

Singapore's Migrant Worker Poetry, Worker Resistance, and International Solidarity

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Abstract

Workers, activists, and volunteers organized the first Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in Singapore in 2014. The competition has been held annually since then, and it has created a vibrant literary scene among migrant workers that has become an increasingly important part of migrant worker advocacy in the city-state. The migrant worker literary scene has developed within the constraints on critical political discourse in Singapore, but expressions of international labor solidarity have also emerged from the migrants' literary activity. This article focuses on the work of two poets, Shromik Monir and Rolinda O. Espanola, in order to illustrate the kinds of cultural politics that migrant workers have been able to engage in despite the restrictions on political activity imposed by the state of Singapore and the influence of the US Embassy. Monir's poetry has articulated international solidarity in terms of a connection between migrant workers and workers in his originating country, Bangladesh, and he directly references literary traditions that have supported workers internationally. Espanola, in contrast to Monir, refers not to literary traditions, but rather to the conditions created by NGO programs in Singapore. The poems thus provide lessons for developing a framework for interpreting migrant worker poetry in relation to both the traditions of proletarian literature and the forms of working-class organizing in specific contexts.

Keywords: Singapore Migrant Worker Poetry

Competition, International Labor Solidarity, Proletarian Literature

Workers, activists, and volunteers came together to organize the first Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in Singapore in 2014. Almost all of the workers were from Bangladesh and worked in the construction sector, and they themselves had laid much of the groundwork for the competition in weekly meetings in which they shared poems and responded to each other. This nucleus of worker activity became the focal point of a much larger organizing program that would draw into its orbit NGOs, cultural workers, academics, other construction workers, and crucially, migrant workers from other countries who were working in other sectors in Singapore. The following year, in 2015, the US Embassy in Singapore began to support the competitions. Over the course of several years the competition has allowed a growing body of migrant workers to exercise limited collective leadership in creating a shared subjectivity among workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, China, Myanmar, India, and the Philippines.

The act of creating a shared subjectivity is a response to the legal regime that assigns very circumscribed identities to migrant workers in Singapore. The state of Singapore differentiates among migrants, based on kinds of work, formal education, and salaries, distinguishing "professionals," "skilled workers," and "semi-skilled workers." Non-Singaporeans in the first two categories can receive work *passes*, while "semi-skilled

workers” can receive work *permits*. While those with passes have rights such as the ability to seek permanent residency, marry a local citizen, or bear a child in Singapore, those with permits—workers in the construction, manufacturing, shipyard, processing, or service sector, as well as confinement nannies, performing artists, and domestic workers—are constructed by the state to provide a flexible workforce that can be admitted or expelled based on the needs of the Singaporean economy.¹ Work permit holders, according to this regulatory regime, are reduced to their labor power, a commodity in a neoliberal market, and they are meant to be as pliant, disposable, and bereft of subjectivity as any other commodity.

It is apt, then, that a documentary released in late-2016 about the second Migrant Worker Poetry Competition was titled *Poets on Permits*.² Poetry within the context of the competition proceeded to become a mode of articulation for ever more migrant workers to define themselves. Among the first and most common statements of migrant workers in and about their poetry was put succinctly by Sandeep Kaur, a domestic worker from India: “Everyone only sees them [migrant workers] as a worker.” The regulatory regime reduces migrant workers to an abstract equivalent, “a worker” on a work permit, thus denying the richness of their concrete subjectivities. *Poets on Permits* juxtaposes this statement with Kaur reciting a poem that she composed for the competition. The juxtaposition itself suggests that Kaur wishes to be recognized as a cultural producer. Furthermore, the poet criticizes female infanticide in her home country, which suggests that her subjectivity includes a desire to be a political actor.

The migrant worker poets’ desire to be viewed as more than the figure of commodified labor is a *class* desire insofar as it addresses the condition of workers in a capitalist society. The poems are thus part of the broad continuum of

working-class poetry that extends from poems written by workers to poems that consciously support workers as a class. Furthermore, because of the reach of neoliberal capitalism beyond national borders, the migrant workers’ poems invite reflection on their articulations of international solidarity. Because the poets are migrant workers addressing other migrant workers and their allies, calls for international solidarity attain particular salience and urgency.³

Glory Ann Balista, a migrant domestic worker from the Philippines, provides one such glimpse of international solidarity in an explanation of the poem that she recited for the documentary: “I want other FDW’s (Foreign Domestic Worker) children to know they are not the only ones who feel sad, and are suffering...the parents also, because being far away from them is very hard.” Balista’s words have political significance on an international register. She addresses the children of other foreign domestic workers with her poem and imagines a community of children who share the experience of being separated from their parents. This community is international – Singapore is a destination for migrant domestic workers from several locations in South and Southeast Asia, and several locations in South, Southeast, and East Asia send workers across national borders to wealthy areas in the Middle East and to locations around the South China Sea such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In her address to the children of foreign domestic workers Balista implicitly calls for international solidarity.

Kaur and Balista were both finalists in the 2015 Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in Singapore, and, annually after its inception in 2014, growing numbers of migrant worker poets with work permits have been recognized as finalists in the December awards ceremonies. This article focuses on poems by two finalists, Shromik Monir and Rolinda O. Espanola, in order to contextualize Singapore’s

migrant worker poetry scene within the broader histories of worker literature and its relationships to worker organizing. In particular, this article will consider the historical development of the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in order to sketch possibilities for international solidarity. The creative expressions of the poets themselves point to emergent articulations of international solidarity that are potential resources for building the political power necessary for the worker poets, other workers, and their allies to confront the basic problems, international in scope, that have created the need for the competitions as a venue for migrant worker expression.

This potential, however, is limited because of the power of the Singaporean and US states. Singapore, as a receiving destination for migrant workers, sets restrictive legal limits on who the poets can be and what kinds of political activities they can engage in. Two legislative interventions in particular, the Societies Act and the Internal Security Act, have limited the ability of activists and workers to criticize the Singaporean state and to affiliate with organizations in Singapore and internationally. However, the Singaporean state itself faces a limit on the kinds of repression that it can direct towards the competition because of the support that the competitions have received from the US Embassy. Personnel in the US Embassy, though, are themselves restricted by the interests of the US State Department. This article views the competitions as contested ground, formed by the aspirations of workers which are shaped both by grassroots attempts to build international working-class solidarity and by state forces that attempt to contain and neutralize them.

