

Coming-of-Career Narratives, the Postcolonial Work Ethic, and the Promise of a New Nation

At the opening of Isa Kamari's novel *The Tower* (2002), Hijaz invites the young clerk Ilham to join him on a strange quest to climb the stairs of the two hundred floors of the fictional 2000 Tower—Hijaz's architectural masterwork. Lured by Hijaz's promise to share his story, Ilham gratefully accepts the invitation, remarking, "I feel honored that you wish to share your story with me. For a long time I have been following your career."¹ As the two go on their journey, the story that Hijaz tells is not, as Ilham expects, about Hijaz's accomplishments in the architectural profession. Puzzled, Ilham comments, "From our conversations so far, you've emphasized life's questions more than your career," subtly illustrating how the career is assumed—and taken for granted—as the idealized mode of work.² For Ilham, "your story" and "your career" are interchangeable narratives. The novel draws a structural contrast between Hijaz's glamorous career trajectory, symbolized by the trek up the stairs, and his spiritual struggles living as a minoritized Malay Muslim man in Singapore, revealed in dream sequences and poetic interludes. While Isa's novel and oeuvre explore Islamic spiritual alienation in Singapore, the themes of *The Tower* asks readers to consider the problematic effects of making life legible through work and career success.

The Tower calls attention to the hegemony of what I describe as the coming-of-career narrative, a narrative form that literarily, ideologically, and thematically proliferated in the post-1997 Singapore literary and cultural imagination, as evidenced by the very range and number of texts in this chapter's archive.³ Playing on the coming-of-age narrative, the coming-of-career narrative relates one's life story of personal growth as interchangeable with the story of work and career advancement. The focus on worklife in the coming-of-career narrative overlaps with the bildungsroman's traditional focus on middle-class socioeconomic development,

particularly as it has been foregrounded in anglophone women's writing.⁴ As Ilham's confusion in *The Tower* suggests, the logics of the coming-of-career narrative form are implicit in Singaporean discourse. Indeed, evidence of the narrative form can appear anywhere from state ephemera (see below), corporate-speak (job advertisements), and in casual conversation. Literarily, coming-of-career narratives build on a tradition in Singapore writing that uses work themes as a way of commenting on the socioeconomic changes that have accompanied the island nation's rapid modernization.⁵

Although coming-of-career narratives retain a focus on *Bildung*—variously defined as education, culture, formation, growth, or development, depending on its context—the subgenre distinguishes itself from the bildungsroman in a few crucial ways. Unlike the coming-of-age story, which focuses on the maturation process through a young person's move from childhood to adulthood in the context of the nation-state, in the coming-of-career narrative, the global, neoliberal economy dictates the processes that help form an ideal, mature, enterprising self. Work is the basis of maturity. For early German thinkers such as Schiller, Hegel, Goethe, and Humboldt, the links between the bildungsroman and the nation-state were explicit, because they theorized *Bildung* as the social processes of “self-cultivation” necessary to become a good citizen.⁶ Whether the nation is an oppressive force or the structure in which individuals can realize their “self-culture,” the bildungsroman has been regarded as insightful for comprehending the ideological workings of the modern nation-state. Notable too are the ways “social outsiders, primarily women or minority groups,” have instrumentalized the genre to perform critiques of the nation-state.⁷ Although often about protagonists who must adapt to rather than change society, the bildungsroman, as many scholars have shown, has been used to challenge societal structures because the nation is implicitly assumed to be the protagonist's main opponent. In the coming-of-career narrative, however, the “society” that shapes the protagonist's character is a *world* of many transnationally connected places, changing the terms by which we can understand the relation between determinative structure and the protagonist.⁸

The coming-of-career narrative's emergence in Singapore follows a broader trend in contemporary global anglophone literature that, as Kalyan Nadiminti observes, uses the developmental form of the bildungsroman to explore and critique the changing nature of work in the context of a neoliberalized, global economy.⁹ Its proliferation in Singapore seems to further confirm Singapore's Global Asia status as a site that produces professionalized, corporate knowledge workers for the global economy and evidence of its exceptionality, especially when compared to other postcolonial economies in the region such as the Philippines that rely on, say, the feminized labor of domestic workers and their remittances. While certainly the coming-of-career narrative manifests the concerns of twenty-first-century work, my interest is in how this Global Asia genre grapples with, compensates for, and erases its own history of postcolonial capitalism.

While *The Tower* calls attention to the naturalization of coming-of-career logics in Singaporean culture, by describing his novel as part of his “reflections on Singapore at the turn of the century,”¹⁰ Isa also situates the coming-of-career narrative in terms of economic transition—that of the 1997 Asian financial crisis—rather than, say, neoliberal ideology. At first glance, thematic emphases like capitalism as freedom, individualist enterprise, and citizens as consumers in coming-of-career narratives seem to evidence neoliberalism’s ideological hold in Singapore through the influence of Western transnational corporations. Situating the narrative form in terms of economic transition, as Isa does, however, invites us to grapple with what precedes the form’s emergence. And indeed, my analyses find the ideologically disparate, mixed-genre texts in this chapter consistently wrestling with the history of postcolonial capitalism through questions of work motivation, which leads me to investigate the nature of a postcolonial work ethic and its politicized logic. To think about a postcolonial work ethic, I argue, is to consider the pleasures of work and how such pleasures necessarily change over time. In the early history of Singapore, labor in the name of the developing nation helped spur decolonization movements, but the restructuring that took place under Global Asia means that nationally motivated work does not have the same force. Moreover, the Singaporean state’s presence and governance are felt differently under Global Asia. To be clear, this is not an argument about whether the state plays a role in neoliberalism: it is now well established that despite neoliberalism’s pro-market stance, state intervention is crucial for its functioning. But as I observe, there is a *seeming* retreat of the state in the texts under study. This paradoxical showiness of state retreat is itself a power move, one, I argue, that asks us to think about subject making at the institutional intersections of state and corporate entities rather than as the totalizing force of a singular institution.

Following a discussion of how work in postcolonial contexts has been understood as an aestheticized mode of protest against empire, I turn to Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Mammon Inc.* (2001), a satirical novel critical of the state’s cosmopolitan push following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Tan’s novel, which won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004, has been taken as a contemporary text without much regard for Singapore’s historical context or local politics because of its depiction of twenty-first-century, globalized, corporate work. But I show how even as it depicts the motivation and pleasures of neoliberalized labor, through subtle symbolic gestures, the novel portrays longer deleterious effects of governmental policies and campaigns that managed worker-citizens for a manufacturing economy in Singapore. While as a coming-of-career narrative, *Mammon Inc.* depicts how the pleasure of neoliberal labor unites employees with corporate management, my reading of the novel’s climax illustrates that this pleasure does not operate in a historical vacuum. I show that comprehending the historical impact of Singapore’s strong state on its citizen-workers is also at play in the self-pleasures of the coming-of-career narrative. The pleasure that the protagonist, Chiah Deng, takes in herself—as

the site of her labor—is as shaped by neoliberal notions of human capital as it is by the postcolonial pleasures of agency.

While Tan's novel explores the politics of work motivation and pleasure as it relates to Singaporean subjectivity, *Conversations of Coming Home* (2012), a state promotional booklet that uses coming-of-career testimonies to recruit Singaporeans abroad to return, offers insight into the governing logics that *Mammon Inc.* sets out to critique.¹¹ *Mammon Inc.* teaches readers how the act of returning home to Singapore for family or sentimental reasons can be evocative of the Singaporean state's moralizing tendencies from the Asian Values era. Thus the challenge for *Conversations on Coming Home* is to present the act of returning to Singapore as part of a continuing developmental narrative, one in which "coming home" is not a neoliberal regression. As I show, *Conversations* attempts to recover transnational labor by reconstructing Singapore as both an imagined and a materialized setting operating in service of the coming-of-career narrative. I demonstrate how Singapore is presented as the ideal setting for a flourishing career in *Conversations* and further aligns returned Singaporeans with expatriates, revealing the logic of colonial social hierarchies at work in the cultivation of neoliberal ideology.

