

The right to the city: outdoor informal sport and urban belonging in multicultural spaces

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Studies on ‘everyday multiculturalism’ and ‘lived multiculture’ have advanced knowledge on the kinds of inclusive everyday spaces and practices that characterise our culturally complex, mobile and superdiverse cities. This paper expands this agenda by exploring informal sporting and leisure interactions amongst migrant and ethnically diverse urban populations. Embedded in a larger comparative city project that examines how urban environments and wider social structures mediate inclusions and exclusions of urban dwellers, this paper presents a case study of temporary migrant workers in Singapore and their participation in outdoor informal sport. It deploys Lefebvre’s notion of ‘Right to the City’ to understand city dwellers’ access to urban resources and their collective ability to democratically inhabit the city. Despite structural constraints imposed on marginalised migrants, the nature of informal sport, the spontaneous coming together to play, creative use of public space and a range of convivial practices, generate a sense of urban belonging.

Keywords: sport, recreation, migrant workers, urban belonging, diversity, Singapore

Introduction

Outdoor recreational and physical activities are a familiar feature of public space and bring these spaces to life. These activities can take a variety of forms, ranging from formal participation in competitive club sport or organised exercise such as ‘boot camps’, to more casual engagements in active leisure such as jogging and cycling, or lifestyle sports like skateboarding, or outdoor play like frisbee. There is also participation in ‘informal team sport’, which is composed of regular or semi-regular sporting participation in team sport (like basketball, soccer, volleyball and cricket) where individuals join in on a ‘turn up and play’ basis. This typically occurs in public or semi-public spaces. Although the games are competitive there are generally no formal rules, fees, memberships or referees, as is the case with organised competitive sport. While casual games are often based on formal sporting codes, rules are modified by consensus and playing areas are adapted to fit the available space. Evidence suggests that participation in informal recreation and leisure practices now outnumbers that in formal amateur sport club competitions in major cities like Singapore, Sydney and London (Singapore Sports Council, 2011; Australian Sporting Commission 2015; Singapore Sports Council 2011; Sport England 2015). Further, existing research into informal social team sport posits that this form of recreation is better at facilitating democratic civic participation than organised sports (Vermeulen, 2011; Wheaton, 2015; Jeanes et al., 2019). Participants from diverse backgrounds voluntarily take part and learn not only how to negotiate game rules but also complex interethnic and diasporic social relationships (DeLand, 2014; Teok, 2015; Wise et al., 2018).

Embedded in a wider comparative city project – Sydney, London, and Singapore – this paper has an empirical focus on Singapore as an under-examined and long established site of urban multiculturalism and migration settlement. The research investigates

how outdoor informal team sport is entangled with different traditions of urban space and density, with contrasting histories and contemporary formations of urban citizenship, and variegated forms of race, migration and multiculturalism. We situate informal team sport in urban everyday life and examine its social benefits to city dwellers, particularly marginalised and racialized temporary migrants disenfranchised from formal recreational opportunities. Informal sporting participation raises pertinent questions about urban citizenship, particularly as cities become denser, public spaces increasingly privatised, and inequalities deepen around differential access to the city across race, class, gender, generation, migrant status and citizenship rights. Drawing on field research among two groups of temporary migrant workers in Singapore, skilled and low-waged, we demonstrate how wider structural inequalities, regimes governing public space, including forces of privatisation, as well as increasing commodification of leisure and recreation practices, shape the ways in which they are able to inhabit the city. We interrogate the tensions and contradictions of urban belonging for these workers who are central to Singapore's economy but whose rights and access to public spaces are restricted and regulated.

With a focus on access to and use of outdoor public spaces, we draw on Lefebvre's notions of the 'Right to the City' (1996) and 'Production of Space' (1991) as a way to understand urban belonging - the relationship between city dwellers and their access to urban resources and spaces, not so much as individuals but in their collective ability to democratically inhabit the city (Purcell, 2013; Bauder, 2015). The right to the city's emphasis on participation in social life, the appropriation of urban space, and the collectivism of shared urban resource inform Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the production of space. He develops a trialectic of perceived space (i.e. physical, mappable space), conceived space (i.e. space that is designed and governed by policymakers and planners)

and lived space (i.e. the ways in which people unpredictably experience and interact with space, the space of inhabitants and users). The notion of these distinct but co-constituting layers of space is particularly helpful for developing an analytical framing between urban space, leisure practices and multicultural social relations. We connect the right to the city with theorising on ‘everyday multiculturalism’ (Wise & Velayutham, 2009) and ‘lived multiculturalism’ (Neal et al., 2015 & 2013) which has advanced knowledge into what kinds of everyday spaces and practices make for inclusive diversity, by reflecting upon the ways in which urban environments and wider social, economic and political structures are generative of inclusions while also reinforcing exclusions in everyday life.

The significance of informal sport and public space in the multicultural city

The popularity of sport makes it an attractive tool to promote shared community values and social integration of migrants, especially those newly arrived, as engagement in sport and leisure facilitate the acculturation process by decreasing the stress associated with migration (Hasmi et al., 2014). Indeed, sport can build links and trust both within migrant communities and between migrants and the broader community, thereby acting as an entry point for wider participation in community life (Schailleé, Haudenhuyse & Bradt 2019). Team sport holds almost mythical status in popular discourse for its perceived role in building cohesive communities but while the positive unifying aspects of sport and its economic and social benefits for cities are often celebrated (Schimmel, 2001), the racial abuse of black and minority ethnic players (see Cleland et al., 2019) serves as a powerful reminder of the conditional terms of inclusion in sporting arenas.