Articulations of Migrant Worker Subjectivity

Although migrant workers in Singapore are forced to operate in circumstances not chosen by themselves, the competitions have allowed some of them to articulate through poetry both individual and collective subjectivities. Monir Ahmod, a migrant from Bangladesh who writes under the pseudonym Shromik Monir (“Worker Monir”), has contributed poems to the competitions that not only call for international solidarity among migrant workers but also ground it in the particular national conditions and trajectories of sending countries.

In Bangladesh, Monir won awards for his poetry in competitions organized by literary groups, and in 2010, at the age of 23, he travelled to Singapore to work in the construction sector.⁴ He was a finalist in each of the first three years of the Singapore competition, from 2014 to 2016. His poems from the latter two years construct a subjectivity that is simultaneously worker and poet, located both within and across national borders. More specifically, his poems construct a worker-poet subjectivity by alluding to histories of working-class struggle in Bangladesh, the traditions of proletarian literature from Bangladesh, and non-Bangladeshi literatures written in solidarity with the international proletariat.



Monir reading at the 2015 competition.

Photo by Jeddah.

The title of Monir’s 2015 poem is simply “**Shromik**” (“The Laborer”).⁵ The poem directly addresses workers, identifying this addressee as an exploited historical figure. Workers are defined by what they have built, mansions and courtyards, as “craftsmen of this beautiful civilization.” However, although they produce the splendor of civilization, they are not able to enjoy the fruits of their labor:

In this empire of pleasure
 you will live in the dense loveless
 forest
 with your inherited hunger⁶

The afflictions of “inherited hunger” and being forced to live in a “dense loveless forest” point to the history and the experience of an unacknowledged collective subjectivity. However, although this subjectivity is unrewarded and unrecognized, the poet asserts that it has content:

No one knows that you also have
 Love
 dreams within dreams

The poem describes a situation in which the commodity of labor power is, from the standpoint of capital, bereft of subjectivity.

Moreover, in the context of Singapore, once the labor is complete the holder of the work permit must either find another employer or disappear from the city, which further obscures the subjectivity of workers. In contrast, the poem claims that workers experience “love” and “dreams within dreams,” thus drawing attention to the concrete experience of workers that exceeds their labor power.

Although the condition of being exploited and unacknowledged would be common to workers anywhere within a capitalist system, the poem situates the addressee within the history of labor struggle specific to Bangladesh through a constellation of allusions:

Like Aminul, perhaps you will
 become
 an unclaimed corpse by the lake

Maybe like Ruhul Amin, your dead
 body
 will lose the right to touch the soil
 of your land
 for the crime of being a migrant

Drowning in the brick and mortar
 of Rana plaza
 burning in the fire of Tazreen
 maybe you will disappear from the
 earth

The first reference is to Aminul Islam, an

organizer of garment workers in Dhaka who was killed in 2012. The second reference is to Ruhul Amin, a national hero of Bangladesh who was killed by Pakistani soldiers and Bengali militiamen who supported Pakistan during the 1971 war for independence. The third reference is to disasters that have struck garment workers in Bangladesh, namely, the 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse and the 2012 fire in the Tazreen Fashion factory. The first allusion implies that organizing could result in martyrdom because of violent repression. Doing nothing is not an option, however, because of the unsafe working conditions faced by workers in Bangladesh.

While the poem constructs a specifically Bangladeshi working-class subjectivity, it also shows how this subjectivity is itself split because it articulates hazards and contradictions experienced specifically by migrants. The figure of drowning and dying away from their native land suggests that going overseas is hazardous. Furthermore, the poem points to a lived contradiction that exported migrant workers experience insofar as they are threatened with being criminalized. Ruhul Amin, the figure in the second reference above, was not himself a migrant, but he was killed as he was trying to swim to shore. The poem uses this story to suggest that migrants could die abroad and not be allowed to return “for the crime of being a migrant.” The experience of feeling guilty for having committed a crime, in this line, is an inescapable condition of migration. A key component of the labor export regime is the moral pressure on international migrants to send remittances. But the remittances can never be enough, leading to an abiding sense of guilt.⁷

“Shromik” thus expresses pessimism about struggle. The stark choice for workers is between joining the collective struggle and possibly being martyred, or doing nothing and being killed by the conditions created by capitalist and state authorities. The poem ends

flatly by stating that “you [the worker] will be a history, an unread history.” However, the poem intimates that the revolution has not been lost. The allusions are conditional: “perhaps” and “maybe.” In a different future, figures such as Aminul, Ruhul Amin, the Rana Plaza and Tazreen workers, and the migrant workers in Singapore might be remembered, and the opposition between migrants and those who stayed in Bangladesh negated. Furthermore, in that future, the figure of the worker would have full subjectivity, with “love” and “dreams within dreams,” presumably with poetry as one of its vehicles of expression.

Whereas Monir’s 2015 entry invokes a working-class subjectivity as something that “no one knows,” his 2016 entry, “[You are My Poetry](#),” is a love poem to an addressee who, at first glance, is indeterminate.⁸ The addressee is never explicitly named, but one of the most plausible referents is the working class. This poem continues Monir’s explication of aspects of an emerging working-class subjectivity. The opening stanzas of the poem define this working class as beautiful, and through its productivity, it makes nature beautiful:

Stunned by your beauty

 the spring dressed itself up again

 the nightingale sharpened its
 afternoon melody

 Your dazzling beauty

 Changed the color of this earth

 The Seven Wonders drew their
 beauty from yours

In contrast to the 2015 poem, though, this is not a working class with a specific national origin. Rather, “You are My Poetry” invokes workers who created beauty before the emergence of capitalism and the system of nation states, workers who constructed the Seven Wonders.

