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Serial migration, multiple belongings and orientations toward the future: The perspective of middle-class migrants in Singapore

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Abstract

The growing phenomenon of serial migrants – people who have moved at least three times and profess belongings to more than two places – challenges the dialogic relationship imagined in studies of transnationalism. This is particularly true in the case of the mobile middle class, which has attracted less attention than the multiple migrations of low-waged labour migrants and the global professional elite. Drawing on interviews with 35 Australian and Indonesian migrants in Singapore, this article proposes the idea of orientation in order to understand the serial migration biographies of middle-class migrants. Rather than focusing on the propulsion and direction of movement, the notion of orientation suspends a migrant between reflection, action and imagination as they forge provisional pathways that upend or cleave to more conventional social trajectories. Developing this concept helps us to understand how migrants with middling resources navigate post-national socio-political formations contoured by race, gender, and class.

Keywords

mobile middle class, multiple migrations, orientation, serial migration, transnationalism

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For growing numbers of people worldwide, the prospect of migrating to another country is increasingly unexceptional, sparking questions about the degree of congruence between the bounded nature of nation-state formations and the development of transnational social subjectivities. Migration scholars have affirmed that migrants do not straightforwardly assimilate into the places that they have moved to, but continuously engage politically, economically, and socially with the place where they were born. Over the last two decades, research on migration has increasingly adopted transnationalism as a lens, spawning studies as varied as the act of mothering through the mediation of polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2012), the politics of ethno-national diasporas (Sheffer, 2003), and transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1999). However, research on transnationalism still generally takes for granted the assumption that migrants inhabit a dialogic space between two countries representing a single 'origin' and a single 'destination' (Paul and Yeoh, 2020). Less attention has been paid to more itinerant migration patterns, including those adopted by people whom Susan Ossman calls 'serial migrants' – migrants who have moved more than twice, call more than two countries home, and transcend the dialogic relationship imagined in studies of transnationalism (Ossman, 2013). This is particularly true in addition to research that focuses on what Conradson and Latham (2005) characterise as 'middling migrants', a term which refers to those who occupy the space between transnational elites and low-waged labour migrants.

This article focuses on serial migrants from Australia and Indonesia to understand how their inhabitation of multiple homelands shapes their mobile subjectivities. We argue that focusing on how migrants occupy the transnational social field between origin and destination alone does not fully encapsulate the experiences of serial migrants. Instead, serial migrants are experts in cultivating a sense of the provisional. They do not necessarily move according to a set of conventional social trajectories built around (intergenerational) upward social mobility, expatriate careers, or desires to exit oppressive or otherwise debilitating social and environmental conditions.

In this light, it may be fruitful to contemplate what we call migratory orientations, a form of competency acquired as part of cosmopolitan repertoires (Hannerz, 1990; Learmount, 2003). Motivated through a search for belonging – being in one place, longing for another (Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002) – an orientation, while connected to movement, does not assume mobility as a given. Rather, an orientation is positional, both spatially and temporally: it indicates the intention of movement relative to one's current position and suspends a migrant between reflection, action, and imagination. Instead of purposeful movement from a set origin towards a specific destination, an orientation implies an inclination towards a general direction. This encompasses entangled senses of directionality, ranging from aspirational planning to a wandering-towards and a drifting-away-from. An orientation, as a competency of provisionality, develops through self-knowledge acquired in the course of serial migration as migrants navigate specific economic, social, and material conditions.

Most of the serial migrants in our study are not cosmopolitan expatriates whose existences are (as often imagined) frictionless, easy, or cushioned by considerable corporate resources. They come from middle-class backgrounds with modest levels of capital at their disposal, and many inhabit bodies that are marked by gender, nationality, and ethnicity in ways that palpably influence their capacity for mobility. As part of a mobile

middling class, these migrants' successive experiences in multiple homelands turn them towards a broader sense of what they desire and do not desire: they have had to chart their own pathways against more conventional life-course scripts as they embark on multiple border crossings. We draw on their accounts of their own migration biographies to show how these migrants are constantly gripped by the question of how to transform and articulate their desires in the fashioning of migration projects (Collins, 2018). Thinking through the multiple meanings of an orientation allows us to capture and take seriously these mixed feelings of frustration and hope that characterise serial migrants' migration biographies.

The third place: transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and serial migration

Developing out of a recognition that theories of migrant assimilation do not fully capture the experience of migration, transnationalism accounts for how migrants are multiply and simultaneously embedded in interlocking social fields that transcend nation-state boundaries (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). As Faist puts it, transnationalism attends to the 'mode of connectedness that is achieved to the extent that a dialectical relationship between the movers and stayers in the two worlds is achieved in one or more arenas of social life: familial, religious, economic, political, cultural, and so forth' (Faist, 2012: 3). Transnationalism pays attention to the simultaneous experience of incorporation into countries of destination and the maintenance of sustained connections with actors, networks and institutions in countries of origin (Vertovec, 2003). By doing so, transnationalism challenges the limits of the nation-state and give rise to new social formations. Migration scholars attuned to this approach are sensitive to how migrants are concurrently embedded in 'multiple sites and layers of the transnational social fields in which they live' (Levitt, 2011: 10).