As Spaaij (2014 : 304) argues, any generalised claim that sport is a mechanism for ‘good settlement’ is contentious’ because sport ‘is also used to differentiate and

exclude'. Most research on sport and diversity examines formal, organised activity relating to professional sport and associated local sporting clubs (Adair & Rowe, 2010). This focus has been imperative to exposing the structural relationship between sport and social inequalities across race, ethnicity, class and gender across different societies (Carrington, 2010; Maxwell, et al., 2013). Racial slurs on the court and field still commonly occur. Tensions can also emerge across ethnic differences due to a lack of socialisation into organised club sports linked to rule following and differing expectations around player etiquette (Aquino, 2015; Burdsey 2010; Carniel, 2009). Ethno-specific clubs can increase access to club management positions for migrants. However, benefits for 'linking' social capital beyond the sporting organisation and accessing positions of power in mainstream clubs remain rare. Women from racial minority backgrounds also continue to be excluded at the levels of social structure of sporting clubs and marginalised in micro-interactional sporting contexts (Agergaard, 2016; Schailleé, Haudenhuyse & Bradt 2019; Maxwell & Stronach 2020).

This paper turns its focus to outdoor informal team sport and recreation, and examines its potentials and limits in fostering inclusion and exclusion of marginalised migrant groups. Beyond its interpersonal and interactional dimensions, which has formed the focus of existing studies on informal sport (see Thangaraj, 2015; Woodbine, 2016), we argue for understanding informal sport in relation to its *urban* context – the kinds of spaces in which they occur, the different formations of 'community' fostered by such urban encounters, and multicultural populations involved.

Informal engagement in recreation in shared urban locations produces regular encounters with difference – between participants and also among those otherwise sharing these spaces of play. Neal et al.'s (2015: 473) study of parks and urban multicultural in England found that 'encounter not only matters as a moment of

(potentially transformative) interaction and dialogue between ethnically different populations but is also present and affective in the sharing of spaces and participation in similar practices'. Inclusive places to meet and play are clearly central here. Recent research on 'arrival infrastructures' (Meeus, Arnaut & Van Heur, 2019) in European cities foregrounds the fundamental importance of civic and social infrastructure in creating the conditions for diverse communities to flourish, arguing that the built environment, not just civic voluntary organisations, influences the depth of associational life in cities – something underplayed by much scholarship on social capital. Thus, physical spaces like parks are essential for the development of supportive social networks that contribute to the belonging and social anchoring of marginalised migrants. Rishbeth and Rogaly (2018: 284) argue that for those excluded in the city, 'such as those marginalised by unemployment, ill-health, loneliness, overcrowded housing and/or racisms', accessible outdoor spaces can foster atmospheres of recovery – bringing respite and hope. Further, the authors posit that urban public spaces require 'practice, effort, negotiation, and achievement', and these can produce dispositions 'at ease with difference' (Rishbeth & Rogaly, 2018: 286). In multicultural Singapore, Wise and Velayutham's (2014) work has shown that living in close proximity in high density public housing means that there is intensive use and sharing of spaces such as corridors, parks and playgrounds, and this produces possibilities for mundane intercultural habituation. However, these spaces of encounter are cut through by migrant status where the racialized embodiment of temporary migrants marks them out as non-citizens with only a tentative and provisional entitlement to inhabit public space, in turn circumscribing the possibilities of encounters with local citizens.

The Singaporean context

Singapore is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and very much a 'high rise' city. The city-state is an immigrant society consisting of a Chinese majority (74.1%) followed by Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%) and 'Others' (3.3%) – these classifications make-up the dominant organizing framework of racial difference termed 'CMIO'. Singapore's permanent population numbers about 3.7 million people. Non-residents residing there on temporary work visas number an additional 1.3 million people. Non-residents often comprise a large part of the 'Others' category. Foreigners who intend to work in Singapore must hold a valid work visa, which are categorised according to occupation, skill level and salary. Employment Pass holders are typically professionals, S-Pass holders are mid-level skilled staff (hospitality, IT services, technicians, etc.) and work permit holders are semi-skilled workers (construction, manufacturing, cleaning and domestic help).

These visa categories are also highly racialized. Traditionally, Employment Pass holders have tended to be white 'expats' from Europe, Australia and the US. Only in recent years has this category opened up to skilled professionals from the Asian region, particularly India and China. S-Pass holders are almost exclusively migrants from Asia. Work Permit holders are exclusively from Asia – blue collar workers from India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and PRC China. Migrant domestic workers are predominantly from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Despite the nomenclature of 'temporary' work visas, many of these migrants have worked in Singapore for well over 10 years. Notwithstanding the length of their stay, mid-level and semi-skilled migrant workers are viewed as a transient labour force (Wise, 2016) .