As a narrative form that values elite forms of work, the coming-of-career narrative is necessarily exclusionary. To understand how the values that undergird Singaporean coming-of-career narratives—namely, cosmopolitan, transnational mobility—play out among subjects that are brushed over in depictions of Singapore's Global Asia, I turn to *Ilo Ilo* (2013). Although Anthony Chen's award-winning feature film about a middle-class Singaporean Chinese family and their Filipina domestic worker has been heralded for its humanizing depiction of an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW), my analysis focuses on the film's depiction of labor differentiation. While *Mammon Inc.* and *Conversations* depict Global Asia's obscuring of postcolonial state power, *Ilo Ilo* depicts how Global Asia's exceptionality is a mode of distancing and distinguishing itself from the Southeast Asian region. By announcing that it is not the Philippines, Singapore affirms its status as Global Asia. The racial and classed logics that undergird Singapore's dissociation from the Third World, as represented in the film by the Philippines, is where we again see Global Asia erasing a different marker of postcoloniality: that is, any inking of Global South solidarity.

The chapter closes with brief readings of Troy Chin's graphic novel series, *The Resident Tourist*, which presents something of a post-career narrative, and a memoir/self-help book by the Filipina domestic worker turned corporate CEO Rebecca Bustamante, *Maid to Made* (2014). Chin's series explores what a Singaporean life narrative might look like when framed around the pleasures of "nothing," while Bustamante's memoir, on the other hand, invites questions about how Global Asia is ideologically reproduced outside of Singapore. Both texts provide insights for future critical directions.

POSTCOLONIAL CAPITALISM AND WORK

One of the earliest rallying cries to articulate work as a mode of liberation in Singapore came from Lee Kuan Yew in the context of its first independence from the British, when it was a part of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. Speaking then as secretary-general of the PAP, Lee declared:

Merdeka is ours and with it the right to do what we will of our own country and our own lives. Let us all resolve to work hard together to build a happy and prosperous Malaya, to remove ignorance and poverty by education and production and to establish a more just social order where every man is judged on his merits and his contribution to society.¹²

Although Lee would not speak to Singapore as an independent nation-state until 1965, his address reflects a philosophy of work that would carry through to the years of Singapore's nation formation. *Merdeka*, the Indonesian-Malay word for "independence" and "freedom," was an important term during the pro-independence era and encapsulated an anticolonial sentiment that Lee situated in discourses of work. Working hard was to at once express *merdeka*, assert rights, and declare solidarity among fellow citizens. In Lee's logic, work is not taken as a political problem in and of itself. Work, to re-form Marx from *The German Ideology*, is posed as both the necessary and the inevitable postcolonial solution to the problem of colonialism.

Although the logics of the coming-of-career narrative appear so thoroughly neoliberal in terms of how it motivates work by encouraging subjects to think of themselves as human capital, the ideological effect it has in Singapore builds on a longer history of work under colonialism and postcolonial capitalism. To talk about a *postcolonial* work ethic, or the motivation and thus meaning assigned to work under capitalism in a postcolonial context, is to talk about labor's historical relationship to colonialism. For a number of historians of capitalism and postcolonial thinkers, colonialism is the violent, structural implementation of capitalism. As Frantz Fanon powerfully puts it, "Deportation, massacres, forced labor, and slavery were the primary methods used by capitalism to increase its gold and diamond reserves, and establish its wealth and power."¹³ In other words, the history of colonialism is a history of exploited labor and what David Harvey describes as "accumulation by dispossession."¹⁴ Thus when "postcolonial" is used to mark the aftermath of such a history, the notion of a postcolonial work ethic can appear, at one level, a politicized response to the violence of an extractive colonialism that took raw materials and labor.¹⁵ Postcolonial work is no longer for empire's profit but for the now-independent nation. Working for the independent nation rather than colonial masters, in other words, makes the work ethic politically edifying. For the way that "postcolonial" suggests a response to or contending with the history of extractive capitalism—or at the very least, an acknowledgment of this history's legacy in the present—"postcolonial" is analogous to Rey Chow's

theorization of “ethnic.” “Postcolonial” too remarks on subjects “held captive in their specific histories” and “conceived of implicitly as proletarian, a resistant captive engaged in a struggle toward liberation.”¹⁶ Although Chow here is thinking about what notions of ethnicity mark *within* a nation, her language usefully captures the dynamic between a marginalized people and those in power. The notion of liberation especially resonates with early postcolonial nationalisms—as in the case of Lee’s speech—that similarly situate work as a form of protest and as a form of redemption.¹⁷ Fanon too captures the importance of work in decolonizing terms: “To work means to work towards the death of the colonist.”¹⁸ While here Fanon writes in the context of violence as a necessary mode of decolonization, like Lee, his use of “work” (*travailler*) frames an economic activity as political aspiration. In both Chow’s and Fanon’s thinking, in other words, postcolonial capitalist activity must be understood in relation to the history of colonial exploitation.

Despite the fact that the British Empire relied on the work of the colonies, the rejection of empire happens not through a rejection of work. The independent nation, as a structure of feeling, shaped the relationship individuals would have with capitalism.¹⁹ Work was the mode through which to make the nation form whole, a solution through which decolonization was possible. Part of the motivation to work, then, was the moral imperative of national independence. The imagined collective experience of “work[ing] hard together” is the basis of a nation form appearing as a “project,” as Balibar describes; work *forwards* the nationalist narrative away from its colonial past.²⁰ In this way, work was simultaneously politicized in its significance for postcolonial liberation and depoliticized insofar as it was not treated as a problem for the way work would entrench Singaporeans in a global system of capitalism. Lee’s sentiments, as I later discuss, especially befit the manufacturing economy of Singapore’s early years.²¹ In the postcolonial context, in other words, what Chow describes as ethnic protest and ethnic redemption find their analogy in anticolonialism and national independence.

Articulating work as a nationalist response to the injuries of imperialism is problematic as it further entrenches capitalist labor as a pleasure principle. “Men and women, young and old, enthusiastically commit themselves to what amounts to forced labor and proclaim themselves slaves of the nation,” Fanon wrote. “This spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to the common interest fosters a reassuring national morale which restores man’s confidence in the destiny of the world and disarms the most reticent of observers.”²² Despite the continuity of exploited labor, postcolonial work seems to heal the trauma of colonial labor exploitation. Developmentalism, as the prevailing economic ideology of the mid-twentieth century, would combine with the pleasures of postcolonial autonomy to provide further motivation to work. To quote Fanon again: “There is a widespread belief that the European nations have reached their present stage of development *as a result of their labors*. Let us prove therefore *to the world* and ourselves that we are capable of the same achievements.”²³ Fanon here subtly points out that belief in the myth

that work produces wealth obscures the history of colonialism that created the systematic foundations for continued Western capital accumulation even after the end of formal colonialism. Moreover, notions of economic development and underdevelopment are modes of thinking about historical difference and thus material wealth is necessarily tied up in the traumas of racial marginalization. Capitalist continuities between the colonial and postcolonial eras would be obscured by the promise of pleasure: the postcolonial pleasures of material compensation, hope, agency, satisfaction, and competence.

Fanon's emphasis on the *audience* for work, in addition to calling attention to the affective dimension of postcolonial work, shows how postcolonial work is highly aestheticized in a global context. While Fanon's comment about proving capability to "the world" indicates his awareness of the economic metrics used to evaluate the status of development in various nations, the idea that work can be "shown," or be looked at, suggests an aesthetic dimension to work that is also pleasurable. This is why, as Jini Kim Watson's theorization of the "new Asian city" illustrates, states of the so-called Asian Miracle nations were incredibly conscious of the aesthetic importance of performing their development through modern urban development. The idea of a global audience for work makes the postcolonial work ethic distinct from theorizations such as Max Weber's because rather than as an internal realization of spirituality or faith, the positive motivation to work is situated as partly external to the laboring body. Fanon's observations about the affective and aesthetic dimensions of a postcolonial work ethic provide the grounds for turning to literature.

Fanon's writing also makes clear the significance of the state for comprehending a postcolonial work ethic. While Fanon wrote of a particular concern he had of postcolonial nationalism going awry, he was also commenting on an emergent relationship between state and worker that was a global post-World War II phenomenon.²⁴ The way that the globalized, modern subjectivity of the citizen-worker combines with the imperative for Third World nations to develop is foundational to postcolonial capitalism. The highly entrenched sense of lag and desire to catch up would lead Kalyan Sanyal to describe postcolonial nation-states as "pre-committed to development."²⁵ Sandro Mezzadra points out that the citizen-worker form would facilitate the ideological depth of developmentalism by presenting "the generalization of wage labor as a condition for the full deployment of national citizenship (and therefore for the full achievement of sovereignty, which had fundamentally been at stake in anti-colonial struggles for independence)."²⁶ The citizen-worker subject, in other words, would yoke the affects of anticolonialism to a relation to the postcolonial nation-state by creating a nationalist system of valuing work.