Researchers have recognised that there are particular elements of transnationalism that would benefit from further development. Faist, for example, points out that even as we critique ethnicity or nationality as a category, we continue to organise the empirical and conceptual parameters of our research projects around migrants' countries of origin. This assumes that nationality is the key nexus of identity through which migrants understand themselves, as opposed to alternative identifications, such as religion (Faist, 2012). Methodological grounding nationality also leads to another taken-for-granted assumption of transnationalism: that migrants' social worlds generally (or primarily) encompass only two countries, origin and destination.

Ossman suggests a different way of considering migration. Like Faist, she argues that centring ethnicity or culture obscures the actual salience of these factors in the experience of migration. Instead, she proposes that examining a 'shared pattern of settlement' (Ossman, 2013: 2) – in this case, the 'successive dwelling' of serial migrants – more productively reveals the contours of newly emerging forms of social organisation. Ossman's work focuses on how repeated border crossings 'generate the serial migrant as a specific kind of subject' that goes beyond the 'double bind of immigration' (Ossman, 2013: 4). By moving a third time, out of the 'betwixt and between' and adding a third country to a collection of homelands, the serial migrant 'introduces a very concrete third

space [which] can lead to a distancing from the symbolic and practical confrontation of host to home' (Ossman, 2004: 113). Serial migrants construe their life through an open-ended lens that confounds the additive logic of hyphenation. This, Ossman argues, propels serial migrants to deliberately reach for borders in order to signpost their lives, rather than viewing their journeys as the consequence of postmodern fluidity. Serial migrants are motivated by a cosmopolitan stance, 'a willingness to engage with the Other' (Hannerz, 1990: 239).

While not necessarily following Ossman's approach, scholarship that acknowledges the importance of the multiple migrations has grown. For example, researchers have studied circulating expatriates who move as experts tied to transnational corporate institutions (Koser and Salt, 1997) and 'self-initiated expatriates' as modern-day corporate globetrotters (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). Globalisation has opened the possibility of serial global mobility to an increasingly well-educated middle class, including transnational knowledge workers who migrate 'in a more autonomous way, outside rigid organisational (state, corporate and other) pathways' (Colic-Peisker, 2010: 468).

Moving more specifically to Asia, an interesting new line of scholarship has sprung up around serial migrants who appear at first to be diametrically opposed to the mobile expatriate: migrant domestic workers. Paul's research on stepwise international labour migration looks at how migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia 'accumulate migration-related capital of various kinds while working overseas, enabling them to gain access to destinations that had been out of their reach and/or outside their awareness set when they originally left their home country' (Paul, 2017: 10). Paul shows how labour migrants who have constrained access to capital and information negotiate their way from country to country. Like using a series of stepping stones, they leverage their experiences to reach a dreamed-of destination, which is often located in places such as Canada and the US. Their journeys thus consist of sustained stays in multiple countries, rendering them serial migrants. In response to Paul's findings, Parreñas et al. (2018) argue that migrant domestic workers do often migrate in a serial fashion, but not necessarily in a linear and progressivist way. Hostile contexts of reception and conditions of neoliberalism force these low-waged labour migrants to move through lower-tier, easily accessible migration destinations in an itinerant fashion.

For Ossman, however, what distinguishes the serial migrant from mobile subjects such as the expatriate, the transnational knowledge worker and the enterprising domestic worker is the fact that serial migrants do not take the measure of their lives in accordance to work. While the experiences and conditions of mobility that characterise economically motivated migration patterns may appear very varied, such movement is still inescapably contoured by labour. In contrast, serial migrants 'do not have a stable institutional or national reference point that makes sense of their displacements. Serial migrants can rarely find direction and stability by reference to a stable social or professional medium in which they can progressively design their lives' (Ossman, 2004: 112). Serial migrants are set apart by their very struggle to define a continuous and contiguous self, unbuttressed by the forward velocity of archetypal scripts often used to understand migrant lives. Ossman deliberately veers away from centring the effect of economic factors in her work while acknowledging their power. In fact, the term 'serial' is ironic, because the experience of the serial migrant is much more given to what Rodrigues (2015) calls

'parallelism': instead of the linear sequencing implied in seriality, the story of the serial migrant is more episodic, rooted in simultaneity, ambivalence, and provisionality.