While there is an official policy of multi-racialism in Singapore that has to some extent fostered harmonious race relations among the populace, some Singaporean scholars argue that this policy largely fails to address the continued occurrence of racial

discrimination at the institutional and everyday level (see Velayutham, 2017). Racism in Singapore has roots in European colonialism that racially classified the land's inhabitants and in the postcolonial context has been reconfigured into new racial hierarchies and made further complex as a result of migrant-led super-diversity. There has been a normalization of 'Chinese privilege' while Indians report experiencing regular everyday racism and racial stereotypes are publicly vocalized about Malays (Velayutham, 2017). Migrant workers are also stigmatized for being 'foreigners' and perpetually Othered as transient and dispensable labour, particularly those from less advanced economies in Asia, and perceived as a social nuisance especially when they gather in large numbers in public spaces.

The complex layers of race, class differentiation and visa status in Singaporean society play out in heated (often xenophobic) local debates around access to public facilities and public space. Again, these contestations have roots in Singapore's colonial period (1819-1959) where British town planning centered around excluding indigenous and immigrant communities from open public spaces and segregating them into high density enclaves (Hee & Ooi, 2003). In 1959, under self-rule, the Singapore government established the Housing Development Board (HDB) to provide public housing and improve living conditions for its residents away from the city centre. Today, some 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in large public housing estates, most with outdoor or covered sporting facilities that form the bulk of publicly accessible spaces for play. These middle and working classes, including permanent residents and skilled temporary workers, avail of centralized shared sporting amenities such as hardcourts, exercise and play equipment. While these aimed to deliver a 'national agenda for 'harmonious living' among various ethnic groups' (Hee & Ooi, 2003: 91) more exclusive forms of leisure spaces exist with regulated access. Upper middle class Singaporeans and highly paid expats on skilled visas

live in private condominiums with ‘gated’ recreational facilities, including indoor gymnasiums, pools and tennis courts. Those who are least provisioned for in terms of recreational spaces are low waged workers – with male migrant labourers (such as those working in construction) living in on-site dormitories and female domestic helpers residing with local families. Occupation by both groups’ of public spaces such as parks and open fields on their ‘day off’ from work (usually Sundays) is often frowned upon by local Singaporeans (Ye 2019).

Thus, while Singapore promotes itself as an ‘inclusive city’ based on its urban design, structure and functionality, it is important to investigate the contours of this inclusion. Limitations particularly apply to Singapore’s migrant population. As Ye (2019: 486) argues, migrants are ‘rarely naturalized’ in city life but rather ‘incorporated with various limits on the occupations they can access, where they can live, as well as citizenship rights and privileges’ and this includes regulating their modes of inhabiting public space.

The study and field-sites

Our study adopted multiple methods, involving sustained participant observation and in-depth interviews, to investigate the extent to which informal sporting participation and the spaces in which they occur forges urban belonging for marginalized migrant workers. Through regular field visits, we were able to observe more closely and speak to those engaged in informal sport and the ways in which they inhabit the lived space (Lefebvre, 1991) of the city. This paper introduces two groups of temporary migrant workers aged 20 to 40 in two geographical locations in Singapore, Kallang and Yishun, identified based on our prior experiences in the city. They present differing residential locations – one in the centre of Singapore and the other on its margins. In Kallang we follow a group of

female migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia who play social volleyball, while in Yishun, a group of male Filipino migrant workers on SPass visas who play pick-up basketball.

Ethical clearance from relevant university ethics committees was sought and granted before the research commenced which ensured the research had safeguards for discussing experiences of racism which can be uncomfortable or upsetting for some interviewees. Aquino, Wise and Velayutham, who have long-standing fieldwork experience in Singapore, began the empirical work in 2018. During our initial visit, we identified patterns of use, routines and interactions and had casual conversations with players about their involvement in the respective informal sports, having first identified ourselves as researchers and explaining the purpose of our research. Regular return visits helped develop more cordial relationships with the participants and eventually they were approached for formal interviews in 2019.

Participants were purposively sampled and formal one-to-one interviews were conducted in English and Tagalog at the sporting venues. The interviews explored wider questions of migrant stories, senses of home and Singapore, and the importance of the particular space they inhabited and the games they played. In addition to approximately 200 hours of participant observations, we conducted 14 formal individual interviews and 3 formal group interviews with an ethnically and gender diverse research population. The dataset – both extensive field notes and the interview transcripts – have been inductively coded and key themes that emerged relating to participants' relationship with the urban environment and the role of informal sport were used as the analytical frame for this paper. Pseudonyms have been used for participants in the reporting of our findings.

Given the concern with the ways in which public urban space is generative of social interaction and leisure practices, particular attention was given to in-depth

observation of these spaces and we turn now to the descriptions in the fieldnotes as these capture the nature of the public spaces in the two areas of the city and detail the physical activities and associated social life within them.

Public space, migrant presence and outdoor leisure

Kallang estate is located close to the city's downtown centre, developed around the Kallang River, and the site of Singapore's first airport. It is an area that has been subjected to expansive land reclamation, including for mass residential development and today is famous for housing the Singapore Sports Hub comprising of the National Stadium and other sports facilities. Kallang is easily accessible by public transport, which makes its greenspaces a popular meeting place for migrant workers on their day off.