Though, as Mezzadra reminds us, there is no single way of compelling labor, Fanon provides us the basic question we must ask of how a postcolonial work ethic is cultivated: How does the postcolonial state use colonial history and the idea of a global audience to compel labor from its subjects?

Given its ideological emphasis on individuality, such a question might seem irrelevant in the context of neoliberalism. Indeed, as Foucault explains, interventionist Keynesian policies, or the kind of policies that undergirded the developmental state nationalism of decolonization, was part of the “adversary and target of neoliberal thought, that which it was constructed against or which it opposed in order to form itself and develop.”²⁷ Such ideological opposition is why the rise of neoliberalism is typically regarded as marking a historical break from forms of capitalism that preceded it. Moreover, as Foucault explains, neoliberalism as drawn from Theodore Schultz’s and Gary Becker’s respective works on human capital, brings in considerations of labor in distinctive ways.²⁸ Rather than quantify labor in terms of time or capital (i.e., classical economics) or understand the process of abstraction in the mechanics of capitalism (i.e., Marx), theories of human capital instead take on the perspective of the worker by asking, “What does working mean for the person who works? What system of choice and rationality does the activity of work conform to?”²⁹ Consequently, neoliberalism proclaims that “Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself[,] . . . being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings.”³⁰ In other words, neoliberalism encourages an individual view of oneself as the capitalist enterprise against views that encourage a situated view of oneself as a figure of exchange within a broader capitalist system.

Though Foucault claims that neoliberal theories of human capital reflect “a complete change in the conception of this Homo economicus,” many of its conceptual tenets are central to the experience of colonialism and, moreover, evident in the logic of colonial and postcolonial governance. For example, Foucault points to the eugenicist and natalist reasoning that shapes “the formation, growth, accumulation, and improvement of human capital.”³¹ Although Foucault sidesteps the racial underpinnings of such thinking—a seeming gesture to his awareness of the critiques of Schultz’s ideas—in favor of familiar examples of human capital such as parenting, dwelling on examples from colonial history might have dampened Foucault’s claims about neoliberal conceptions of human capital as “a complete change.” As the narrator of Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* wryly explains their resistance to capitalism, “Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it’s because we, for as long as we have known you, *were* capital, like bales of cotton and sacks of sugar.”³² While Kincaid is writing about the transatlantic slave trade and the Caribbean, she calls attention to a historical, postcolonial consciousness of being treated as human capital. In the British colonies of Southeast Asia, workers were racially hierarchized in terms of their ability to work, echoes of which resonate in Singapore’s CMIO demography model and the phrase, “people are our only resource,” so prevalent in Singapore state discourse. Such colonial histories have rightfully been critiqued for their dehumanizing effects, but less has been made of how such histories have produced enterprising, self-investing, postcolonial subjects who view themselves as capital because such subjects are so

often instead interpreted as the winners of neoliberalism. When Foucault discusses the role of mobility in the formation of human capital, it is again difficult to not think of the ways that colonial and postcolonial subjects have moved to the metropole using the very same calculations that Foucault describes: "Migration is an investment; the migrant is an investor. He is an entrepreneur of himself who incurs expenses by investing to obtain some kind of improvement. The mobility of a population and its ability to make choices of mobility as investment choices for improving income enable the phenomena of migration to be brought back into economic analysis."³³ Indeed, such entrepreneurial postcolonial subjects and self-investing migrants appear throughout contemporary and canonical postcolonial literature.³⁴

This is not an attempt to disprove Foucault but to bring in a more explicit critical consideration of colonial and postcolonial histories of capitalism in the production of neoliberal subjectivity. As I show, while the individualist pleasures of the coming-of-career narrative may seem new and fitting for a neoliberalized economy, it is a form that retains and renews a postcolonial work ethic. My readings illustrate how work motivation structured by the history of colonialism, postcolonial state power, and the global audience is still central to the Singaporean coming-of-career narrative even as the narrative appears new and best suited for neoliberalism. While newness has typically been associated with the aesthetic of modernity, the novelty of the coming-of-career narrative remarks on the revitalization of work motivation and pleasure against a recent history of declining work energy.

HISTORICIZING WORK IN SINGAPORE

For the way that it recalls the dynamics of early postcolonial capitalism in Singapore alongside its depiction of turn-of-the-twenty-first century corporate work, *Mammon Inc.* provides a useful, generalizable historical frame for reading the various coming-of-career narratives in this chapter. *Mammon Inc.* is often described as a lighthearted, humorous novel about the escapades of an upwardly mobile cosmopolitan woman. Newly graduated, unemployed, and about to be deported because of her expiring student visa, Chiah Deng begrudgingly agrees to interview with Mammon Inc., the largest corporation in the world. She applies for the coveted position of "Adapter," in which she would help "the modern international professional elite" gain social acceptance in the countries where they are posted.³⁵ Readers follow the arc of Chiah Deng's foray into the "real world" after university and her quest to pass the tests for the Adapter position despite her reservations about pursuing a corporate career. Through the course of the tests and various conflicts with friends and family, Chiah Deng comes to understand that the position would afford her and her family great financial benefits, and she agrees to take the position at Mammon.

As a result of its multiple settings, *Mammon Inc.* has rightfully been situated in critical discussions of globalization and transnationalism, but such criticism has often focused on the global at the expense of the national. Reading *Mammon Inc.* biographically, Robbie B. H. Goh describes Tan as a “poster girl for the ‘global’ generation of Singapore writers” and suggests that as a result of her cosmopolitanism, Tan pays less attention to a Singaporean (i.e., national) sense of place compared to her local contemporaries.³⁶ Eddie Tay also frames the globality of Tan’s novel in opposition to national context and argues that it reveals “that a subjectivity created via an appeal to national identification may no longer be a viable option within a paradigm of globalization.”³⁷ In both examples, the global is an external structuring force that has the power to overwrite the significance of the nation. To a certain degree, this thesis might be true in terms of how much the novel’s global status, as marked by its international publication, was grounds for its local celebration—an example of what Paul Nadal describes as “remittance fiction,” or “a work produced abroad (as program fiction) and valorized at home (as national literature).”³⁸ The cosmopolitan nature and the appeal of Tan’s novel on a global scale should not suggest, however, that the novel is not engaged with national particularities. To assume so can produce a false dichotomy of nation and globe and effectively dehistoricize and depoliticize the novel’s global themes as they relate to specific material developments in Singapore.

In gesturing toward the work ideologies of Singapore’s manufacturing economy while also portraying Singapore’s engagement with neoliberal global capitalism, Tan’s novel offers a number of clues that point to the longer history of postcolonial capitalism in Singapore. In the opening scene of *Mammon Inc.* Chiah Deng laments to her university roommate, Steve, “I feel like I don’t fit in anywhere, like I can’t connect. Like I’m a three-pin plug living in a two-pin world.” Her revision of the idiomatic expression “a square peg in a round hole” indicates Chiah Deng’s sense of alienation and confusion about her place in society in the twenty-first century, a time marked by the influence of electronic technology. Her language also reveals her cosmopolitanism. “Anywhere” for Chiah Deng is global in scope, as her knowledge of three-pin and two-pin plugs indicates. Indeed, as a Singaporean who has just completed a degree at the University of Oxford, Chiah Deng is keenly aware of the different cultural currents one experiences as one moves through the world without a proper connection.

Without consideration of the Singaporean state’s overhaul of its manufacturing economy, Chiah Deng’s plug metaphor appears to merely describe a globalized identity. Tay takes the plug metaphor as a comment on Chiah Deng’s “transnational subjectivity that is, at the same time, transcendental” and states that the novel illustrates that it is difficult to “be a citizen of the world and at the same time remain loyal to local and specific national ties.”³⁹ Such a reading can depict Chiah Deng’s cosmopolitanism as unrooted while romanticizing it.