The poem further defines this working-class subjectivity of the addressee as a critical one. Like the 2015 poem, a set of allusions appears in the middle lines of the poem, but instead of referring to workers and activists, they instead name three poets. The poems of the first, Jibanananda Das, have been lauded as “the defining essence of modernism in twentieth century Bengali poetry.”⁹ Monir’s invocation of Das’s name, though, suggests that there is something lacking in his poetry: “If Jibanananda Das had seen you / Maybe his ‘Banalata Sen’ would have had more life.” Unlike Das, the speaker of Monir’s poem claims a certain intimacy with and proximity to the addressee, the international working class. The consequence of Das’s inability to see Monir’s addressee is a lack of vitality in “Banalata Sen,” one of his most-studied poems.

While Monir positions himself in opposition to Das, he affiliates himself with two other poets: “You might have been the muse of Neruda or Bodelier (Baudelaire).” It is not hard to find resonance between Monir’s poetry and works by Pablo Neruda and Charles Baudelaire. Neruda’s “The Heights of Macchu Pichu” (1947) like Monir’s 2015 poem, highlights the unrecognized workers who have constructed great monuments. Baudelaire participated in the 1848 workers’ uprising in Paris, and his prose poem, “The Eyes of the Poor” (published posthumously in 1869), through the conversation it stages between two privileged people who are gazed upon by those who are poor, bears comparison with [Monir’s 2014 poem](#), which contrasts those who enjoy lavish religious festivals with a hungry street child.¹⁰ In “You are My Poetry,” Monir

delineates lines of aesthetic affiliations along class lines. He distances himself from Das, whom Monir dissociates from the working class. Instead of aligning himself with another Bangladeshi poet, he instead affiliates himself with two non-Bangladeshi poets who were themselves inspired by the working class, thus performing a kind of aesthetic internationalism.

Monir’s political commitments are also visible in the biography that he submitted to the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition.¹¹ In it, Monir locates himself within a revolutionary poetic tradition in Bangladesh. He mentions the names of two poets as his favorites, Sukanta Bhattacharya and Kazi Nazrul Islam, both of whom became iconic within a revolutionary and progressive Left in both West Bengal and Bangladesh. Bhattacharya died in 1947 of tuberculosis at the age of 21, and during the final years of his life, when Bengal faced famine and partition, he produced most of his poetry and actively participated in revolutionary movements. Kazi Nazrul Islam was born in 1899, long before Bhattacharya, but died much later, in 1976, soon after the founding of Bangladesh as a country independent from Pakistan. Nazrul has been enshrined as the national poet of Bangladesh, but during his youth, his celebrated poem “Bidrohi” (“Rebel,” 1922) resulted in him popularly being referred to as the “rebel poet.” Monir, perhaps in homage, refers to himself as a “rebel poet” in his biography.

The Poetry Scene Emerging from NGO and Migrant Worker Activity

Monir’s poetry bears signs of the influence of traditions of proletarian literature. Both Nazrul and Bhattacharya wrote in contexts heavily influenced by communist parties and the Comintern. However, Monir and the other participants in the Singapore competitions have been writing in an historical and political context in which an international coordinating

body for working-class movements with resources and centrality comparable to the Comintern does not exist. The state of Singapore, in fact, has created mechanisms that have shaped migrant worker organizing so that its organizational form is not a party that is coordinated at an international level. Instead, migrant worker poetry in Singapore has developed in conversation and conjunction with the development of the NGO scene. Two organizations in particular were key movers behind the inaugural contest in 2014, the NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the newspaper *Banglar Kantha*. Although the poetry competitions are in part a product of migrant labor-related NGOs in Singapore, they have been shaped by local constraints and possibilities for social justice movements.

In Singapore, the government constrains NGOs through the application of two legal mechanisms carried over from the era of British rule. The first of these is the Societies Act, which requires all organizations of ten or more persons to register with the Singapore government, with exemptions for most businesses and organizations covered by other laws (such as schools and mutual-benefit organizations). The Registrar of Societies has wide discretion in deciding whether societies can register, and organizations that are not registered are prosecuted. Individuals associated with societies that have lost their registration are subject to fines and imprisonment.¹² The second policy is the Internal Security Act. Whereas the Societies Act is a surveillance tool, the Internal Security Act is a blunt instrument of political repression. It allows the Singaporean head of state, with Cabinet advice, to detain anyone without trial for up to two years if the head of state judges such an action necessary for maintaining Singapore's "security," "public order," or "essential services." Detention can be repeatedly renewed for additional two-year increments with very limited judicial review. Short of detention, the person who is judged a

threat can face restrictions on activities and places of residence and employment, be prohibited from holding office or taking part in the activities of any organization or association, and be prohibited from traveling within Singapore or abroad.¹³

These two policies have profoundly influenced the activities of NGOs in Singapore. The political landscape is haunted by memories of Operation Spectrum, a 1987 crackdown on the so-called "Marxist Conspiracy," which led to the arrest and detention of sixteen people who allegedly were planning to "subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore, using communist united front tactics, with a view to establishing a Marxist state."¹⁴ Thus, although a multitude of societies have been registered under the Societies Act, only a handful have had an activist or social justice orientation. These few organizations have endured intense scrutiny from the public, the media, and the state.

One such activist organization is the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), which was founded in 1984, just a few years before the government arrests of activists accused of participating in the "Marxist Conspiracy." Because several of those arrested were social workers and lay workers at the Geylang Catholic Center for Foreign Workers, which was subsequently closed, the Catholic Church and other NGOs were hesitant to address the exploitation of foreign migrant workers.¹⁵ Throughout the 1990s, AWARE distanced itself from issues surrounding foreign domestic workers or advocated in a very low-key manner. A shift occurred, however, in 2001 in response to the killing of an Indonesian domestic worker, Muawanatul Chasanah, by her Singaporean employer. When her body was found, it showed evidence of starvation and long-term abuse.¹⁶ At that point several members of AWARE and other NGOs began to meet, and the result of those meetings was the formation of TWC2, which was registered in