Despite the abundance of formal sporting facilities nearby, the migrant domestic workers play volleyball on vacant land between Kallang train station, the river and a neighbouring housing estate. This vacant green field¹ of uneven terrain, veined with the roots of Angsana trees is largely just an empty space on weekdays with a dirt track offering a convenient short cut from the station to the neighbouring public housing estate. On Sundays, this interstitial zone comes alive as Filipina and Indonesian migrant women domestic workers gather (weather permitting) for social volleyball. Laughing groups of women emerge from the train station from early morning carrying nets, balls, picnics and a change of clothes. Women queue up to access the public toilets in the station and space at the washroom mirror is at a premium with a crush of young women fixing hair, adjusting clothing, and applying makeup. Outside, nets are tied between the trees dotted

¹ Part of the old Kallang Airport land is State land gazetted for development. These sites, found all over the island, often sit untouched for years. Conventionally, they are grassed but left as open public space.

around the field and temporary mark lines are drawn for up to eight volleyball courts. The atmosphere is joyful and festive, and is a whole day affair with Filipina, Indonesian and mixed background teams of migrant domestic workers playing matches in a round-robin competition. On a typical Sunday there can be upwards of one hundred women playing matches, and spectators gathered in groups of five to ten, sitting around a picnic blanket, often with a sound system and home prepared packed food to share. On 'competition' days, upwards of twenty teams can be present.

While teams are mostly all female domestic workers, usually there are one or two mixed gender teams with both domestic workers and male migrant workers from Bangladesh and India. There are as many male migrant workers present as spectators as there are women. Many of the volleyball teams are made up of domestic workers who have come from a town or region in the Philippines or Indonesia who have connected in Singapore via social media and started initiating weekly volleyball games. Team names often express an identity or home country connection. For example, teams are named after regions or towns in the Philippines such as Cordillera or San Miguel. Others with names like 'Bangladeshi Friends (BDF)', 'Singapore Migrant Friends', or 'D'Amazing Friends' signify friendship and support. Team names also signify strength and resistance, such as 'Dignity Team', 'We Roar' or 'Tigers'. From time to time the large gathering of migrant workers around the train station and nearby shops has raised concerns about personal safety, cleanliness and noise among locals. This has led to the instalment of remote video cameras all around the green field and regular police patrols. Despite this surveillance, the games remain enthusiastically attended. While match heats are going there are often side groups of women dancing, singing, and sometimes staging spontaneous beauty pageants. Through migrant networks, team jerseys are ordered from the Philippines.

While this all sounds like formal organised sport, it is entirely informal and self-organised on social media.

Our second field-site, Yishun, is located in Singapore's northeastern corner. It is a more recently developed residential area (since the 1970s) that has a large concentration of public housing though newly built private condo developments are increasingly cropping up on its skyline. Yishun is a low-income area and is home to a sizeable population of Malays and a large number of low-waged and middle-income migrants.

In Yishun, three outdoor concrete basketball courts host a large group of male Filipino migrant workers for nightly pick-up games. The basketball courts are part of privately-owned sports complex that also has futsal courts. While the basketball courts are free and publicly open on a 'first come, first serve' basis, a small office on-site manages the futsal courts, which entail fees for casual and formal use. Filipino migrant workers occupy two courts on most nights while Singaporean school kids can usually be found on one court from the early afternoon playing shooting games. They make way for older local Singaporeans to play 3 on 3 basketball as the sun sets. Usually a core group of Filipino players arrive before five pm to secure a court and these men call themselves the 'die hard' ballers of the crew. There is no prior 'call out' for players, people simply 'turn up'.

There is a buzz of excitement in the air every night - Filipino men coming and going, happy to see each other after a hard day's work, some staying to play a couple of games while others just drop in to hang out. The courts are occupied until the lights are switched off at eleven as most of these men are living in Singapore without their partners and children. This space has become a focal point for these migrants' social life in Singapore. On the sidelines there is occasional serious talk about upcoming job opportunities or navigating Singapore's visa system. However, mostly the men talk and

joke about mundane things. Conversations range from how their workdays went to the latest factory outlet sales on basketball gear or updates on their fantasy basketball teams. Other men relax on the grass catching up on family life in the Philippines via their social media feeds. Comedic commentary during games is regularly provided by those hanging behind the basketball rings whenever a shot is scored or missed - playfully teasing someone's crooked jump shot or ageing knees. Fridays and Saturdays are particularly festive, with younger second-generation Filipino men joining in the pickup games but they are not as serious about play as the older guys, mostly congregating in small circles around the courts, listening to the latest hip hop or techno music from a small boom box.

Usually pick-up basketball is played 3 on 3 and half court. But because of the large number of men who turn up every night, games are played 5 on 5 and full court, to ensure court time for everyone. There are no referees and scoring is maintained among those playing and follows the format of first to 15 where each point counts for 1. Throughout the night, players negotiate their turn around the common phrase in pick-up basketball of 'who's got next?' which gives preference to those waiting the longest. Even when on some nights up to sixty men can turn up to play, the process is followed democratically, with everyone respecting the invisible queue, though new faces are often allowed on court ahead of others to welcome them in.

These fieldwork accounts of outdoor sporting activities and the micro descriptions of the social and spatial life in Kallang and Yishun resonate with Lefebvre's (1996: 34) conceptualisation of the right to the city, which, broadly conceived, refers to a call for the right to urban life for the whole society:

the right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretise and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller and user of multiple services. It

would affirm... the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged space, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the marginal, and even for the 'privileged').