As a metaphor for her understanding of her place, or her lack of a place, in the world, Chiah Deng's plug takes on a different valence in an exchange with Draco Sidious, head of Mammon Inc. Explaining the tests that prove an applicant's aptitude as an Adapter, Draco Sidious hands Chiah Deng a plug: "We like to think of ourselves as being like a universal travel adapter. We enable our clients to go anywhere in the world, and plug into the power supply there." Slowly grasping the implications of Draco's explanation, Chiah Deng asks, "So you want me to become like a plug-and-play peripheral[,] . . . like one of those PCMCIA cards that you can just take out of the box and slot into any computer, anywhere?"⁴⁰ Mammon wants Chiah Deng to function as a connection between two-pin plugs and three-pin plug sockets and vice versa. Though the interchange may seem unremarkable because it is typical of the novel's humor, its language is also reminiscent of *Singapore 21*, a socioeconomic development report written in response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, published two years before *Mammon Inc.*⁴¹

The Singaporean of the 21st century is a cosmopolitan Singaporean, one who is familiar with global trends and lifestyles and feels comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas. . . . They must be encouraged to explore foreign languages, literature, geography, history and cultures throughout their school years, so that they will grow up "world ready," able to *plug-and-play* with confidence in the global economy.⁴²

Although Chiah Deng seems to use the meanings of "plug," the "PCMCIA card," and "plug-and-play peripheral" somewhat interchangeably, the metaphors point to different layers of the Adapter's work: the plug conceptualizes Chiah Deng as a conduit of power, the PCMCIA card as a conduit of information, and the plug-and-play peripheral as independently adaptable (i.e., hardware with software that is user-friendly and not in need of further user input). The plug metaphor and the PCMCIA card reference, moreover, dramatizes a changing global order, anticipating the Asian Century. The "two-pin world" references the United States, China, and many newly emergent Asian countries, and the "three-pin plug" references Chiah Deng's situation in the United Kingdom and Singapore's colonial heritage. The PCMCIA card also references the incredible success of Singaporean tech companies like Creative Technology, which needed to interface their products with many different international standards in the 1980s and 1990s. When taken together, the metaphors reveal the multifaceted significance of translators as intermediaries between changing interfaces of power, a hybrid role that has long, controversial roots in colonial history.

In the twenty-first-century context of global capitalism, Chiah Deng's job as a plug/Adapter also becomes a comment on immaterial labor. Noting the changes in economic paradigms over the history of capitalism, Michael Hardt writes that "providing services and manipulating information are at the heart of economic production."⁴³ Accordingly, Hardt argues, the nature of labor has changed and is

increasingly immaterial insofar as it is now a kind of labor “that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge, or communication.”⁴⁴ Certainly, the very notion of an Adapter, a consultant and assistant to the transnational elite, is exemplary of the immaterial labor that Hardt describes. But as the various referents of the various plug metaphors suggest, the novel encourages a historical understanding of immaterial labor. As I later discuss, the novel depicts the pleasures of immaterial labor not only as a comment on new economic paradigms but also as an illustration of how such pleasures are a postcolonial, historical formation.⁴⁵

The similarity of the language in Tan’s novel and the *Singapore 21* report can be read as an ironic relation that comports with the novel’s broader efforts to satirize and critique the Singaporean state. Even though I read the language of *Mammon Inc.* as historically referential, slang and idiomatic language can easily be credited to the novel’s globalized cultural milieu. Much like in the previous chapter’s example of Jeremy Tiang’s writing, Tan deploys language that *seems* to evidence the effects of global culture but is in fact historically resonant with Singaporean policy and governance. The consistency with which a resonance occurs suggests that *Mammon Inc.* is purposefully making a critique and calling attention to the ways that Global Asia erases the history of postcolonial capitalism by misattribution. Thus, rather than read the novel’s pop style and “mass-mediatized language usage, one that reads easily, well and quickly, and is comfortable with the culture industry,”⁴⁶ as evidence of Chiah Deng’s or Tan’s (Western) cultural literacy, I see the language of *Mammon Inc.* as performing something beyond fluency: it is in fact overwrought with pop culture allusions, caricaturing the Singaporean state’s ideal citizen as someone who is “familiar with global trends and lifestyles.”⁴⁷ This excess in language is akin to what Shashi R. Thandra describes as the postcolonial aesthetic strategy of hyperbole, which ultimately has a critical function.⁴⁸ Read this way, and as a reference to the *Singapore 21* report, the above exchange between Chiah Deng and Draco Sidious repurposes the report’s language. The report is meant to be read as ambitious and perhaps even inspirational, but the grand-sounding notion of “world ready” is ridiculed when Chiah Deng asks incredulously if her job is to be the equivalent of a computer piece. While PCMCIA cards were certainly crucial to computer connectivity in the early 2000s, Chiah Deng’s disbelief reveals the disjuncture between her perception of the Adapter’s cosmopolitan glamour and Draco Sidious’s unsentimental depiction of the Adapter’s instrumentality to power.

Chiah Deng’s initial resistance to working at Mammon draws a throughline between early and contemporary postcolonial capitalism in Singapore. Early in the novel, she claims, “I didn’t want to be a cog in some capitalist machine.”⁴⁹ Within the story world of *Mammon Inc.*, Chiah Deng balks at the idea of becoming a corporate drone and attempts to resist Mammon’s seemingly inescapable power by refusing to become a mere function of a larger system. Again Chiah Deng’s language, which could be simply interpreted as evidence of her trite or naive thinking,



FIGURE 4. A poster from the Productivity Movement, featuring Teamy the Bee / “Bee” A Team, ca. 1985. Poster from National Productivity Board campaign. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

in fact points to the novel’s broader political context, echoing some of the initial praise of *Singapore* 21. As a member of Parliament, Simon Tay, who commended the report, described some of the problematic economic rationalities of the manufacturing era as such: “In Singapore, we have been used to saying, ‘People are our only resource.’ This is an accepted truth. But part of the way this truth has been seen is that people become just a resource. That is to say, people become important only in so far as they give utility to the national good, the economic bottom line. . . . In this, there is a tendency to see people solely in an economic paradigm, as *cogs in a grand machine*.”⁵⁰ While Chiah Deng’s sentiments might appear to register frustration with labor alienation and global capitalism as it is embodied by Mammon Inc., her invocation of “cogs in a machine” also captures a frustration that emerges from Singapore’s economic history as it relates to work motivation issues from the manufacturing economy era.

When Singapore’s economy was focused on industrial manufacturing, the government orchestrated a formal campaign known as the Productivity Movement, reflecting the kind of developmentalist-inspired work ethic that Fanon observed.⁵¹ To promote Japanese management techniques and productivity concepts (e.g., teamwork, quality control circles), the state developed propaganda that included posters, television commercials with catchy jingles, a mascot known as “Teamy the Bee,” pamphlets, and periodicals.⁵² The Productivity Movement sought to equate

“hard work” with what was known as “productivity will,” or “the desire and drive to develop oneself for the growth of the company so that in turn, the individual will benefit from a stronger company and nation.”⁵³ Work for transnational corporations was ultimately for the national good, and thus the government exhorted citizens to work endlessly, tirelessly, and precisely in its production of goods like hard disk drives and silicon computer chips. National Development Minister Teh Cheang Wan warned that Singapore would “stagnate and then fall behind if we do not increase productivity. And we, not being fortunate enough to be endowed with any natural resources, have nothing to fall back on.”⁵⁴ Not simply relying on the liberation rhetoric, Teh emphasizes precarity by linking the nation’s survival with its citizens’ abilities to work productively. Arguably, the Singaporean state’s emphasis on the nation’s existential crisis is unique to the postcolonial world, reflecting the island nation’s unusual path to independence. This period would also see a stronger celebration of urban modernity in political speeches—skyscrapers, Housing Development Board (HDB) complexes, subways—which would simultaneously function as an incentive to work hard as well as proof of the state’s ability to effectively harness its citizens’ hard work to create material rewards.