2004.¹⁷

TWC2 would soon expand its focus beyond domestic workers to include other migrants, most of whom were male and working in other industries, especially in construction. This expansion would lead it to help foster cultural currents that were already developing in South Asian migrant communities. In 2008, the organization began a program, the Cuff Road Project, to provide free meals to workers in the neighborhood of Little India who were injured and unable to work or were involved in disputes with their employers.¹⁸ This service addressed a structural gap because workers who filed complaints against their employers were often kicked out of employer-provided housing, and many could not legally find employment elsewhere in Singapore. Three years after the establishment of the Cuff Road Project, Debbie Fordyce, a volunteer with TWC2, and AKM Mohsin, editor-in-chief of the Bangla/Bengali newspaper *Banglar Kantha*, created the Dibashram Centre in a space above one of the meal locations in order to promote the cultural development of migrant workers. The center supported cultural activities initiated by workers from Bangladesh such as screening movies, producing plays, and writing poetry. In weekly meetings, workers shared literary compositions in the Dibashram Centre, and they formed a club called Banglar Kontho Sahitya Parishad, in which they recited verse and participated in lyrical battles and poetry slams.¹⁹

Catalyzed by the 2013 Little India “riot” and state arrests and deportations of migrant workers, Shivaji Das, a TWC2 volunteer, and Alvin Pang, co-founder of The Literary Centre, helped to build wider support for migrant workers by expanding the contests held at the Dibashram Centre into the first Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in 2014. They and other people who participated in the organizing committee assembled a team of judges, engaged other volunteers, made arrangements

with translators for entries written in Bengali and Tamil, and helped with logistics and printing.²⁰ The organizing committee also secured venue support from the National Library Board, and raised prize money. In the first year of the poetry competition, there were 27 Bengali entrants and one Tamil entrant, each of whom submitted three poems.²¹ Eight of the poems were shortlisted, and the judges selected first-, second-, and third-prize winners.²² After the awards ceremony, the work of the shortlisted poets and translations into English were published on a web site, *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*.

The success of the 2014 competition led organizers to expand it to include a much wider range of migrant workers in the following year. The organizers of the 2015 competition invited submissions from migrant women doing domestic work, which entailed opening the competition to entries in several more languages. TWC2, *Banglar Kantha*, and the Literary Centre continued to play an important role in the contest, but the organizers also enlisted new NGO partners. The most important of these was Aidha, an NGO that collaborates with the United World College South East Asia to provide finance and entrepreneurship courses as well as leadership development for domestic workers in Singapore. Aidha grew out of the financial literacy program for domestic workers developed in 2001 by the writer Audrey Chin and the wealthy social activist Melissa Kwee. Initially the program was run by UN Women Singapore, and when support from UN Women ended in 2005, members who wanted to continue the project formed Aidha in 2006.²³ Since then, Aidha has expanded rapidly, with 1,076 classes taught by 195 mentors to 1,143 students in FY2017.²⁴

With support from Aidha, the 2015 competition reached a large number of migrant domestic workers.²⁵ Aidha sent out calls for submissions on Twitter and Facebook, and undoubtedly, the

school was crucial in building trust and legitimacy for the contest with the domestic workers who submitted poems. There were 74 entrants, including 25 Filipino, 23 Indonesian, and five Chinese workers, and over 60% of the participants were women.²⁶ Several submissions by Aidha students emerged as finalists, and Sharasyamsi Yahya, a poet from Indonesia, won the third prize overall during the awards ceremony in December.²⁷

Collectivity and Advocacy in Migrant Worker Poems

Balista and Kaur, whose poems were featured in *Poets on Permits*, were both students at Aidha, and both were among the finalists in the 2015 competition. Aidha's participation was crucial to the gendered expansion of the migrant worker poetry competition, and it certainly played a part in creating a pattern or genre in the poems submitted by domestic workers. In contrast to the 2014 poets, who built on their own previous poetic activity and engagements with South Asian poetic traditions, and who came together under the auspices of the newspaper *Banglar Kantha* and the registered society TWC2, the domestic worker poets came together as students in Aidha's financial literacy classes. The poems carried traces of a kind of future orientation and leadership development encouraged by Aidha insofar as its courses have been designed to prepare students to "create sustainable futures for themselves through financial education."²⁸ Several poems centered on the pain of family separation and the resilience necessary to survive in Singapore, which fits into the narrative developed by Aidha of workers leaving their families, struggling in Singapore, taking classes, and then building a financially secure future for themselves after returning to their families. From this common foundation, each poem made specific departures.

In the following year, another Aidha student, Rolinda O. Espanola, tied for third place with her poem "My Story" ("Ang Aking Kwento"), which was exceptional insofar as it addressed the asymmetrical power relationship that renders workers vulnerable before their employers.²⁹ Espanola, in this poem, was not writing primarily about herself and her own employer, whom she described in her competition bio as very kind. Rather, she took on a persona and imagined the experience of Thelma Oyasan Gawidan, a domestic worker from the Philippines whose story of being restricted to meals of slices of bread and instant noodles had inspired Espanola.³⁰ By writing from a position somewhat different from her own, Espanola in her poem voices a critique of the common structural conditions faced by migrant domestic workers in Singapore.



Espanola reading at the 2015 competition. Photo by Jeddah.

In "My Story" the word *fearless* appears as a refrain, but much less frequently at the beginning of the poem. Instead, lines that describe the challenges faced by the worker predominate:

I spent three and a half hour to set
foot on Singapore

I sealed my lips with a smile, my
composure is now ready

My employer fetched me, drafted
her own law

Fearless, I shall not quit

No phone, no daily dip nor even
brushing is allowed

Never talk to anyone

even to fellow Filipinos

Sadly, noodles and bread. the only
meal I eat

Fearless, I will be able to do all
this

The worker, resolute, arrives in Singapore, but she is shaken when her employer imposes additional rules on her shortly after she arrives. It appears that the worker observes these rules after she begins to work, but then she learns of another condition: that she would only be fed noodles and bread. At this stage in the poem, the word *fearless* interrupts the narration of experiences forced upon the worker as she migrates to Singapore.