Underpinned by a trialective of perceived space, conceived space and lived space, Lefebvre's right to the city "imagines inhabitants to have two main rights: the right to appropriate urban space; and 2) the right to participate in the production of urban space" (Purcell, 2003: 577). The right to *appropriate* does not mean the right to private ownership but the right of *use*, wherein, the collective routines of urban dwellers are what give urban space its value. The right to participation meanwhile, refers to inhabitants' right to play a central role in decision-making processes defining urban space and their interests represented by the state. This right involving institutionalised control over urban space is highly circumscribed for our participants due to their status as transient labour that excludes them from formal decision-making processes about urban planning and governance in Singapore. But, through the informal leisure practices and quotidian multicultural social relations in which they engage in these spaces, the right to appropriate is made possible. We can see the ways in which the vacant field in Kallang shifts from the conceived space of city development to an inhabited space through volleyball games and the associative social interactions, and while the concrete basketball courts in Yishun are being used as planned, the social activities among the players transform the courts from merely a sporting space into lived sites of diasporic community and connection.

The forms of participation in everyday life which make the city liveable, involve a cultivation of a more collective and connective use – or reuse – of planned urban space and our findings suggest that practices and encounters generated by play and leisure, and

the materialities of the urban environments in which these activities are engaged, can shape democratic inclusivity in the city. These themes are not only emergent in the fieldnotes but also in the interview conversations with the participants and we consider these next.

Respite and pleasure in outdoor public space

Time and space were reoccurring motifs in the interviews as participants described how engaging in outdoor recreation has become important because they are generally granted little leisure time from work and they often lack privacy for relaxation in the places they reside in. For migrant domestic workers in Singapore, the distinction between hours of work and off-work are blurred because they live with their employers in an apartment and may not be allowed to leave the premises. Hospitality sector migrant workers work long and irregular hours, including over weekends and public holidays. Cramped shared housing, which usually characterize the living conditions of temporary workers in Singapore, both skilled and low waged, further compounds the lack of freedom to relax and de-stress in private. Additionally, the cost of living in Singapore is among the highest in the world (Tay, 2020) and this includes expensive recreational activities like joining formal club sports. In this context of constraint, as our fieldnotes illustrate, outdoor informal sport and recreation offer important chances for pleasure and exercise, as well as respite and social connection.

Rishbeth and Rogaly's (2018: 285) research in London found greenspaces to be avenues for 'self care' for marginalised residents that enable respite and recovery. They conceptualise 'self care' as part of a spectrum of caring practices that 'includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible'. 'Self care' is not just an inward looking practice of individual care, but also

one that looks outward to care beyond the self and affect one's outside world. It can be undertaken out of choice, but can also emerge as a reaction to an antagonistic wider environment, making self care highly political acts of resistance as much as self-centred acts of agency. These modes of self-repair are recounted by the basketball players interviewed. Many described the fast-paced life in Singapore and the high-pressured nature of the Singaporean workplace and most struggled to say that they 'enjoyed' living in Singapore. Karl, an SPass holder working in IT, explained how pickup basketball provides respite because, "*Singapore is work, work, work.*" Being outdoors especially brings relief and release, including from over-crowded households which often bring conflict. Karl recalled his first share-house when he migrated with his wife – a three-bedroom HDB flat shared with two other Filipino migrant workers - which gradually became over-crowded with other migrant worker renters and "*people coming in and out*". A housemate also allowed his mother, a domestic worker, to bring her friends (other domestic workers) over on Sundays to play Mah-jong as this group too lacked space to socialise. Karl confirmed that his situation is not unique and such discomforts and longing for freedom are shared by other players:

"Most of the guys here, actually that is why they play every night – straight from work and all the way until the lights close. Because of their work and house situation. They come here to escape."

While Rishbeth and Rogaly (2018) examine 'sitting' on park benches as a means for creating spaces of solitude, outdoor physical activities also enable recovery. That is, aside from gaining physical health benefits and getting some emotional respite from their everyday struggles, migrant workers' bodies are able to physically transform from laboring bodies into creative and carefree bodies through social and pleasurable play where the outdoors offer a 'safe haven' (Rishbeth & Rogaly, 2018) to take some control

over their lives. Informal sporting play, cultivated in informal sites where rules and playing space are modified, can generate unconventional, yet skilful and creative performances that enable ingenuity in the face of marginality (see Aquino, 2015; Neal et al., 2019). Male participants in Yishun regularly described their participation in informal games as making them feel “*relief*”, “*feeling free*”, “*feeling at peace*” and turning into “*someone different as soon as I step on court*”. Likewise, for the Kallang volleyballers, the ability to ‘release’ physically on a Sunday is profound for women whose ‘other’ lives involve hard and long hours of subservience living in the households of frequently harsh employers. Their work hours require a gendered ‘performance’ of submissive and gentle agreeability, as the ideal carer and housekeeper. They spoke about the physical benefits of keeping fit and active, as well as how sports allow them to “*forget their stress*” from work and life in Singapore, and how they enjoy “*letting loose*” on their day off. On ‘volleyball Sundays’, a striking embodied transformation of these women occurs in the public restrooms – changing from non-descript casual clothes to shiny team jerseys, and for non-players the sexy Sunday best with hair and makeup done as they sit outside and watch the games. Their embodiment transforms even more on the court – with competitive and aggressive play, sassy stances – during play and for team selfies afterwards. Performances ranged from sassy ‘sexy girls’, through to non-binary and masculine expressions of embodied selves. We observed that quite a number of same-sex attracted women were regular participants.