Rather than solely read the coming-of-career narrative in terms of its congruence for the post-1997 knowledge economy, we might also read it as remedying the problems of living labor. Singaporean novels like *If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng, set in 1960s Singapore, provide insights into the early labor history of postcolonial capitalism, a time when the state required workers for its industrialized manufacturing economy. The novel illustrates the disciplinary difficulties of managing what Marx described as living labor and, moreover, setting the conditions for the coming-of-career narrative to flourish. To put it a little differently: under contemporary postcolonial capitalism, during which the coming-of-career narrative emerges in Singapore, the nationalist state-driven developmentalism that Fanon speaks of does not quite have the same ideological hold on its subjects, though it will never completely disappear. The move from a developmentalist state-nationalist narrative to a coming-of-career narrative is not about the historical stages of capitalism but a comment on the vitalist nature of work itself.⁵⁵ For the protagonist of *Dream*, Kwang Meng, the industriousness of the manufacturing economy demanded of him resulted in a distinct lack of pleasure in work. This lack of pleasure would form the basis of the novel’s critique: the industriousness advocated by the Singaporean state for the benefit of the corporation and thus the nation was not giving pleasurable meaning to work. While the colonial era work was exploitative, *Dream* suggests that the call to work by the postcolonial state is hollow because the work feels meaningless and boring. Certainly, as illustrated by Kwang Meng’s petty attempts at resisting work, capital can neither discipline nor capture Kwang Meng’s labor. This, combined with the novel’s flat aesthetic, points to the diminishing motivational power of state-nationalist rhetoric. Singapore’s urban developments, which were so often touted by the state as the gratifying achievement of hard work, provide no pleasure for Kwang Meng, who views their “seriality” with great apathy.⁵⁶ In

other words, Kwang Meng's lack of pleasure in work is not only a comment on the industrial drudgery associated with a manufacturing economy but also a symptom of diminished energy that is inured to government appeals like the Productivity Movement and other gestures toward postcolonial independence.

Despite the exuberance of the Productivity Movement, state discourse of the time reflects an awareness of the problems of living labor and the difficulty of compelling work from Singapore's citizenry.⁵⁷ What Marx deemed the issue of living labor is what the Singaporean state deemed as the problems of "the individual" and their (Westernized) desires, problems that would become articulated as culturalist through emerging Asian Values discourse of the time.⁵⁸ Speaking then as a trade and industry minister, Goh Chok Tong affirmed that "workers are not mere cogs in the wheel of industry."⁵⁹ But as a speech by Acting Minister of Social Affairs Ahmad Mattar illustrates, the "cog effect" seemed part and parcel of the manufacturing economy.

In this technological age, people are often seen as digits in the whole process of development. We are seen as factors of production and caught up in a whole social and economic process. . . . We are statistics for most purposes and except for some who make the public scene, the rest are just nameless and faceless. . . . People should be seen as individuals who have needs, feelings and emotions which have to be recognized. It is only when we show concern for people as people that we can hope to have a healthy population which can bring us to new heights in our nation-building. It is important that we nurture the healthy well-being of our people especially in a country such as ours where our only resource is human resource.⁶⁰

Ahmad's worries about individuals and their emotional health stands out from the attitude of his colleagues, who typically foregrounded the needs of the nation and the corporation, with the individual mentioned as an afterthought. Despite Ahmad's more compassionate stance, his language comports with the economic bottom line: interest in the well-being of citizen-workers is ultimately in the interest of sustaining living labor. In fact, Ahmad's speech anticipates the kinds of twenty-first-century corporate management logics that would focus on employee happiness and well-being for the sake of better functioning in capitalist society.

Even as *Mammon Inc.* appears to engage the contemporary politics of Singapore's neoliberal milieu, Chiah Deng's use of the cliché "cog in a machine" to describe her resistance to corporate work invokes a longer history of state discourse on work. We will also see gestures to this history in the other coming-of-career texts I discuss later in this chapter. The pleasures that the Singapore coming-of-career narrative emphasizes respond to the problems of work motivation of the manufacturing economy. Certainly, the neoliberalized knowledge economy that Singapore transitioned to after the 1997 financial crisis emphasized new kinds of work and skills, namely, "social and intellectual capital," "innovation," and "creativity" for the purpose of providing highly specialized services to consumers and corporations rather than the ability to manufacture standard goods at large volumes.⁶¹ In the transition to the knowledge economy, Prime Minister Goh appeared to promise

new individualist pleasures for the Singaporean citizen-worker: "Individuals [would enjoy] satisfaction in being able to exercise innovation, [and] demonstrate initiative."⁶² Moreover, the education reform aimed at the new work of the knowledge economy, Goh claimed, would allow an individual "the freedom to participate in improving his own life as well as his community and nation."⁶³ Although the novelty of such internal pleasures would seem to replace the inspiration of postcolonial independence, in view of the threat of declining modernity and the state mandate of productivity, such pleasures are, in fact, contending with the history of early postcolonial capitalism. In other words, the sort of individualist work pleasures that are typically read as neoliberal are also a corrective to the diminishing returns of developmentalism. In this way, the coming-of-career narrative has as strong a postcolonial gloss as a neoliberal one.

THE PLEASURES OF THE CAREER

Despite her previous reservations about corporate capitalism, Chiah Deng comes to accept the values of Mammon Inc. because she ultimately finds the labor rewarding. The reconciliation of Chiah Deng's values with Mammon's is true to the form of the bildungsroman narrative in that the protagonist reaches maturity the moment she is no longer in conflict with broader social structures, although in the bildungsroman the structure has typically been the nation, whereas in *Mammon Inc.* it is the transnational corporation. Chiah Deng's identification with Mammon Inc. illustrates what Colleen Lye via Kathi Weeks describes as a work ethic in which "employees' identification with management" remarks on the changing nature of post-Fordist work.⁶⁴ Because Mammon Inc. seems to have replaced the nation-state as the social structure shaping Chiah Deng's personality development, it is tempting to read Tan's novel as a commentary on a changed global political system in which the transnational corporation reigns. Indeed, depictions of the neoliberal era tend to characterize the transnational corporation as displacing the power of nation-state. Rather than the transnational corporation and the nation-state vying for ideological dominance, however, here the nation and the corporation operate in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship is most evident when we consider how the form of pleasure yokes the postcolonial with the neoliberal. Let us briefly turn to the passage in which this climactic moment unfolds.

For one of Mammon's tests, Chiah Deng must gain entrance into Utopia, an exclusive nightclub in New York City, ostensibly to prove her cosmopolitanism and ability to assimilate into unfamiliar situations. To prepare, Chiah Deng gives herself a complete makeover, going on an extreme diet and exercise program in order to lose weight and fit into an appropriate dress. After the final stage of her physical transformation, Chiah Deng looks in the mirror:

For the first time in my life, when I looked into the mirror, my instant reaction was, "oh my God, I look so cool." I slid my hands down the sexy white-leather dress,

skin-tight against my finely honed body, which, for the first time in my life, bulged in all the right places. I never thought I could ever feel that way about myself . . . to be able to see myself and think—"Hello, cover girl. *Gen Vex* this month, *Vogue* the next."⁶⁵

Here *Mammon Inc.* makes a powerful point about the pleasures of work. The satisfaction Chiah Deng experiences is in the product of herself as an aesthetic delight, as a commodity, and as her own person. In the critical vocabularies of the bildungsroman, one could describe the pleasure Chiah Deng takes in her person as a Lacanian moment of self-realization. This is certainly a valid reading, supported by Chiah Deng's repeated exclamations, "for the first time" and "I never thought," which both emphasize the internal experience of comprehension; the consolidation of the subject with social structure is an emotionally gratifying experience. The language of the passage, however, also points to Chiah Deng's tactile pleasure of what contains that pleasure: the bodily form of her self. While the bildungsroman emphasizes the *content* of the self through personality development and the internal voice made possible by the novelistic form, this scene reveals the significance of one's own *form* and one's externalized experience of it. In other words, if the climactic moment of the bildungsroman is the consolidation of the subject with broader social order of the nation, what we see in this scene is slightly different: the consolidation of the internal self with the external self, or the aesthetic experience of the self as subject and object.

The action and the setting of the scene, moreover, emphasizes how Chiah Deng's pleasure in her self (i.e., her body) is one that she experiences on her own (i.e., alone). The mirror, which conveys an external view of herself, and Chiah Deng's evaluation of her body as achieving gendered ("right places" to bulge) and racialized beauty standards (the white "skin" of the dress), suggests that the pleasure Chiah Deng takes in herself is, in part, determined by social norms. But the fact that this gaze is made possible by an object that Chiah Deng uses according to *her* needs, a mirror, foregrounds Chiah Deng's purposeful action. Chiah Deng deploys this social/external gaze in service of her own pleasure. She can see herself and enjoy herself in the way that an external audience does. The pleasure of the self is self-contained not just in terms of her body, but in terms of solitude: while alone, Chiah Deng finds emotional gratification from the development of her self-content, aesthetic enjoyment from her self-form, and scopophilic pleasure from the encounter with her self in the mirror.