Much of the poem illustrates a tension between, on the one hand, forces that would isolate the worker, and on the other hand, a position of strength that allows her to grow ever more fearless as she breaks her isolation. If the worker is indeed isolated, she does have much to fear because her employer's law would be absolute. Her employers attempt to isolate

her when they forbid her from using her phone and talking to anyone, even "fellow Filipinos." The worker is further isolated because she is liable for a debt: "To my creditor in the Philippines, I will pay you back in promised time." Presumably, the worker took a major risk and went into debt in order to get a contract allowing her to travel to and work in Singapore. As an isolated worker, she is especially vulnerable to her employers because of the threat that she could be without income and personally liable for a huge debt if they terminate her contract.

Nevertheless, the worker overcomes her fear by embracing collectives that are not explicitly mentioned in the poem itself. The poem as a whole illustrates a transition for the worker, from a fearful position to one in which her fearless voice resounds without interruption:

One day, I draw all the remaining
strength

Fearless, I will flee

Fearless, I will seek the assistance
of law

Fearless, I will envision a good
future

Fearless, my story will never end
here.

The strength of the fearless voice is drawn from forces that extend far beyond the worker herself. Because of the existence of NGOs in Singapore such as TWC2, AWARE, and the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) that provide support to work permit holders who flee their employers, some workers who have been abused have

been able to find shelter and meals after fleeing. Furthermore, the NGOs have provided a support network of people with knowledge of the legal and bureaucratic system, the willingness to make statements for journalists, and the ability to assist workers in dealing with police, courts, and bureaucrats. Without NGO support for workers' physical needs and the possibility of public support and legal redress, it would be difficult to imagine how fleeing or seeking legal help could lead to the closing lines in which the worker envisions a good future despite the conditions imposed by her debt, her contract, her employer, and the work permit.

Espanola implicitly articulates support for the NGOs that have been crucial in creating the conditions for the poet's confident assertions at the end of the poem. The poem moves beyond the Aidha narrative by addressing the state, the worker's relationship to her employer, and the economic conditions represented by the contract. However, the poem also seems to endorse state power insofar as it condemns abuses that the state itself condemns. The employers of Thelma Oyasan Gawidan, on September 15, 2017, were sentenced to ten months in jail, and Singapore's Ministry of Manpower issued a statement that it "has zero tolerance for abuse and mistreatment of workers."³¹ The state thus sets norms for employers and provides some protections for domestic workers. Likewise, NGOs must follow very strict rules governing their activities. While Espanola's poem shows the influence of NGOs that have advocated for migrant workers, it also perhaps shares the limitations of the NGOs, which face repression from the state under the terms of the Societies Act and the Internal Security Act.

Poetry and Potential for International Solidarity

Shivaji Das, one of the primary organizers of

the poetry competitions, after the 2017 awards ceremony described his aim as giving migrant workers a "voice and a platform." Yet this voice and platform must be situated within the constraints specific to Singapore. Migrant poetry in Singapore is expressive of a politicized and shared migrant worker aesthetic, an aesthetic drawn from traditions developed in sending countries but engaged with the conditions of workers on the ground. The departure point is capitalism's definition of the migrant worker and its drive to abstract labor from the concrete experience of workers. As Das himself put it, by listening to the poems of the migrant workers "you tend to appreciate them more as a complete human being, instead of being just an economic machine."³² For Monir, this has meant articulating a worker subjectivity that loves, dreams, and creates. For Espanola, this has meant articulating a fearless worker subjectivity willing to act in response to abuse.

The competitions in this regard have established a forum, however limited, for critical speech. By operating in an aesthetic register, the poetry contests are able to circumvent the restrictions on more explicitly political organizing in Singapore. In Singaporean terms, they can remain low-key because the migrant workers are brought together *as poets*; under the rubric of the competition, they have a carefully-calibrated critical voice. Kaur and Monir have shown that worker poets are able to criticize human rights abuses perpetrated or abetted by the states of their sending countries as long as the state of Singapore is not implicated. Balista and Monir have expressed solidarity across national lines. Espanola has demonstrated that worker poets can criticize employers in terms of mechanisms already established within the Singaporean state. More generally, Das has noted that "[audiences for the competitions] have seen poems about [the poets'] work situations, such as not being treated nicely, not being paid or around their living conditions," all of which are

regulated to some degree by the state of Singapore.³³

However, the critical speech and activity in the poetry competitions occur within strict limits that the competitions thus far have observed. Although some poems point to the urgency of mobilizing workers insofar as they are victims of abuse, Espanola's poem tellingly is careful to apparently limit this mobilization to an appeal through state mechanisms, an appeal that might be facilitated by registered societies. Pressure on the state of Singapore itself is not overtly voiced, and testing this limit could be perilous. Moreover, restrictions imposed by Singapore are designed to isolate workers there from workers in other countries. The Societies Act separates organizations such as TWC2, AWARE, and HOME, which advocate for migrant workers in Singapore, from international alliances of migrant worker organizations through a provision that allows the Registrar of Societies to order the dissolution of a political association if it is affiliated with or connected to an organization outside of Singapore.³⁴ The provision thus isolates advocacy groups in Singapore from international migrant worker networks such as Migrante International in the Philippines, Tenaganita in Malaysia, and the International Migrants Alliance (IMA) based in Hong Kong.³⁵

The US Embassy perhaps provides a shield for the competition, but it has attempted to shape interpretations of the poems in a way that obscures the role of the US in creating the conditions of forced migration.³⁶ After Stephanie Syptak-Ramnath became the Charge d'Affaires ad interim in early 2017, the embassy's support for the competition became much more visible.³⁷ The embassy's website published articles on its "News & Events" link, and Syptak-Ramnath made the following statement shortly after the competition in December:

We are honored to lend our support to the 2017

Migrant Worker Poetry Competition. This event is a wonderful platform for creative expression by the men and women who work hard each day to help build and maintain the Singapore success story. With International Human Rights Day upon us, this is an especially good time to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that all people have the opportunity to make their voices heard. The Migrant Worker Poetry Competition does exactly that.³⁸

Syptak-Ramnath's statement mirrors Das's, published just a few days before, in its endorsement of creativity and hearing the voices of workers. There is even acknowledgement of the role of foreign workers in building Singapore, which harkens back to Monir's poems. However, the term "Singapore success story" seems to frame the city-state within a kind of "model minority" discourse that is prevalent in discussions of Asian Americans.³⁹ Furthermore, the vision of human rights expressed in Monir's 2015 poem is far more capacious than that of the US Embassy. By comparison, Syptak-Ramnath invokes International Human Rights Day in a way that limits it to issues of individual expression. US military intervention, and US military and financial support for regimes that violate the human rights of workers through "counterterrorism," are of course not mentioned on the US Embassy's web site. Nor are they discussed by Syptak-Ramnath.