These emancipatory experiences signal the importance of ensuring the accessibility of the spaces in which informal sport and recreational activities are played. Thus, beyond interpersonal interactions, the modes of urban governance in place and the materialities of urban design are also crucial for how our participants can occupy space in ways that can reclaim agency and engage in self care.

Social connections through informal sport and outdoor public space

Amin and Graham (1997) assert that well designed urban spaces encouraging the sharing of space and a diversity in cultural and social activities, animate and enliven our cities, especially providing some relief to problems of alienation and polarisation. The basketball players at Yishun see nightly games as an inexpensive way to socialise and cope with being away from partners and children. In addition, they alleviate the sense of limbo participants endure as temporary visa holders. Elijah, an SPass holder working in the construction industry, talked about how, being without his family in Singapore, time feels like a slow drag:

“We are just waiting here in Singapore, waiting for something to happen.

You are waiting for the next job. Waiting to get accepted into another

country. Just waiting.”

Elijah plays every night and this ritual helps deal with his sense of indeterminacy in Singapore as the games guarantee companionship because *“the guys are always here”*. Moreover, the buzz at the outdoor courts facilitated by the material urban form provides a reliable source of diversion. At Yishun courts, the well-lit facilities and the wide open space of grass surrounding the courts enable players to relax and talk on the side-lines as they wait their turn to play. The courts’ location by a thoroughfare allows for people-watching and holds the promise of refreshing and unexpected encounters as walkers, joggers and cyclists from the park and commuters passing from the direction of the nearby shopping mall and train station traverse the area. As Elijah remarked in amusement, *“you never know who’s going to turn up.”*

Indeed, our participants’ informal sporting activity are fateful coming-togethers mediated by the urban and which exhibit the significance of urban greenspaces found in

Neal et al.'s (2015) research into conviviality and outdoor parks – they are sites encouraging ‘elective leisure’ and stimulating inclusive modes of participation among strangers. Elective practices, moreover, are emergent from the materialities and affordances of the built and natural environment which may ‘become a part of people’s vocabularies of affect and attachment, community, and belonging to local places’ (Neal, et al., 2015: 464).

The accessibility of the courts in Yishun demonstrates this is a quasi-public space – owned by a private organisation but enmeshing with the public spaces that surround it. Karl, who lives across the road in a HDB flat, witnessed the complex’s transformation from an uninviting gated space catering for middle class futsal players to one that was made more accessible to lower income and migrant worker residents in the area by the construction of unfenced basketball courts made available for free casual play. The courts were scarcely used until a transport interchange was erected nearby and it was then that people, especially Filipino migrant workers living in the area, converged on the space. Karl acknowledged how changes to the design and management of the complex, transforming it into a visible, approachable and accessible arena contributed greatly to facilitating friendships among the Filipino men who play at Yishun, many of whom were once strangers but have now formed valuable social ties. Newcomers stumble upon the courts as the complex’s openness (it is integrated into a wide open field and the south of the courts is lined by a public pathway leading to a public park) enables the ease of mundane routines which provide points of light contact between users that can turn into sustained interaction through more structured activities. For example, Ryan who has newly migrated to Singapore, chanced upon the courts during an afternoon jog and because he was wearing basketball shoes was immediately invited to play by some of the men. He described finding people with shared backgrounds (as Filipinos and as migrant

workers) and shared passions (basketball) as cushioning his move to Singapore and helping him cope with his new surrounds.

Urban spaces designed and managed to achieve more socially equitable outcomes thus create atmospheres that can “prime bodies’ to be receptive to ‘newness’” (Wise, 2016: 2302). Beyond bringing people with shared backgrounds together, they may also ‘generate pleasurable feelings towards engaging with and negotiating difference’ (Wise, 2016: 2302). While the games we observed did not involve much mingling between Singaporean locals and migrants (for reasons elaborated in the next section), there was mixing among migrant workers across ethnicity, gender, class and migrant status.

In Yishun, the majority of players are Filipino migrants but over the years have come to include migrant workers from Indonesia, Malaysia and mainland China who also reside in the area. Basketball provides a bridge to form friendships across ethnic and language barriers. Nelson, one of the long-time Filipino players at Yishun and who has been on an SPass visa on and off for ten years, talked about the group’s camaraderie with Roem, a temporary migrant worker from Indonesia, who has been playing pickup basketball at Yishun for a few years. He has become well integrated into the Filipino group, including being regularly invited to join competitive Filipino-run basketball leagues. His Filipino teammates have taught him common Filipino curse words so he can participate in the ‘trash talk’ during play. The skills of getting along across racial and language divides, according to Nelson, are needed on and off the court when living in a place like Singapore:

“I manage a construction site and we have plenty of different races as workers. Malaysians, Chinese from the mainland, the Bangladeshi, even some Thai people. Singapore is very multi-racial. Over the years, you have

to learn how to get along with different people. Learn what you have in common. I even learn sometimes a bit of the language. On the basketball court it's the same."

It is noteworthy that at Yishun courts, while some young women might occasionally 'shoot around', no females participate in the pick-up games with Filipino men. Thus, it is a highly masculine space that signals gendered exclusions operating simultaneously with inter-ethnic/inter-racial inclusion. The men expressed a clear preference that women are not included because of perceived gendered differences in tolerating the 'rough' contact in pickup basketball where play is more 'physical' because there is no referee.