In following Ossman's lead and looking beyond labour as the main explanatory force of migratory lives, we use the notion of orientation (what Ossman has otherwise characterised as bordering or signposting) to unpack the dynamics of how serial migrants situate themselves in relation to their past and future homelands. The serial migrant is necessarily a self-making subject, deliberately choosing to uproot and resettle themselves repeatedly in pursuit of a complex set of desires and dreams. Their goals, as reflected in their citizenship choices, emotional locations, and decisions around education and work, ultimately coalesce around the desire to keep their options for continued mobility open, to (possibly) go on and on and on. When mobility – the option to choose, rather than the act of making a choice – itself is prized, this results in a way of situating oneself that is not quite akin to the definitive act of mapping or signposting, but to the more general approach of an orientation. This is not to say that serial migrants lack self-knowledge or are unclear about what they want and how they intend to pursue these goals. On the contrary, serial migration 'forces people to become highly articulate about ideas associated with identity, attachment and self in relation to others and place' (Roberts, 2019: 189). Much like a field of sunflowers, serial migrants are able to distinguish where the warmth of the sun lies and to gradually orientate themselves towards it in order to flourish. Nor is it to say that serial migrants speed across the world, frictionless and boundless. Serial migrants orientate themselves to a specific landscape under conditions that are not always of their choosing: what enters the realm of possibilities ahead of them, and how and when these can be grasped, is dependent on their own set of resources and ability to negotiate their movement forward.

The migration biographies utilised in this article are drawn from a wider research project that undertakes a comparative understanding of diasporic groups from China, Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia. Researchers in Singapore conducted 72 interviews in total with self-identified Chinese, Indonesian, and Australian migrants, as well as Singaporean returnees from these countries. The migrant groups were selected with the intention of drawing comparative analyses between them based on their differentiated pathways into incorporation and belonging within Singapore society.

We spoke mainly to middle-class professionals who possessed significant cultural and social capital, and who were reasonably mobile; our respondents worked in finance, banking, research, engineering, academia, law, teaching and business. A few respondents were graduate students or homemakers. Through qualitative in-depth interviews that ranged between 1 and 3 hours in length, we elicited respondents' migration biographies through questions which focused on reasons for migration, conceptions of home, and plans for the future.

Some of these interviews reflected experiences of serial migration, where migrants had lived for extended periods of time in several different countries before reaching Singapore. Of these serial migrants' stories, we delve more deeply into three especially rich accounts: the stories of Indra, a 40-year-old Minang Indonesian lawyer; Margaret, a 35-year-old Caucasian Australian woman who works in the tech sector; and Arjun, a 49-year-old Indian Indonesian engineer. These stories offer the biographies of migrants who possess considerable human capital as highly sought-after professionals, but who

also embody different intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, and nationality. The confluence of these social characteristics necessarily shapes migrants' ability to traverse pathways forward, influencing their capacity to orientate themselves towards the future. However, their stories also reveal how an assumed desire for linear social progression – either in family life or in career trajectory – may be superseded, or shaped, by the (sometimes) contradictory desire to preserve one's mobility options. In the next section, we recount Indra's, Margaret's, and Arjun' stories before discussing the key points of their migration biographies and how they relate to serial migrants' cosmopolitan self-making practices in the face of post-national formations.

Indra: 'Mothers' prayers go straight up there'

Indra, a 40-year-old Minang Indonesian woman, is a rapid-fire talker. She opened our conversation by saying that, while other children wished to be teachers or doctors, she grew up wanting to be a global citizen. Indra spent her childhood moving around Indonesia in the wake of her father's civil servant job. These frequent moves planted a seed of restlessness in Indra. 'I was a little girl, and my mind is just easy,' she said. 'Moving from one city to another . . . maybe I can move from one country to another. . . . People, they see globalisation, but I see movement of people. I'm like, "why can't that be me?"'

Indra studied French, Italian, and Spanish in high school, reckoning that this knowledge would be necessary for a longed-for career in an international organisation, like the World Trade Organization or the United Nations (UN). She spoke of her fervent teenage dreams to live in places like New York, Vienna, Paris, and Geneva. As a high school student, she seized the chance to travel abroad, joining English-language immersion programmes to visit countries such as Australia and Singapore. After she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in international relations from an Indonesian university, Indra set her mind on going abroad to pursue her Master's degree. She won a hard-earned scholarship to major in business and trade law in Rotterdam.

Indra lived in the Netherlands from 2002 to 2003 and graduated into an unwelcoming job market contoured by the 2001 September 11 attacks. Unable to find a job in Europe, Indra returned to Indonesia to work as a university lecturer, where she soon grew restive. She moved to Italy to take a three-month course in law, and then to Vienna to take on an unpaid internship with the UN, an experience that Indra loved: 'It was like literally people from all over the world. . . . I was just like, "Yeah, I think this is my environment, my right environment!"'