The threat of repression from the Singapore authorities and the support thus far from the US Embassy creates the potential for dilemmas and fraught political decisions among the poets, organizers, and judges that would sorely test the solidarity that they have built. What would happen if a submitted poem questioned the sustainability of capitalism itself and proposed to replace it? Would judges be willing to test the commitment of the US Embassy to making the voices of workers heard if, for example, a worker wrote about how US military support for the Duterte regime and its human

rights violations forced someone to migrate? Would the US Embassy withdraw support if a poet criticized US military interventions? And, should military conflict in the South China Sea escalate, would workers from and in different countries be willing to lend solidarity to each other, and would the states of Singapore and the US allow it?⁴⁰

For now, though, there is no evidence that those entering the competitions have directly faced political barriers. Rather, it appears that the workers and the organizers have been operating within a political space that is relatively safe but which, nevertheless, strengthens them. An accomplishment of the competitions has been to create a shared subjectivity unified by certain tenets: that workers can simultaneously be creative artists and writers; the expressive potential of workers should be cultivated; and all audiences, but particularly workers themselves, should be introduced to the poems of workers. The competition has even moved beyond poetry to further develop in a direction towards creatively building international solidarity among the migrant workers. The 2017 competition featured a play, performed by migrant workers from several different countries, in which Balista played the role of a Singaporean who learns of the creative projects of several migrant workers, which in the play included photography, painting, and music. The play emphasizes the creative subjectivity of the migrant workers. However, the process of producing the play—in which migrants from several different countries collaborated over an extended period of time—is significant insofar as it could prefigure the organized activity of workers from different countries collectively reclaiming control over the conditions and fruits of their labor.⁴¹ Furthermore, the play demonstrates the creative potential of the migrant workers themselves, a potential source of collective strength. The migrant worker poetry scene in Singapore has developed great potential for building international solidarity,

and might one day serve as a vehicle to overcome the isolation of migrant workers in Singapore from migrant workers elsewhere, especially if migrants engage in campaigns that demand change in their home rather than their host country.

Scholars outside of Singapore might play a role in the construction of international solidarity among migrant workers through comparative research on the development of migrant worker poetry scenes. Soon after the inaugural competition in Singapore, a similar one was held in Kuala Lumpur, and as is the case in Singapore, the Kuala Lumpur competition has become an annual event. There is significant literary production from migrant workers in Hong Kong, particularly among Indonesians.⁴² The government of Taipei and more recently the state of Taiwan have sponsored literary competitions among migrants, and migrant workers in the People's Republic of China have produced poems and novels with substantial readerships.⁴³ And the Singapore competition itself has become the epicenter for a Global Migrant Festival, which has included a poetry competition in refugee camps in Kenya.

The way in which scholars construct migrant worker literature as an object of study might further facilitate building connections between migrant workers and an international working class. As this article attempts to demonstrate, the poems of migrant workers in Singapore are not isolated, but rather are best understood as parts of much larger collective formations. Some parts of these formations, such as the worker poets themselves, the organizing committee, as well as teams of volunteers, translators, and judges, would touch the poems of many of the migrants. Other parts, such as specific NGOs and literary traditions, have powerful influences on some poems and not on others. In comparing the work of the poets in Singapore with those in other locations and historical moments, differentiating factors

between worker literary formations might involve their class compositions and the class positions of the writers, the degree and kinds of unity that tie the constituents of the formations together, their aesthetic and political decisions based on the constraints and possibilities given by state power, and the literary traditions that have influenced their literary production.

For Monir, proletarian literary traditions seemed to be particularly important. However, in contrast to the figures he cited, his own relationship to proletarian literary traditions could not clearly be tied to a national working-class party, a major feature of the collective formations that Nazrul and Bhattacharya participated in.⁴⁴ One reason for this is the political and legal environment in Singapore. Another reason is his position as a migrant. In contrast to Nazrul and Bhattacharya, for whom national liberation was at the forefront as they addressed their compatriots, for Monir, participation in the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition has highlighted the need for working-class solidarity across national and linguistic lines. Such working-class solidarity might strengthen worker organizing in the home country by bringing international attention to the human rights violations perpetrated by the state of Bangladesh and abusive employers.

Espanola's poem, on the other hand, is not clearly tied to proletarian literary traditions, and so the work of scholars could be to interpret the poem in a comparative framework

that brings it into conversation with the international working class. Such interpretive work would require imagination from scholars. Because of the exceptional vulnerability of migrant workers in locations such as Singapore, there are limits to their ability to speak. It would be an interpretive mistake, though, to believe that the imaginations of workers observe identical limits. It will be worthwhile to recall the closing lines of Espanola's poem: "Fearless, I will seek the assistance of law / Fearless, I will envision a good future / Fearless, my story will never end here." It is easy to interpret these lines within narratives propagated within Singapore: the worker would appeal to the legal regime of Singapore, which would override the regime of her immediate employer, and after the expiration of her contract she would return to her family with capital and entrepreneurial skills. However, the law in the poem is not explicitly identified with Singapore, and the future is not necessarily a capitalist future. Perhaps the story that Espanola alludes to is one in which workers unite to create a truly just and sustainable future for themselves and their children.