On the one hand, we can read Chiah Deng's pleasure as a remark on the motivational power of the individualist ideologies so often espoused by neoliberalism, in this case by *Mammon Inc.* as the transnational corporation. As Chiah Deng's perception of her self-improvement deepens and her pleasure in herself grows with each passing test, *Mammon Inc.* is more effectively able to compel her labor because Chiah Deng becomes and sustains her own work motivation as a material object of pleasure. In this way, employee and management are united in their purpose. While it is true that Chiah Deng performs immaterial labor, it is hard to

ignore how strongly the text emphasizes the gendered, material pleasure of her own body. Hardt explains that immaterial labor “results in no material and durable good,”⁶⁶ but the novel reveals that it is actually the producer of services that experiences the material good rather than the consumer of services. If under industrial or extractive capitalism material goods are typically understood within the purview of consumption, under informational and service capitalism, *Mammon Inc.* suggests, material goods have a labor function. Moreover, to use the parlance of neoliberalism, Chiah Deng’s perception of her work as for herself can be described as that of individualism, or the orientation of labor, social actions, and behavior to the benefit of the individual rather than the community. The power of self-pleasure is abundantly evident in *Mammon Inc.* when she admits, “For the first time in my life, I had to admit that the bad guys were right all along. Mammon Inc. was right and I was wrong—money can make you into the person you’ve always dreamed of becoming.”⁶⁷ The pleasures that Chiah Deng experiences and is able to generate for herself act as a positive feedback loop, which in turn distracts her from the effects of capitalist violence because Mammon Inc. appears as a catalyst for a better self.

On the other hand, the solitude of the mirror scene indicates a different kind of postcolonial pleasure that emerges from the feeling of agency, or the capacity to exercise free will. As Fanon points out in his critique of nationalized labor, the feeling and pleasure of agency—in his example, agency from colonial exploitation as articulated through nationalism—catalyzed capitalist developmentalism. The pleasure that Chiah Deng experiences in the mirror scene is formally akin to what Fanon describes, except that the structure in question is the nation-state. When we recall, as Tina Chen writes, that “agency is often paired with another term—‘structure’—the two understood as making up the dynamic between the choices and creative actions of individuals and the social, political, and economic structures within which they operate,” we must then consider the ways Chiah Deng experiences the “feeling of structure” in the lead-up to the mirror scene.⁶⁸ In the rising action of Tan’s novel, Chiah Deng experiences internal conflict about working at a “capitalist machine” that would enable her to support her family financially.⁶⁹ As Chiah Deng contends with the pressure to take care of her parents as they age (“You need to make a lot of money to give us, so Buddha will see that you’re very filial,” her sister Chiah Chen tells her), particularly as her father is suffering from worsening night blindness,⁷⁰ the feeling of structure that emerges in this moment is the institution of the nuclear family. Family is deeply imbricated in the national project, as the family is the site of what Teo Youyenn describes as “neoliberal morality” in Singapore, or “a set of institutionalized *relationships* and ethical *meanings* that link citizens to each other and to the state . . . [and] render the paradoxes embedded within state pursuits of neoliberalism inevitable, natural, and indeed good.”⁷¹ *Mammon Inc.* provides a slightly different and historical gloss on the notion of what exactly feels good about neoliberalism, however. As Chiah Cheng centers her family as the reason to pursue a career at Mammon, we see

at play the neoliberal morality that Teo theorizes. But ultimately, this does not make Chiah Deng feel good, though in theory it is supposed to. Instead, she feels instrumentalized by her family since her labor is ultimately for *their* pleasure and the determinative force of structure is felt through her sense of obligation. Chiah Deng's family dynamics also invoke Singapore's Asian Values era, and Tan satirizes this history of exploiting traditional affects in service of its capitalist agenda through Chiah Chen's mixing of traditions (Buddhism is not known to espouse materialism; filial piety is a value more associated with Confucianism). Thus even as Chiah Deng registers obligation through the family, she feels the structure of the nation-state.

The mirror scene calls attention to how the self-form is central to the workings of individualism and agency, thus asking readers to consider the continuities between neoliberal and postcolonial work ethics. That we can read Chiah Deng's pleasure in her self as either indicative of neoliberalism's ideological hold or as her resistance to state-driven postcolonial capitalism more broadly illustrates how states and corporations operate in concert to compel labor from their subjects: in this case, neoliberalism offers a kind of pleasure in work that postcolonial subjects desire. Rather than read transnational corporations and nation-states as competing institutions, *Mammon Inc.* asks us to think through the intersection of their power. When Prime Minister Goh advocated educational reform that would promote the basic tenets of neoliberalism, this was not a concession of state power but a way of further obscuring it through the ruse of the global economy. The seeming erasure of the Singapore nation-state is evidenced in readings of *Mammon Inc.* that have tended to treat the "global" as an external structuring force that has overwritten the significance of the nation-state. *Mammon Inc.* illustrates the relative illegibility of state power and warns us to resist the critical desire to read capitalist power as emanating from a single sociopolitical structure or distinct historical period.

CAREER EMPLOTMENT AND TRANSNATIONAL CAPTURE

While the temporality of the postcolonial nation has typically been discussed in terms of the colonial teleology of historicism or in terms of nationalism, *Conversations on Coming Home* reveals something quite different in the way it emplots Singapore as the career telos for the returning Singaporean's coming-of-career narrative. Emplotment—or the parsing of time into events and arranging them into a plot—is central for comprehending postcolonial critiques of developmental logics.⁷² In the self-centric coming-of-career narrative, emplotment is conditioned by notions of life progression and conventional ideas about age identity. This is not to suggest that there are not broader determinative powers at work in career emplotment, but because the teleological workings of the coming-of-career

narrative are premised on self-improvement—rather than national improvement or colonial superiority—structure recedes into the background.

The novelistic form of *Mammon Inc.* is especially useful for comprehending how emplotment constructs the career as life telos by illustrating how youth is a transient time of economic impossibility and impractical idealism.⁷³ The novel depicts youth as a life stage filled with pleasure and lack of (financial) responsibility. Youth and immaturity are made legible in the portrayal of Chiah Deng's and Steve's student life as fun and carefree or, as Chiah Deng puts it, "the perfect slacker lifestyle."⁷⁴ Chiah Deng muses over the things she would miss about her student life in England if she were to move back to Singapore for work:

If I left England, there would be no more sleeping in on Bank Holidays, waking up just in time for the mandatory mid-afternoon Bond movie on telly. No more Saturday afternoons at the launderette, listening to the cricket on Radio 4 on our portable radio and fighting over who gets to read the TV Guide in the *Guardian* first. No more eating strawberries at Wimbledon, swept up in Henmania; no more intellectual slumming, nursing pints of Boddingtons while deconstructing Indiana Jones with reference to James Frazer's *Golden Bough*.⁷⁵

As Chiah Deng performs her fluency with British contemporary culture, the passage portrays her student life as filled with entertainment and instant gratification. The repetition of "no more" indicates that life in the impending real world lacks pleasure. Also symbolically apt is how Chiah Deng says she will no longer be able to sleep in on bank holidays because her post-schooling life requires that she engage with the real world of global capitalism. This framing of youth as an inadequacy and as a finite surmountable *event*, rather than structuring ideology, makes it possible for the career to loom large as the inevitable solution and "coming." While the portrayal of youth as deficient has been a useful strategy of dismissal for justifying control, Tan's novel illustrates how the desire to transform oneself into a globally, economically viable subject is rooted in social constructions of age. The significance of a career is built on anxieties of economic survival and the pleasure principle of life progression. The ties forged between career advancement and life maturity are key for the coming-of-career narrative to appear and feel meaningful and essential for concealing broader structural forces like the nation or for justifying them, as in the case of *Mammon*.