When her internship ended, Indra set her sights on a UN entry-level scheme in order to further her desire to work and live as a self-proclaimed 'global citizen'. The Junior Professional Officer scheme, aimed at grooming young people below 35 for a career in the UN, requires 2–3 years of international experience. Taking stock of her options, Indra decided to move to Singapore to work in a law firm so that she could meet these requirements. In 2005, Singapore was hungry for foreign talent and offered permanent residency pathways for skilled professionals under the Landed Permanent Residence scheme, so Indra found the move easy; and she imagined that her stint in Singapore would constitute the years of experience she needed to break into the UN. While she worked in

Singapore, Indra continued to pursue her dreams, applying for a number of what she called 'global jobs' to maximise her chances of finding a job outside of Asia. 'I was super confident. I'm a female from [. . .] an under-represented country, you know, my chances would be high!' she laughed. 'But in this world, never assume!'

In 2010, Indra decided that she needed a full law qualification in order to further her chances of mobility, and moved to the UK to complete her legal education. She returned to Singapore in 2011 to complete her traineeship after a brief stint in Jakarta, and has remained in Singapore since. Indra has tried, on and off, to leave Singapore: she repeatedly applied for jobs outside of Asia, but has been continually disappointed. Aside from graduating into the 2011 economic crisis, Indra's job search is stymied by recruiters who imagine their ideal candidates to be Caucasian:

> When I see a job description I think, "Oh, that fits me." But I was not even shortlisted. . . . Now I think when I see "English-qualified lawyer", what they mean is an *angmoh* [Caucasian/white]. That's how I see it. This is why discrimination is everywhere.

For now, Indra intends to remain in Asia, to take competitive advantage of her position as an Indonesia expert; her dreams of mobility outside of Asia depend on securing a secondment abroad with her current firm. Indra reflected that she is now 'more realistic' than she was when she was younger. 'I have experienced how protectionist these countries have become. When they say "globalisation" it is only when it benefits them. But when it disadvantages them, this is what they do.' She hugged her arms to her chest to illustrate. 'Let's close our borders.'

While Indra is living abroad – as she had dreamed as a child – her sphere of mobility is curtailed to Asia, specifically Singapore. This is not without its difficulties. In Singapore, Indra is often mistaken for a migrant domestic worker. As Indra put it, 'You are Indonesian, female, you are here alone and working, therefore you must be a maid.' She recounted an instance when she was sharing a lift with a stranger who remarked to her: 'Your employer is so kind, to let you out!' Indra performed her terse response: 'No, I'm a lawyer.' Then she imitated the blank, uncomprehending expression of the question-asker and robotically repeated the line: '"Your employer is so kind, to let you out!" Okay, whatever.'

For Indra, what keeps her in Asia is not only the difficulty she faces in navigating a global job market, but her mother's prayers. Throughout the interview, Indra returned over and over again to her fraught relationship with her parents and her struggles with what she felt were the patriarchal expectations of the Minang culture. Indra described her mother as overprotective and traditional, often praying that her daughter would remain close to home, get married, and bear children – constraints that Indra, in her determined pursuit of global citizenship, chafes against. After years of familial conflict, Indra said, 'I think my mom has to a certain extent allowed me to be away [from home]. But the limit is Singapore. I mean, well, I'm Muslim. We believe that mothers' prayers are the strongest. They go straight up there.' She pointed up at the ceiling. Singapore has become an invisible boundary, a sphere circumscribed by her mother's worry and disapproval, as well as her spiritual petitions for Indra to stay close and for her mobility projects to fall apart. 'Even without you,' Indra joked, referring to her mother, 'the world economy is already difficult enough. Then you add another barrier!'

When asked about how she imagines her future to be, Indra is clear about what she wants and does not want. She focuses on preserving her freedom and mobility by being especially careful about what she *is* able to control: her choice of life partner. Indra does not wish to add more ballast to the gravitational force of her mother's prayers. As she said:

> The main qualification that I'm looking for in a husband is somebody who supports me. . . . In looking for a husband, I'm looking for somebody who is a partner. Because my family is more conservative. The guys are heads of the family blah, blah, blah, so you have to follow them. That's not the kind of relationship that I'm looking for [. . .] I would like to marry somebody that has the same faith as me. That makes the population even smaller [laughs]. I guess now the big question is, is there somebody out there?

Indra joked that a husband would come in handy when she is travelling, particularly to places which might be hostile to young female travellers. 'I find when I feel the need of having a husband or a partner, it is when I can't really go to a place by just being alone, travelling alone. . . . A boy needs to carry my bag!' Sobering, she said seriously:

> I think I would love to settle down with somebody I would love to settle down with. It's not about 'I'm of this age, I need to get married because it's time to get married.' No, it's not because of that. If eventually I decide to settle down, it's because I think I have somebody who I can live the rest of my life with.'