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Notes

¹ This concept of migrant labor in Singapore is not new. In 1995, Lee Hsien Loong, before he became prime minister, stated that foreign workers could rapidly expand the workforce so that Singaporeans could take advantage of “growth opportunities.” Lee predicted that, while foreign workers would be an unqualified boon for capital, on the other hand, the influx of migrants could limit wage increases for Singaporeans working in the same sectors. However, in a recession, foreign workers could be expelled in order to create an “outflow” to buffer adverse impacts on Singaporean workers. Hui Yang, Peidong Yang, and Shaohua Zhan, “[Immigration, population, and foreign workforce in Singapore: An overview of trends, policies, and issues](#),” *HSSE Online* 6.1 (2017). For a brief overview of the stratification of work permits/passes in Singapore, see “[Work passes and permits](#),” Ministry of Manpower, December 17, 2018.

² Upneet Kaur-Nagpal, “[Poets on Permits - a documentary on migrant workers + poets in Singapore](#),” Uptake Media, December 10, 2016.

³ The approach that I employ in this article draws on two works on working-class literature after the dissolution of the USSR. Sonali Perera’s *No country: Working-class writing in the age of globalization* (2014) conceptualizes working-class writing as a social formation. Perera reworks concepts developed by Raymond Williams, Michael Denning, and Terry Eagleton to describe proletarian writing as “a strategic alliance of workers, writers, readers, and political activists who came together in formal and informal settings” (78). By viewing proletarian literature outside of the usual bounds of the 1920s and 1930s and the parties of the USSR, Great Britain, and the US, Perera is able to draw insights about a working-class literary tradition that includes the Dabindu collective, which consists of activists and garment factory workers who have migrated to free trade zones in Sri Lanka. The other work, Neferti Tadiar’s *Things fall away* (2009), attempts to identify features of shared subjectivities in workers’ and revolutionary literature in the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora. In particular, I draw inspiration from Tadiar’s attention to the creative activities of workers that point to post-capitalist social relations.

⁴ His bio for the 2015 competition states that he was 28 at the time. “[Shortlisted poets and their work - 2015](#),” *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*, n.d.. The translations for the 2015 competition from Bengali to English were made by Gopika Jadeja and Debobrata Basu, with input from Souradip Bhattacharya. “[Results 2015](#),” *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*, n.d..

⁵ “Shortlisted poets and their work - 2015.”

⁶ I am reproducing exactly the translated poems that were published on the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition web site.

⁷ I have had difficulty finding ethnographic research on affect among Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore, although articulations of guilt are quite common in the poems. See, for instance, Zakir Hossain Khokan’s explanation for the poems he submitted to the first competition in “[Dear Abbu](#),” *MyVoice@Home*. For affective dimensions of Bangladeshi migration in other locations, see Natacha Stevanovich, *Remittances and Moral Economies of Bangladeshi New York Immigrants in Light of the Economic Crisis* (Diss. Columbia University, 2018), and Francesco Della Puppa, “Ambivalences of the emotional logics of migration and family reunification emotions, experiences and aspirations of Bangladeshi husbands and wives in

Italy," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, November 2016. On a neoliberal state's involvement in creating the affective conditions of migration, see Robyn Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World*, 2010. Recall also that Balista addressed her poem to the children of foreign domestic workers, and her request for them to remember that their parents feel sad and are suffering perhaps arises from guilt that parents feel when they leave their children.

⁸ Shromik Monir, "[You are my poetry](#)," *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*, n.d.. Translations from Bengali to English for the 2016 competition were made by Anindita Dasgupta and Shivaji Das.

⁹ "[Jibanananda Das: Defining 20th century Bengali poetry](#)," *The Daily Star*, November 11, 2013.

¹⁰ "[2014 winners](#)," *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*, n.d.. Gopika Jadeja with Debabrata Basu, Shivaji Das, and Souradip Bhattacharya translated from Bengali to English.

¹¹ "Shortlisted poets and their work - 2015."

¹² "[Societies Act](#)," *Singapore Statutes Online*, February 28, 2014.

¹³ Jack Tsen-Ta Lee, "[The past, present and future of the Internal Security Act](#)," *Singapore Public Law*, June 5, 2012. Despite the repressive character of these acts, Singapore's record of human rights abuses against political activists is not nearly as horrific as that of several of the sending states for migrant workers such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, each of which have committed large-scale political killings, massacres, forced disappearances, and other forms of militarized political repression.

¹⁴ Lee

¹⁵ Nicola Piper, "[Country Study: Singapore](#)," *Migrant Labor in Southeast Asia*. n.d..

¹⁶ Zuraidah Ibrahim, "Who's looking out for maids here?" *Straits Times*, July 27, 2002.

¹⁷ Although AWARE has focused mostly on local Singaporean women and TWC2 on migrant women, AWARE has continued to provide some support to TWC2's campaigns. However, the two organizations have strategically separated as TWC2 faces greater threat of political repression. According to Lenore Lyons, "the establishment of TWC2 was a means to test the OB markers without jeopardizing AWARE." Lenore Lyons, "[Dignity overdue: Women's rights activism in support of foreign domestic workers in Singapore](#)," *University of Wollongong Research Online*, 2007.

¹⁸ "[Who eats with the Cuff Road Project and why?](#)" TWC2, Feb 16, 2013. Data collected by TWC2 for a four-week period in 2012 shows that a large majority of the recipients of meals from the Cuff Road Project were Bangladeshi men who had filed injury claims. Between September 2015 and February 2016, 1,298 men benefitted from the meals. "[The Cuff Road Project: How many men? How many meals?](#)" TWC2, June 2, 2016.

¹⁹ Sabrina Toppa, "Migrant poets society," *Dhaka Tribune*, November 26, 2014.

²⁰ Zakir Hussain Khokon, shortly after winning the 2014 competition, alludes to hostility that he perceived after the Little India incident: "After the riot, many Singaporeans think differently about us. We want to show that workers are not just go to work and go back to sleep. We also have creativity. We not only sweat, but we also make plays, short stories, poems." Hong Xinyi, "[Engaging migrant workers through art and adventure](#)," *AP Migration*, originally published in *Channel News Asia*, December 4, 2014. Subsequently, many commentators have framed the discussion of migrant worker poems as a response to the riot.