The ideological work of career emplotment is especially evident in *Conversations on Coming Home*, a booklet I encountered while at Singapore Day 2012 in New York City.⁷⁶ As evidenced by the glossy booklet's length of fifty pages on heavy-stock paper, professional color printing, and sleek graphic design, no expense was spared in its production. If one were to construct a sense of the diasporic Singaporean demographic from *Conversations*, one would likely assume Overseas Singaporeans are predominantly Chinese. Functioning as a table of contents, the opening pages of the booklet feature a series of individual photos of the



FIGURE 5. Author with the *Conversations* booklet.

returning, Chinese-passing Singaporeans. Although the names do not reveal those with mixed-race backgrounds, it is notable that none of the Singaporeans in the booklet have Malay or South Asian names—the major non-Chinese ethnic groups in Singapore. Underneath each photo we find the person's name, the company they work for, and where they lived before moving back to Singapore. As company names such as Goldman Sachs, Accenture, and Mitsubishi connote, these Singaporeans are highly skilled professionals. The booklet spotlights engineers, researchers, business managers, and legal interns, in addition to bankers. Overseas Singaporeans, according to this booklet, are synonymous with what Leslie Sklair describes as the “transnational capitalist class,” or a global elite composed of corporate managers and professionals.⁷⁷

The state's sinocentric racialization of coming-of-career narratives adds to the text's differential function.⁷⁸ Already coming-of-career narratives are selective by virtue of their limited articulation with professionalized work. Though the depiction of Overseas Singaporeans as primarily Chinese is likely true since Chinese constitute the largest demographic in Singapore and overall are in the best economic position to become professional, mobile, and cosmopolitan, *Conversations* is distinct from conventional state representations of Singaporeans. It is more typical to see representations of Singapore as a racially and ethnically diverse society.

Conversations thus invites questions of how and when the state deploys multiracial and multicultural inclusivity and why Overseas Singaporeans are, in this instance, represented as racially homogeneous. Certainly, the answer might simply be that the state has a clear preference for the kinds of Singaporeans they would like to return. But when considering how conscious the state tends to be about its global image and how *Conversations* is a text that circulated globally through Contact Singapore's programming and website,⁷⁹ the racialization of coming-of-career narratives, I would hypothesize, also serves a broader function of distinguishing Singapore's workers from others in the region, a point I discuss further in the next section. Indeed, the state's use of the coming-of-career narrative is one of the ways that it inscribes "First World" on its citizen-workers, which differentiates them from other modes of postcolonial labor and transnational mobility in the region, such as the Philippines, which bases its economy on feminized labor and remittance. In this way, *Conversations* reflects a state awareness that not all globalized forms of labor are equal.

By presenting the Overseas Singaporean as a classed and racial identity, the state is effectively generating the semiotic terms through which to understand Singapore as distinct from the rest of Southeast Asia (racially imagined as brown) and more firmly attaching itself to East Asia. When further considering how the Overseas Singaporean is subtly presented as a linguistic identity, or at least an identity with linguistic capability, Overseas Singaporeans are presented as distinct from other East Asians because they are anglophone educated. The cultural work of distinguishing Overseas Singaporeans thus feeds into the Singaporean state's broader goal of presenting Global Asia as an advanced stage of capitalist development, one that presents Singapore as having overcome its Third World roots of underdevelopment. In other words, the politics of representation in *Conversations* reflects the state's navigation of the racial politics of development on a global stage.

Much like the demographic compilations discussed in the previous chapter, the layout of *Conversations* follows a standardized format, and its repetition gives the impression that such Singaporeans returning home are a noteworthy population. Every profile is a double-page feature with one full-page colored photo and a second page dedicated to the story of the featured subject's decision to return. Each of the photos features a professionally dressed individual looking away from the camera against either a background that showcases Singapore's modern architecture or a "natural" landscape, denoted by trees. Not only does business clothing emphasize professional status; many of the returning Singaporeans are holding an iPad, a smartphone, a tablet computer, or a book. The presence of these commodities marks the subjects as modern, educated, sophisticated, in some cases technologically savvy, and thus embedded in a capitalist economy.

The coming-of-career narratives of these profiles are simultaneously stories of diasporic return, combining tropes of career ascendance with those of travel writing. However, the story arcs of these two narrative types are somewhat at odds.

In travel writing, the climax of self-realization typically happens during one's travels as a result of the protagonist's encounters with difference abroad. While the Singaporean state finds economic value in a cosmopolitan citizenry, so long as it wants to draw Singaporeans back home, it cannot present overseas experience as the climax of their citizens' lives. To do so would mean that the diasporic Singaporean's return home would run counter to the developmental logics of the coming-of-career narrative or appear as rather inglorious, particularly since the postcolonial home has historically been regarded as inferior with respect to the colonial metropole.

One of the ways that the booklet mitigates the return's connotation of regression is by choosing profiles that emplot overseas experience as an event in an individual's youth rather than as an identity like "Overseas Singaporean." In some of the profiles, the overseas sojourn is overtly portrayed as a youthful endeavor. The opening profile of the booklet, for example, reads:

Debra Ma absolutely enjoyed her graduate school days at Boston University where she received an MBA in Finance and Strategy. She was inspired by the exchange of ideas within the diverse global student population. . . . Back in Singapore she is inspired in a different way—by exciting new architecture, fascinating heritage conservation and an equally international make up in her home city.⁸⁰

Though seeking an MBA does not have the same connotations of youth in the way that pursuing an undergraduate degree does, the bio underscores youth through notions of fun ("absolutely enjoyed") and personal growth ("inspired"). Perhaps because of the booklet's rhetorical context, the description makes sure to convey that Ma's time abroad was temporally circumscribed but purposeful because she attained an advanced degree in a field that firmly connects her to the global economy.

In other profiles, the connotation of overseas experience as youthful is the result of the return to Singapore appearing as the "mature" event because of responsibilities for aging family members. Eileen Wong explains that her return was "propelled by the frustration I felt when my father fell ill and I was not there to support him in seeking the best medical care," and Alice Lim echoes the concerns about "parents who are getting older and whose health conditions are not ideal."⁸¹ Such comments about family responsibility dovetail with ones that portray family as stable and territorially entrenched. For example, Lin Yan explains, "My family is here and I grew up here," language echoed by Dr. Vrizlynn Thing, who explains her decision to return to Singapore was because "my family is here."⁸² Taken together, family emerges as the stable, durable referent that is in contrast to the transitory, temporally circumscribed experience of being overseas. Framing the overseas experience as an event rather than a defining characteristic, transforms overseas experience into the rising action of the Singaporean's career trajectory.

Though typically the protagonists of travel narratives experience self-realization as a result of their encounters with difference and newness, *Conversations* stresses that the newness is found at home, as evidenced by the constant praise of various urban, tourist, and recreational developments. While the developmental narrative of *Mammon Inc.* casts newness in terms of plot, *Conversations* presents its setting in a continuous state of newness. This is quite a departure from the generic conventions of the bildungsroman, which usually presents national setting as an unforgiving and immovable structural force as typified by the “individual versus society” formulation. By contrast, we see in Ma’s profile, for example, that her continuing development not only relies on the temporal distinction of the present from her youth but also on Singapore’s spatial distinction from its past in new urban developments. Singapore, with its “new architecture” and its increasing “international makeup” made possible by liberal immigration policies to attract so-called foreign talent, offers a distinct experience from what Ma remembers. Newness is even signaled through Ma’s reference to “heritage conservation.” Though “heritage conservation” would seem to be about the preservation of history and therefore not a novel experience, Ma is alluding to state initiatives to gentrify ethnic neighborhoods for tourism, thus transforming once-familiar sites into something new and different for the returned Singaporean. Indeed, throughout *Conversations* the returned Singaporeans extol the new Singapore they encounter. Chan Yan Neng comments, “Singapore’s physical landscape has transformed and there are many new buildings and outdoor spaces. On weekends, I enjoy exploring the countless walking and cycling trails around the city and discovering new independent shops and cafes. I don’t remember there being so much to do before!”⁸³ Wong Kit Yeng also commends Singapore for its new sites: “I like the new park developments such as Henderson Waves, the bridge that leads to Mount Faber. . . . I plan to visit the New ArtScience Museum as well, but have not had the time.”⁸⁴ Ironically, as they reassure their readers of the unknown side of Singapore, Chan’s and Wong’s statements reveal a kind of pleasure more typical of colonial-era travel narratives—that of the undiscovered.