Margaret: 'Things would be easier if I had a family'

Margaret, a 35-year-old Australian woman, described her childhood home in rural Perth in strong terms: as 'quite a myopic, quite a homogeneous, very white, somewhat racist place'. Growing up in a 'vehemently religious Catholic school' and living with family members who were 'actively racist', Margaret sought solace in avid reading, which led her to leave her hometown and deliberately diversify her friendship networks in university. In her early 20s, she began a formative romantic relationship with a man whose father was Malaysian Chinese. This relationship introduced Margaret to an alternative cultural value system that she deeply admired:

> I looked at the way that their family treated each other, and their cultural values. . .. They were very respectful and very kind and caring to each other, and I really respected also the way that the sisters and the women were treated. It was very different to the way a lot of Australians treated women.

After graduating from university, Margaret moved to Germany to work for a major multinational corporation. This resulted in the end of her romantic relationship. Germany, however, was also a place she enjoyed living in, as she found that it aligned with the principles she valued: 'It's a very family-oriented, very intellectual culture.' While working in Germany, Margaret travelled frequently. She also found another family in her German boyfriend and his grandfather. Her relationship with her German boyfriend

eventually ended four years after her arrival in Germany. A year after the break-up, Margaret began a long-distance relationship with one of her best friends in Australia, a Sri Lankan man working in a post-doctorate position in Melbourne.

In 2012, after six years of working in Germany, Margaret found herself back in Australia for two reasons: to be geographically close to her mother, who was facing health issues, and to reunite with her boyfriend. Although her mother was in Perth, Margaret could not find a job there and had to work in Melbourne instead. This move back to Melbourne was a step down in terms of both salary and position for Margaret, who noted with visible frustration that: 'Australia is such a bad place for women in the technology industry. It's so misogynistic and it's so difficult to get decent pay. You're a second-class citizen.'

In 2015, Margaret moved from Melbourne to Perth to care for her terminally ill father, who had been diagnosed with a brain tumour. Shortly before her father passed, her relationship with the Sri Lankan boyfriend also ended, and she began a relationship with a Chinese man who was a practising doctor in Melbourne. After her father's death, Margaret bought a one-way ticket to Asia. She found herself at a crossroads in her life: she was trying to decide if she wanted to return to school to pursue medicine, continue her father's wine business, or rejoin the corporate life. As she was making this decision, the multinational software company that Margaret had worked for in Germany contacted her, offering her a job in Singapore. Margaret recalled that deciding between Melbourne and Singapore was one of the toughest decisions she had to make; because her boyfriend was not willing to move, moving to Singapore meant that it was likely to cost her the relationship. Eventually she chose the job and the move to Asia, which resulted in the end of her relationship with her boyfriend; in June 2017, she found herself in Singapore.

Since then, Margaret has been enjoying her job and feels comfortable living in Singapore; her priority is now to establish a solid career in order to prepare to raise a family. Margaret hopes to own a house and attain what she calls 'visa stability' in Singapore; if not in Singapore, then potentially to settle down somewhere in Northern Europe, Germany, Japan, or China – any country that conforms to a value system that she feels aligns with her own. Her outlook is also a cosmopolitan one: as Margaret said, 'I place tremendous value on trying to understand different systems. . . . I love encountering new cultures and digging a little bit into them, reading and talking to people.'

Margaret remarked that she thought that, at 35 years of age, she would have started a family by now; as she said, 'Things would be easier if I had a family.' In pursuit of this dream, she holds on to her Australian citizenship – despite her tumultuous relationship with the country and her family, who continue to live there – so that she can take advantage of its Medicare system, which she has used to undergo fertility preservation and freeze her eggs.

Arjun: 'Whenever I come to Singapore, I feel I'm home'

Arjun, a tall, confident and well-spoken 49-year-old Indian Indonesian man, was born in 1970 in a small village in Indonesia. As part of an ethnic minority in Indonesia, he was accustomed to being set apart: as he said, 'In the whole town, I think we were the only Indian family, so everybody knew us.' Arjun's early interest in microelectronics led him to pursue a university education in microelectronic engineering in Belfast, Ireland in

1990. He picked this particular location because he knew that he wanted to complete his university degree in either the US or the UK, and Belfast offered the most affordable option. On top of this, Arjun was assisted in his move and settlement by a family friend who had moved to Northern Ireland a few years earlier.

After completing his degree in 1994, Arjun moved to Cambridge to pursue a Master's degree that was partly financed by a scholarship. He then worked in Dublin for two years and Belfast for four years. Sometime towards the end of his work term in Belfast, Arjun's father suffered from a minor stroke; in 2000, he moved home for a short period of eight months to spend more time with his family. The return home was difficult for Arjun, who missed the autonomy of living abroad alone; after the eight months were up, he returned to Belfast for another four years to continue his work.