See, for example, Richard Angus Whitehead's "["this migrant soul enriches this earth': Encounters with Migrant Bengali Poetry in Singapore](#)," June 13, 2016, and Md Sharif's poem "Little India Riot: Velu and a History," which is reprinted in Whitehead's text.

²¹ "Perspectives: Shivaji Das, committee member of migrant worker poetry competition," [#WhyBeTowkayTan](#), February 1, 2016.

²² "[2014 winners](#)," *Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*, n.d..

²³ Amelia Tan, "[Maids get help to break out of poverty](#)," *Straits Times*, September 20, 2014.

²⁴ aidha, [Annual Report 2017-2018](#), 2018.

²⁵ Shivaji Das, one of the main organizers of the competitions, stated that outreach for 2015 was routed through the following organizations: HOME and Healthserve for Chinese workers, TWC2 and Indonesia Family Network for Indonesians, Aidha and the Philippine Embassy for Filipinos, and Banglar Kantha for Bangladeshis. Das also credited the infrastructure of social media, and he named Facebook and Weibo in particular. "[Singapore's migrant worker poets](#)," *The Online Citizen*, December 2, 2015.

²⁶ "[Migrant Poetry Competition 2015: Bringing the conversation ahead by celebration and critique](#)," *Change Thinker*, December 17, 2015.

²⁷ "Shortlisted poets and their work - 2015."

²⁸ aidha.

²⁹ "Shortlisted poets and their work - 2016." Translations from Tagalog and Bisaya to English were made by Shane Carreon and Shivaji Das.

³⁰ Olivia Ho, "[Maids who write prose and poetry](#)," *Straits Times*, November 21, 2017.

³¹ Pedja Stanisc, Fathin Ungku, and Aradhana Aravindan, "[Singapore jails couple for starving Filipino domestic helper](#)," *Reuters*, March 27, 2017, and Selina Lum, "Couple's jail terms raised to 10 months for starving maid who lost 20kg," *Straits Times*, September 15, 2017. Journalists' reports of testimony during the trial vindicate most of the details included in Espanola's poem, but the situation Gawidan faced was even more horrific. Her employers were initially sentenced to shorter jail terms and a fine, but the prosecution appealed to increase the jail terms to 10 months. Amir Hussain, "[Maid who was underfed by her employers testifies that they watched her every move](#)," *Straits Times*, Dec 15, 2015.

³² Beh Lih Yi, "[OFW takes 2nd place in literary contest for migrant workers in Singapore](#)," *GMA News Online*, December 4, 2017.

³³ Yi.

³⁴ "[Societies Act](#)," *Singapore Statutes Online*, February 28, 2014.

³⁵ See Su-Mei Ooi, "[Rethinking Linkage to the West: What Authoritarian Stability in Singapore Tells Us](#)," 2016, for an historical account of ways in which the People's Action Party has actively isolated its opposition from transnational support. On a recent application of the Societies Act, see Roderick Chia, "[Democracy and Civil Society in Singapore: The Politics of Control](#)," 2012. The Registrar of Societies required the organization Singaporeans for Democracy to insert articles into its constitution that prohibited several forms of association and financial relationships with foreign persons, organizations, or parties.

³⁶ An expansion of the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, the Global Migrant Festival, featured a web site which initially displayed over its main page the logo of the Embassy of the United States in Singapore. Visible behind the logo was the main page, which could be viewed without the logo by clicking on a box to close the logo image. It was as if the logo was a shield

that acted as a barrier between a reader (who could be an official of the Singaporean state) and the web page itself. That page is no longer the main page for the festival, but the main page from the day when I viewed it, February 3, 2019, is visible through [this link](#).

³⁷ First prize was SGD 500 in 2017, about USD 375, with second and third-place winners receiving smaller prizes. Stephanie DeLuca, “[A woman wins Singapore’s Migrant Worker Poetry Competition for the first time](#),” *Melville House*.

³⁸ “[Migrant Worker Poetry Competition 2017](#),” U.S. Embassy in Singapore, December 3, 2017.

³⁹ Of course, the “success story” could also be a variation of the “economic miracle” discourse about Singapore. See Ooi.

⁴⁰ A series of articles in this journal, easily found by [searching for the keyword “Spratly,”](#) provides analysis and historical context for the conflict around the South China Sea.

⁴¹ Mayo Martin, “[After poems, Singapore’s migrant workers try their hand at doing a play](#),” *Channel NewsAsia*, December 2, 2017.

⁴² See Pratiwi Retnaningdyah, “[‘We have voices, too’: Identity, community empowerment and Indonesian domestic workers’ digital literary practices](#),” for the emergence of *Sastri BMI* (Indonesian migrant workers’ literature). See Kilim Park, *Kisah Sukses: Stories of Indonesian Migrant Worker Returnees Living in Greater Jakarta* (Diss. University of British Columbia, 2018), for a discussion of creative work among Indonesian migrant workers both while they were abroad and after they returned to Indonesia. See Najib Kailani, “Forum Lingkar Pena and Muslim youth in contemporary Indonesia,” *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46.1 (2012): 33-53, on Forum Lingkar Pena, an organization that supports a literary scene that spans Indonesia and the Indonesian labor diaspora.

⁴³ On the development of *dagong* literature in China see Wanning Sun, “Poetry of labour and (dis)articulation of class: China’s worker-poets and the cultural politics of boundaries,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 21.78 (2012): 993-1010, “[Workers and peasants as historical subjects: The formation of media cultures in China](#),” n.d, and “‘Northern Girls’: Cultural politics of agency and South China’s migrant literature,” *Asian Studies Review* 38.2 (2014): 168-185. On a recently-published anthology of poems translated into English, see Megan Walsh, “[China’s migrant worker poetry](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*.

⁴⁴ Contrast also the situations of proletarian writing elsewhere and at different times in Asia. See, for instance, Heather Bowen-Struyk and Norma Field, “[‘Art as a Weapon’: Japanese Proletarian Literature on the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, and Ruth Barraclough, “Tales of Seduction: Factory Girls in Korean Proletarian Literature,” *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 14.2 (Fall 2006): 345-371. Finally, for a wonderful account of proletarian and anarchist influences on literature, see Sunyoung Park’s *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (2015).