resource for, or even playing an essential role in, the maintenance of a larger structure? 'Can we rewrite a system, Serres asks, not in the key of pre-established harmony, but rather as the book of differences, noise and disorder?' (Serres 2007, p. xiv).

Every medium of exchange, movement, flow of information and migration of people, generates new relationships and forms new hierarchies. The parasite (no longer a purely negative figure) diverts, siphons off from the exchange and in turn adds to the possibilities of new relationships being formed. At each level of parasitism, the individual is always already involved in several relationships of exchange, playing the role of host and guest simultaneously. This introduces the possibility of a quasi-equal relationship amongst actors, which prompts us to reconsider the political and ethical implications of the relationships among migrant workers, local employers and the environment in which they interact. The host city and its guest population functions as interrelated collection of cultural, social and economic spheres, where all levels of activities contribute to the effective functioning of the overall system. Adopting Serres' generalized model allows for a wider, more coherent paradigm where individuals are placed in a network of interdependent relationships, shifting away from the isolated conception of the essential character of parasites as non-reciprocal and subtractive.

In reformulating the empirically determined systems of producing populations, this chapter offers an alternative that attempts to do away with the sticky binaries of domestic/foreign; give/take; host/guest, or at least to recognize that these relationships are never fixed. To retell the story of foreign domestic workers requires a change of perspectives as well as discourse. A recent study published by a local charity Enrich⁹ calculated that foreign domestic workers contribute \$98.9 billion HKD (equivalent to USD \$12.6 billion) to the local economy Enrich (2018). The value of indirect care activities such as cleaning, cooking etc., and direct care services given to the elderly and children; and the resulting increased female labour force participation all amounted to 3.6 percent of Hong Kong's GDP. More than just figures and numbers, the awareness of the contributive role that migrants play in the development of Hong Kong ought to lead to a greater appreciation and acknowledgment of their necessary position within the socio-economic system. Including-out this population, is a strange 'illogical logic', an oxymoron which Derrida calls autoimmunity – a state which parallels the immune system of the body when it starts to attack itself (Derrida 2005).

Notes

1. Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs) is the term used by the Hong Kong Government to refer to migrant full-time, live-in domestic workers. However, the NGO sector has contested the use of 'helpers' preferring the term 'workers'

instead. In this chapter, I will be using the term foreign domestic workers unless referring to official government materials.

2. I use the term minority world to refer to countries with developed economies.
3. Which connotes the 'normative burden' of participation and also the moral connotation of sharing in the sovereignty of the state and hence claiming rights in relation to the state.
4. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has made pre-departure training and orientation compulsory for all overseas workers in 1983 see here (Ministry of Labour and Employment). Civil Society organizations such as Mission for Migrant Workers (2007) have contested these government training schemes, claiming that they create more opportunities for exploitation see here
5. Article 24 of the Basic Law states that 'persons not of Chinese nationality who have entered Hong Kong with valid travel documents, have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years and have taken Hong Kong as their place of permanent residence before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region are eligible to be considered for permanent residency' (HKSAR Basic Law 2017).
6. A Cantonese expression which means to take away jobs. 'Rice bowls' refers to jobs or income – the means to feed oneself.
7. The question of indebtedness has been discussed in Ghassan Hage (2002) work on Lebanese migrants. In his discussion of gift-giving and the state of debt, he points out that the gift of communality, of belonging is often repaid by participating in social life. Migration takes away that possibility and therefore migrants often feel indebted to their families and their communities for having left them behind. This could be seen in the case of the foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, who in addition to sending remittances home, spend much of their earnings to buy gifts to put into large balikbayan boxes which they send to their families.
8. The Justice Centre (formerly the Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre) is a HK based non-profit organization that advocates for rights of refugees and other victims of forced migration. In 2016, they issued a report named *Coming Clean: the prevalence of forced labour and human trafficking for the purpose of forced labour amongst migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong* that grouped foreign domestic workers in categories ranging from forced labour to human trafficking based on the extent of exploitation they faced.
9. At the time of writing this article, the author is also holding the position of Board Chair of Enrich, a local charity that promotes the economic empowerment of migrant domestic workers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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