In 2005, Arjun moved to Singapore. While this move was partly motivated by his recognition of his parents' growing frailty and his desire to remain geographically closer to them, he also recognised that Asia was gaining in prominence as a technological hub and was becoming an ideal place to work. Aside from a year spent in Oxford in 2006 for job training, Arjun continued working and living in Singapore until 2007, which is when he married his wife, a Malaysian citizen from Johor. In 2007, Arjun was offered a job in Penang, where he remained for four years with his wife. His wife felt bored and isolated in Penang; in a bid to engineer Arjun's move back to Singapore so that she could be closer to her hometown in Johor, she began sending out job applications on his behalf to Singapore-based companies. In 2011, Arjun and his wife returned to Singapore, and although he separated from his wife in 2016, he has remained in Singapore since.

Arjun tells three different stories in his narration of his migration biography that reveal his sentiments towards what it means to feel 'at home' in a particular place. One, shared early on, is a testament to his belief that the onus to integrate and assimilate into a host society falls on the migrant. He explains that while he was working in the UK, he was invited to a British home for dinner together with an Indian friend. During dinner, his Indian friend chose to eat with his hands rather than the utensils provided. Arjun reflected on his discomfort while witnessing this scene:

> If you insist on doing things the way you do it in your home country . . . then of course naturally you are isolating yourself. . . . When we were eating [at the host's home], he was eating with the hands. . . . I mean, it's good to keep our roots but sometimes you are in somebody's house, so you follow their rule.

Later in the interview, Arjun returns to the imagery of the home. He uses it to make the point that, in Asia and in specific parts of Europe, such as Belfast, he does not have to invest as much effort in order to assimilate, and has never felt like a guest in another person's home. However, he felt that most interactions with Europeans, particularly the English, were 'superficially friendly'. As he said:

> They greet you, they talk to you, but they never invite you to their homes. . . . The European and the American, they're friendly but [they're not like] the friends I have here. If one day I lost my key and called [my friend here in Singapore], he would say, 'Just come over. Just stay over.' He'd have a spare room. He'll say, 'Why do you have to go back? Let's stay over.' Then we'll end up chatting, chatting, chatting . . .

Following this, Arjun noted that it was in Asia that he formed deeper friendships with the people he met.

Finally, Arjun relates another story where a close British friend who had grown 'blind to [his] colour' complained about the influx of Indian migrants into his local community. Arjun retorted with a playful rejoinder that he himself was Indian, to which his friend exclaimed that this had slipped his mind. In Arjun's account of his life in Asia, such frictions and fissures do not emerge in his narrative. Instead, Arjun makes easy definitive statements about how he prefers Southeast Asian food; how he finds the people to be friendlier; how he values the culture in Asia; and how he appreciates the cultural similarity across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. These countries are interchangeably comfortable: they are all places he can slip into unnoticed and call home.

Arjun's possession of economic and human capital means that he could probably make a home for himself anywhere in the world. On top of his Indonesian citizenship, he also holds Permanent Resident status in both Singapore and the UK. However, an inclination towards work and retirement within Asia is clearly present in Arjun's imaginaries of the future. Arjun states that when asked where he is from, he replies with ease that he is from Singapore ('Whenever I come back to Singapore, I feel – ah, I'm home'). At the same time, he also muses that he still feels 'Indonesian . . . Indonesia is a part of me.' Although he was offered Singapore citizenship, he did not take up the offer as he was not certain if he wanted to renounce his Indonesian citizenship: his mother still lives in Indonesia, and his late father left assets in Indonesia that he would like to inherit eventually. He also compared the pace of life in Singapore to Indonesia and Malaysia, and said that if he were to retire, he would pick Indonesia, where he could make the most out of the relatively lower cost of living:

> I can get a big comfortable house with maids for a fraction of the cost [in Singapore] . . . in Malaysia and Indonesia, all uncles and aunties are in kampungs [villages] but they're relaxing. They're not going to go hungry. They're just relaxing and chit-chat all day.

By maintaining both Indonesian citizenship and a Singapore permanent residency, Arjun keeps his options open for retirement as he approaches the end of his career. Subsequent to his divorce, his relationship with his natal family – his mother as well as his sisters – are at the forefront of his mind when he imagines his future. At the same time, remarriage is also a possibility; Arjun notes that this would shift the weight of his plans ('If I marry a local, it would tie me here [to Singapore] forever') but not his gravitation towards Asia and away from Europe. Ultimately, Arjun's experience of serial migration has turned him back towards Southeast Asia as home.

Cosmopolitan orientations: pursuing mobility as an end in itself

These accounts show how continued mobility is a desired end in itself for many serial middling migrants. Professing cosmopolitan values (such as a belief in the value of cultural plurality) while consciously preserving the capacity to migrate is a common theme across these interviews. Arjun, Indra and Margaret are not in a hurry to settle down in a

specific location. Nor have they charted firm timelines for themselves that follow more linear social trajectories of career progression or romantic and family life. Instead of the progressivist logic of milestones and timelines, serial migrants articulate broader desires and values that are important to them and are reflexive about what they wish to leave behind or avoid. Endowed with considerable mobility capital (Moret, 2017) and having freed themselves of immediate caretaking needs, they are able to eschew the pressures of these social pathways and suspend themselves in a more ambivalent provisionality.