Volleyball games, however, are more inclusive across genders. The main players are female domestic workers, while many male low wage migrant workers from Tamil Nadu (India) and Bangladesh also slowly came to know of the volleyball games in Kallang and elsewhere. Says Crystal:

"Bangla and Indian workers - if watching for a while, sometimes they will ask to join in, sometimes will play in warm ups or fun games post-tournament, sometimes to make up numbers."

Male migrant workers make up a sizeable portion of the spectators, and several teams of domestic workers have included a smattering of male workers. Inevitably, romances have blossomed and these are evident in the more intimate picnic gatherings of couples around the peripheries of the field.

In thinking through how migrants participate in the production of space, Hall (2015) argues that their ability to inhabit the city is not merely passively molded by the urban spaces in which they traverse but also by their active reconfiguration of the urban environment through modes of 'everyday resistance' that transform, materially and symbolically, the economic, social and political functions, meanings and visions of city spaces. These are domains of city-making that Hall (2015) argues is usually monopolized by elites and experts. The volleyball training sessions for the female team members are not simply occasions to meet and train to benefit themselves. These events are also gatherings where participants can organise their informal loans system – a system of raising money within their group - to support each other through life course and crisis events. Thus, through informal sporting practices, these women remake the urban greenspaces on which they play for purposes beyond sport and recreation. The space and the practices within them are reconfigured into arenas of economic, social and political migrant resource generation. These migrant practices of 'spatial appropriation, re-generation and re-enchantment' of the urban landscape empower claims to difference and the right to alterity (Hall, 2015: 855).

Social ordering in urban leisure spaces

While we observed multicultural and intergenerational use of outdoor spaces in Singapore, including some levels of accessibility among women, there still exists hidden privileges and restrictions coded into these spaces, shaped by larger structural inequalities around race, class and gender, and intersecting with the state's regulation of temporary migrant workers. In cities of complex diversity, Hall (2015: 855) reminds us that alongside 'productive registers of interaction, lurk the enduring structures that limit migrant participation through virulent systems of social sorting by class, race, ethnicity and gender'. Thus, while some aspects of urban design and planning in Singapore enable

urban belonging for marginalized migrant workers, shared spaces can still be framed by the grammars of differentiation built into institutional structures, particularly those set by Singapore's regime of migrant labour. It is through this reinforcing of structural difference in everyday spaces and practices that inequalities are often normalized and made invisible. Amid people's general sense of being at ease with diversity, Ye (2019: 479) argues that technologies of exclusion and marginalization give way to a 'management of difference through forms of 'differential inclusion'', a positioning of difference through 'tacit rules of interaction' in everyday spaces that establishes dominant orderings of 'who knows how to behave and who does not'. It is a 'calculated processes of inclusion' that relies upon the 'rituals of everyday contact with diverse others' to normalize a form of 'selective incorporation where acceptance is dependent upon people learning and subscribing to established norms and values' (Ye, 2019: 487-89).

Outdoor recreational facilities and greenspaces may be provisioned for by the state for 'public use', but on the ground who gets to access and enjoy these can be complicated. For example, hire fees associated with fields, courts and community centres for any kind of formal competitive play, enforced by either private organisations or public institutions, often privilege locals or permanent residents as fees are higher for temporary workers or such spaces can only be booked by Singaporean citizens. The volleyball players have struggled to play at designated sports venues because of the costs. One field at a university campus charged them around \$12 an hour for usage but literally offered "*just a field, in the sun*". As they must play during the height of the day because of curfews set by their employers and dormitories on their days off, indoor courts would be ideal to provide some shelter from the Singaporean heat, but the hire costs of these are even higher. It thus makes more economic sense to play and practice for free in non-designated sports areas like the open spaces outside train stations. For the basketball

players, while enjoying the casual nature of pick-up games, sometimes they crave more competitive basketball. Thus, organized leagues often emerge from the pick-up games to provide more challenging opportunities to play against each other, including competing for a small pot of prize money pooled from registration fees. Organizers recognize that keeping fees low is important, knowing many of the men are living in Singapore on a budget, but this is a challenge as they must incorporate the court hire costs, which are higher fees for non-residents and non-citizens.

While both groups experience issues with access, low waged migrant workers tend to be particularly disdained by Singaporeans when they use and occupy public facilities and spaces. The women we spoke to were well aware that their access to the space in Kallang was highly precarious and it could be removed. Complaints from locals were feared for this reason and the volleyballers make an active effort to stave off this possibility and clear up the spaces after use, as Crystal explains:

“After the tournament people leave the rubbish, plastic bags etc., I will go around with my team around the area and pick up rubbish. ...it’s important to take responsibility for it ...and anyway government may fine or punish.”