Indra's migration narrative shows that her dreams of going abroad precede any specific transnational career pathway. She was open to trying out a range of professional occupations as long as it led her to a job in a major non-profit international institution. For Indra, mobility itself was always the goal. When she graduated from school and began seeking jobs abroad, she plotted her journey with the precision of an arrow: she took on unpaid internships, applied to various courses, and pursued a number of educational qualifications in order to position herself as an ideal candidate for a job that would locate her in one of the world's major cultural and financial hubs. As time passed, however, Indra drew back from any attempt to specifically direct her life according to particular milestones and signposts, recognising the socio-cultural barriers that stood in her place. She spoke of emotions of anger she used to feel when she faced instances of discrimination that curbed any progress in her career, and reflected that time has tempered these reactions. For the past nine years, Indra has been living and working in Singapore, within the geography of her mother's prayers. Yet this apparent settlement and lack of geographical mobility does not reflect an enervation of Indra's desires or intensity of self-knowledge. Instead, over the course of her serial migration to the Netherlands, Italy, Austria, the UK, Indonesia, and Singapore, Indra's grasp of her own orientation has sharpened. As Moret (2017) writes, the decision to stay in a particular place is not a passive one, but itself a result of possessing mobility capital.

Indra's sense of orientation is also reflected in the decisiveness with which she speaks of her future. She dreams of dwelling and travelling with an equal partner. She forcefully rejects the patriarchal model of marriage that she feels is dominant in Minang culture. Instead, she seeks a partner who will help her maintain or even strengthen the potential for open-endedness in her life – someone who will support her in her travels, particularly to places she would not be able to access as a single woman travelling alone. She turns away from the possibility of adding another person to her family who may further circumscribe her mobility with prayerful and stifling love. Yet, despite her desire for a partner, Indra also does not pursue this goal with urgency; she is serene in the face of the pressures she faces from her family to get married and have children.

Margaret has also expressed a desire to start a family on her own terms and in her own time. While Indra's sense of orientation draws from her hard-won rapprochement with her family's expectations, Margaret is actively marshalling her resources in order to assert control over her future. By earning money, freezing her eggs, maintaining her Australian citizenship to gain access to affordable health care, and applying for permanent residency in Singapore, Margaret maximises her chances of a family by stretching the window of time she possesses to accomplish her goal. While she has considerable capital and resources at her disposal, she has yet to leverage this advantage to decisively bring about the life-course stage of children and family that she longs for. In Margaret's

narrative, therefore, mobility – here, conceived as a temporal flexibility that stretches her options for having children even at a later age – is an end in itself, as Margaret orientates herself to create and extend conditions of open-endedness and possibility.

Margaret's orientation is borne out of both situating herself in relation to her future and recovering her past. When asked what she considers home, Margaret smiled and replied: 'Home is where my books are. My library . . . my books come with me everywhere.' Like Ossman's story of a serial migrant who painstakingly transports his collection of vinyl records with him to each successive resettlement (Ossman, 2013), or her research on another serial migrant who crafts elaborate quilts whenever she moves in acts of memory and longing (Ossman, 2019), Margaret's attachment to her books speaks of a celebration of a time where she was empowered to move decisively away from her place of origin through the act of 'avid reading': it enfolds and recuperates a painful history by incorporating past loves anew into her present, revealing how Margaret not only orientates herself towards a particular if amorphous possible future, but also how she imagines herself in relation to her past.

It is also clear that these serial migrants do not move frictionlessly through the world. An orientation, while encompassing a self-fashioning act of reflection and impulse, is still situated within bumpy terrains constituted of a number of socio-cultural barriers. Orientating oneself towards a goal or away from what is unwanted does not mean that one is not stymied by the obstacles that stand in one's way. For Margaret, for example, women are treated as 'second-class citizens' in Australia's tech market. This hostility has driven her to seek fairer work environments elsewhere. Indra's difficulties in securing a job reflect how cosmopolitanism (and its recognition and validation as a valued quality) is not a universal abstract, but grounded in practices and structures that make it easier for those from Western cultures to successfully exhibit its outward features (Abbas, 2000; Hannerz, 1990). Even in Singapore, Indra must contend with charged moments of misrecognition, where, by virtue of being a single Minang Indonesian woman, she is assumed to be a domestic worker by people who cannot imagine her as anything, or anyone, else.