Male Filipino migrants on skilled visas, while not being the subject of complaints from Singaporeans, described being indirectly ‘put in their place’ as ‘second-class’ and restricted in their public behaviours on and off the court because of their status as Filipinos and as temporary workers. In Yishun, while the courts are available on a ‘first come, first serve’ basis and the group of Filipinos are usually able to secure a court, there is an unwritten rule among regular users of the space that one of the courts is exclusively

reserved for 'local Singaporeans'. This unwritten system is respected by the Filipino players as part of 'sharing' the space as they do not want to monopolise use of all three courts. However, that there is a court exclusively reserved for local Singaporeans, which requires no prior arrangement such as 'turning up early' as the Filipino men have to do every night, still signals the methods of social ordering that play out in urban everyday life and privilege the dominant Singaporeans over minorities like Filipino migrant workers. Further, when some of the men were asked why they do not just play together with locals, the racialized nature of these hidden codes of privilege and its intersection with the marginal status accorded to migrant workers come to light even more:

Interviewer: *So do you play basketball with many locals?*

Lester: *No.*

Nelson: *No! It's dangerous.*

Lester: *They like to play half court. We like to play full court. Different games.*

Karl: *Kasi medyo arrogant yung mga locals pag kalaban mo (because the locals are a little bit arrogant when they play you). Since 'homecourt' nila (because it's their homecourt) .. they can just elbow you without any hesitation. With Filipinos, we have hesitation here. Kasi kung dumugo sila (because if they bleed), they can go to the police and sue you. For them, they can elbow you, hit you. It's ok for them.*

The conversation above indicates these migrants' cautionary attitude in engaging with locals via informal sport where there is no structure for insurance. These men know they cannot afford any kind of legal proceedings as their families in the Philippines depend on much of their income. The stratifications of race, class and migrant status that

structures Singaporean society therefore impacts on their everyday ways of inhabiting the city, signaling their understanding of where Filipinos are positioned in the social order – that they are ‘second-class’ who can be abused on and off the court.

The highly surveilled nature of Singaporean life, including the stringent regulation of migrant visas by the state, also impacts on Filipino men’s bodily comportment in public space, including the way they play pickup basketball. James, a long time SPass holder and who works for a shipping company, talked about how he felt Singapore disciplines the bodies of Filipino migrant workers in public space, including in their leisure activities. In the Philippines, streetball is rough, sometimes leading to physical altercations. *Pustahan* (street gambling) is also a common feature of the games. In Singapore, when a physical brawl threatens to break out in a pick-up game or people are tempted to engage in some friendly betting, they stop and remind each other “*nasa Singapore tayo, hindi Pinas ito*” (we are in Singapore, this is not the Philippines). For James, this characterised what it is like to be a temporary migrant in Singapore – that they must always be cautious of their public behaviour for fear of getting into trouble with authorities and compromising their work visas.

Conclusion: The right to the city

The kinds of public space that are inclusive of difference, and how race and ethnicity are coded into place has been an important focus of urban sociologists and geographers. Our findings on the experience of temporary migrant workers in Singapore and their informal sporting activities, contributes to scholarship on diversity and the right to the city, which is concerned with how questions of redistribution and recognition for diverse others can be built into the planning and design of public space (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). While the right to the city has been used to mobilise urban political movements, we have employed

it as a lens for conceptualising micro practices of participation in urban everyday life and quotidian translations of particular spaces in the urban landscape. Lefebvre's (1996: 34) right to the city 'brings together the urban dweller (*citadin*) and the citizen' where the citizen is not defined by formal citizenship status but rather by *everyday inhabitation* of the city – "those who go about their daily routines in the city, both living in and creating urban space, are those who possess a legitimate right to the city" (Purcell, 2003: 577). Our findings suggest that inclusive urban spaces composed of practices that negotiate 'civility, security, tact and trust' are crucial for growing notions of 'shared citizenship' in the context of complex diversity, wherein the 'social vitality' of cities is nurtured by the 'everyday social confidence' individuals have to make use of 'the right of access' to spaces, especially public spaces, shared with others (Amin & Graham, 1997: 422).

In identifying a relationship between the nature of urban spaces and the informal use of these for sporting and leisure activities it has been possible to identify the spatial dimensions of urban resources and the ways in which these slip between conceived (managed and governed) space to more unruly lived spaces of urban environments. We have shown how the interactive, informal sporting use of these outdoor spaces is constitutive of urban multiculturalism as migrant and non-migrant, ethnic majority and ethnic minority urban inhabitants converge on, use, lay claim to, create, avoid and 'appropriate' particular urban spaces to meet up in and play together.

For marginalised migrants, such as temporary migrants, in global cities like Singapore, it is clear that the spatial capacity to engage in outdoor informal sport and leisure is integral to the social processes of multicultural urban belonging. But these engagements with urban environments and the resources they afford are competitive and contested, and conflicts over access to public spaces and what happens in them are on the rise across major cities (Legacy et al., 2018). While informal leisure practices enable

temporary migrants to appropriate space and realise the right to occupy and live in the city, they continue to be limited in their right to institutional participation and decision making over the production of urban life (i.e. its planning and governance) because of their marginal status as temporary migrants with little political entitlement. More research and policy advocacy that highlights the social value of these informal sporting spaces is needed in Singapore and in other major cities, like Sydney and London, that are made up of ethnically and culturally diverse populations, including temporary migrants. These groups can often occupy marginal and precarious positions in public domains but especially so in cities where public resources are being eroded by processes of privatisation and gentrification (Wise et al., 2018).

For Singapore, despite being seen as a global leader in socially inclusive urban design, it still has some way to go in delivering ‘just’ public spaces, what Low and Iveson (2016: 13) define as spaces that “redistribute resources, recognise difference, foster encounter/interaction, establish an ethic of care and ensure procedural fairness”. As our findings show, these kinds of urban spaces are essential in developing ‘habits of co-presence’ (Amin, 2008) that can challenge social ordering and enable ‘political subjectification’ (Low and Iveson, 2016) of marginal urban inhabitants to realise their right to the city.

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