Latent in Arjun's story is the effect of this friction. Even for someone like Arjun – who migrates from country to country with ease, enabled by having highly valued educational credentials and much-sought-after skills as an engineer – his cosmopolitan velocity rubs against his ethnic identity, which brings him up short in moments where he least expects it. Initially, Arjun claims that because he does not quite fit in anywhere, he is comfortable everywhere. However, despite his apparently fluid approach to a life of serial migrations, it is clear that Arjun harbours an orientation – a gravitational pull – towards the cultural familiarity associated with Asia. This is in spite of the large swathes of his life that he has spent living and working in Europe. Stories such as his friend's off-handedly negative comments about Indian invaders into English communities, and the way these remarks send unexpected tremors through his everyday life, contrast with Arjun's effusive stories about how at home he feels in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Despite having his pick of where to settle, his serial migration has oriented him towards locations where he does not have to experience the jolt of being caught short by reminders of his otherness. This does not mean that Arjun has a definitive idea of where he would like to be in the future: he insists on preserving an open-endedness by juggling multiple visa statuses.

However, Arjun has a clear preference for imagining his future in Asia, where his cosmopolitan sensibility meets with less resistance. To orientate oneself goes beyond direction; it is also to choose a landscape that might be easier to traverse because it is less littered with obstacles.

The serial migration of a newly mobile middling class

In following Ossman's work, we consider multiple strands of migrant biographies rather than focus on their stories through the overriding lens of work. In this endeavour, we propose the notion of orientation to signal the provisionality of moving towards cosmopolitan-tinged dreams and desires for mobility in the experiences of serial middling migrants. We note the importance of paying attention to a transnational middling class that is increasingly mobile, and locating these serial migrants in the matrixes of gender and race. As Roberts (2019: 190) writes:

> much of the literature on the skilled migrant experience does not account for the differentiated ways through which skilled migrants are included and excluded in new locations due to their gender, race, age, nationality or ethnicity. These discussions have generally been reserved for the study of unskilled migrants. Their human capital does not automatically remove them [skilled migrants] from experiences of discrimination or exclusion.

This article shows that even for middling migrants, particular embodied identities cannot be easily cast aside, affirming the insight that rather than a singular universal cosmopolitanism inhabited by the globally mobile, there are different kinds and degrees of cosmopolitan possibilities open to people on the move across varying social formations (Breckenridge et al., 2002). While middling migrants are not infinitely resourced, they are also not impoverished; they have to chart their journeys both against and in accordance with particular countervailing forces with varying degrees of freedom. Training our analytical gaze on the process of serial migration is hence a revelatory one that shows how migrants over the life-course build orientation as a form of cosmopolitan competency to engage in multiple migrations.

As the migration biographies in this article reveal, serial migrants' successive experiences in multiple homelands turn them towards particular futures, but do not offer easy scripts as to how to get there. The constant (re)scripting of the journey does not follow familiar templates with specific goals defining journey's end. Instead, serial migrants draw on multiple experiences in different places of sojourn, orientating themselves towards a desire to preserve mobility as an end in itself, to keep open an array of possibilities, to continue to make space for the provisional and the open-ended even as they work through and make sense of their day-to-day lives. For Indra, this lies in the hope of an equal partnership that will refute the gendered expectations that cast her in the mould of an ideal Minang daughter. For Margaret, this is the careful leveraging of resources to make space, and extend time, for a longed-for family, even if this requires continued engagement with a homeland she prefers to disavow. For Arjun, it is the tacit acknowledgement that his future rests in Asia, despite his apparent ease of mobility across Europe.

It is notable that none of these respondents were married at the time of their interviews, and none of them had children. Furthermore, it is clear that care responsibilities can upend one's desires for continued mobility. Margaret's and Arjun's journeys, in particular, have been pulled off-course in surprising directions by the unexpected needs of ailing parents. Being embedded in different sets of care relationships and familial obligations might create different limits to serial migrants' orientation, and research interested in exploring this could turn to the intersections between serial migration and studies focused on transnational familyhood.

To tell a story is an orienting act. In our interviews, serial migrants take stock of how far (and from where) they have come, and muse about where they are going as they seek a sense of home – a place where, as Hedetoft and Hjort (2002: 7) write, they can experience 'that elusive but still real psychosociological state of being in sync with oneself under given external conditions'. Instead of aligning oneself with a specific destination (as would be implied in terms such as 'mapping' or 'trajectory'), an orientation implies, instead, an inclination towards desire, a sense of provisionality and imagination. It does not imply a hurtling velocity. It does not indicate a clear destination. The future is not a stepwise hierarchy of countries to be climbed. An orientation reflects an understanding of the social barriers that comprise an uneven terrain, but also a recognition of the provisionality of life.

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Serial migration , multiple belongings and orientations toward the future : The perspective of middle-class migrants in Singapore

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foregrounding nationality assumes social worlds generally encompass only two countries: origin and destination

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what i'm looking for! centering ethnicity or culture obsures actual salience of factors in the experience of migration

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