The simultaneous imagining of Singapore as new and as home in *Conversations* is where we can locate how the state is using tourist developments to reconfigure the role of the nation under Global Asia. Unlike in previous formulations, where state rhetoric would deploy the nation as a galvanizing political force or represent the nation as a site of state management (with all its disciplinary or authoritarian connotations), *Conversations* instead presents Singapore as the setting in which the climax of the coming-of-career narrative can unfold. While the notion of home retains sentimental value through family ties and cultural traditions in *Conversations*, its rootedness in the diasporic Singaporean’s past is augmented by perceptions of newness. Newness is enabled by perspective gained by time away and then amplified by the new infrastructural developments of the island nation. But unlike the infrastructural developments of decolonization that Jini Kim Watson

examines, newness is signified in *Conversations* through tourist attractions. Rather than present localized infrastructure such as housing, community centers, and neighborhood shopping centers, *Conversations* suggests an architectural performance that emphasizes personal pleasure rather than the national project of urban modernity. In chapter 4, I discuss how the politics of pleasure are central to the imagining of Singapore as contemporary and opposed to the nation as “lackluster” and “sterile” and in the broader context of orientalism. In this context of compelling labor from its citizen-workers, however, the booklet appeals to a classed preference for activities amenable to notions of work-life balance: outdoor recreation, cultural excursions, social interaction with new people. There are no depictions, in other words, of the Singapore “heartland,” the residential estates in which the majority of Singaporeans live. By emphasizing the pleasures and the career opportunities that Singapore has to offer, the state reassures its subjects that they are not returning to a tiresome context where productivity must be maximized for the good of the country. Instead, Singapore will serve the pleasure of the self.

In fact, even though *Conversations* serves as state messaging to Singaporeans abroad, it is striking how muted the state presence is in the text whether by lack of reference to policies or governance or lack of economic nationalist rhetoric whereby returned Singaporeans portray their recently acquired skills or labor as a contribution for the nation. The foreword by Ng Siew Kiang, executive director of Contact Singapore, is devoted primarily to the agency’s role in resettling returned Singaporeans using language like that of a CEO of a headhunting firm rather than a government bureaucrat. At best, Chan Yan Neng’s profile mentions that “socio-political conversation . . . has become very lively with more people voicing their opinions through new channels for public debate.”⁸⁵ The most direct comment on governance, in other words, is one that reassures readers about its lack of an oppressive presence.

This deliberate obfuscation in a state text indicates a changed dynamic, one in which the state’s relationship to its subject is less direct and is rerouted through, in this case, the transnational, neoliberal corporation. The coming-of-career narrative, with all its presentist emphasis on self-making and self-pleasure that enables employee identification with corporate management, is a mode of concealing the state’s past demands of endless productivity. *Conversations* presents the nation as a setting for work pleasure and as an atmosphere in which the ideal self can be realized. This text demonstrates how the Singaporean nation—as Global Asia—becomes a propulsive form in the background of the subject, symbolizing a potentiality that is apt to the coming-of-career narrative. The Singapore of early postcolonial capitalism, in contrast, shaped its subjects through containment aimed at galvanizing its subjects into the sociopolitical project of economic development. In other words, the nation of contemporary postcolonial capitalism is a space detached from the state that plays favorably to those performing certain kinds of labor.

Moreover, the particular kind of appeal being made to returned Singaporeans in *Conversations* is one that takes advantage of a postcolonial inferiority complex and citizen anxieties over Singapore's history of disciplinary governance. There have been long-standing local criticisms of how the state has oriented its governance to suit the needs of expatriates ("foreign talent," in government parlance) at the expense of its own citizens. But *Conversations* seems to promise returned Singaporeans that they can behave like foreigners and relish the kinds of pleasures typically afforded to expatriates and tourists, including more distance from the state.⁸⁶ *Conversations* appeals to the postcolonial subject's subordinate sense of being that has been further entrenched by the Singaporean state's treatment of expatriates and tourists. If the state's promise of the manufacturing era to hardworking Singaporeans was the reward of modernity, the knowledge economy promises the reward of foreigner privilege to cosmopolitan, professionalized Singaporeans.

THE DIFFERENTIAL POLITICS OF COMING-OF-CAREER NARRATIVES

"A Worker's Journey," a poem originally written in Bengali by Sharif (Shromiker Pothchola) that was shortlisted for the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in 2014, turns us back to the themes of the drudgery of work and cultural alienation that appeared in *If We Dream Too Long*.⁸⁷ "Journey," like "career," denotes a sense of traveling a long distance. But there is hardly any sense of progress or fulfillment in the worker's journey depicted in Sharif's poem. The speaker's desire in the first stanza "for a break in the rhythm" conveys how the worker's journey is endless and unchanging. In further contrast to the slow pacing of *Dream*, the repetition of the line, "I have to run, keep running," emphasizes the obligatory, physical nature of migrant labor. While "run" can denote the speed of movement, it can also refer to the state of being operational—a machine that is on—emphasizing how migrant workers are viewed as without human dignity. Beyond the assumed need for the money that comes with work, the specific obligation marked by "have to" is unclear in the poem, adding to a sense of purposelessness and drudgery. As the last lines of the poem underscore the speaker's sense of alienation ("At times I belong to this country / At times to that"), the final line ("I run, I have to run") shifts the obligatory meaning of "have to" to convey urgency and of "run" to mean "escape." Singapore, in this instance, is not the exuberant Global Asia where professional careers flourish but a "hellpit" for the migrant worker-speaker.

"A Worker's Journey" and the other submissions to the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition serve as an important reminder that accompanying Singapore's shift to a knowledge economy and its concomitant upward economic trajectory is the greater reliance on migrant labor to build the country's gleaming infrastructure. The underbelly of the Singaporean state's valorization of professionalized labor through coming-of-career narratives, and what is completely left out of



FIGURE 6. An *Ilo Ilo* poster from the Cannes Film Festival. Fisheye Pictures / Photo 12 / Alamy Stock Photo.

Conversations is the low-paying service sector and construction jobs—“unskilled labor,” in other words—without which the state’s drive to advance its knowledge economy would not be possible. In *Mammon Inc.*, Singapore’s exploitation of unskilled labor is critiqued by Chiah Deng’s roommate, Steve, in not very subtle terms: “Your whole economy is built upon the exploitation of the proletariat, and if there’s justice in the world, the maids should start a revolution.”⁸⁸ Although the state relies heavily on such migrant labor to build Singapore’s infrastructure, run its service industries, and maintain Singaporean households, such workers are rarely depicted as desirable citizens or residents. Singapore has adopted laws designed to prevent “unskilled labor” from permanent residence, as well as measures that prevent their “mixing” with Singaporeans.⁸⁹ The pathways to residency and citizenships for such workers are limited at best, further illustrating the state’s privileging of professional-technical labor as well as its efforts to denigrate the forms of labor—domestic or construction workers, for example—that maintain the country’s infrastructure or ensure the efficient workings of middle-class and above households.

To further explore what *Conversations* leaves out and what *Mammon* gestures toward, I turn to Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013), a feature film about a middle-class Singaporean Chinese family and the relationship to their domestic worker. Set in Singapore in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, *Ilo Ilo* tells the story of the Lim family who decides to hire a Filipina domestic worker, Terry, to take care of their home and the son, Jiale, while the pregnant mother, Hwee Leng, and the father, Teck, are at work. Terry is at first treated very poorly by Jiale, a maladjusted ten-year-old and troublemaker at school. Eventually, Jiale takes to Terry and looks to her as a mother figure, and Hwee becomes increasingly jealous of Jiale's obvious affection for Terry. Because of the film's focus on the Lim's family relationship with Terry, *Ilo Ilo* is seen as exploring the ethical quandaries of how Singapore's economy relies on "unskilled labor" to sustain itself. Indeed, the Mandarin title of the film—"爸媽不在家" or "Father and Mother Not at Home"—poses the film as a family drama, lamenting the disintegration of the nuclear family, on the one hand, and honoring the new family intimacies that emerge with migrant labor, on the other. By making Terry an important figure within Singaporean domestic life, *Ilo Ilo* goes against the grain of typical, deprecating renderings of domestic workers in public discourse. As with the works showcased by the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, *Ilo Ilo* critiques Singaporean labor practices and their attendant discourses that both minimize the importance of migrant work in Singapore and produce dehumanizing characterizations of such work. As Singapore has come under increasing fire for labor laws that enable abusive practices toward domestic workers, the film's humanization of domestic workers is no small matter and is particularly revealing of, as Joanne Leow puts it, how Singapore's neoliberal morality "is predicated on the exclusion and subservient status of migrant workers since it is a morality that is certainly not concerned for their well-being."⁹⁰

While *Ilo Ilo* is not a coming-of-career narrative, it takes place in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and shows a strong awareness of the changing nature of work in Singapore during this economic transition. Rather than stage the oppressive power between, say, a professionalized worker and their domestic worker, *Ilo Ilo* depicts the ideological effects of valorized, neoliberalized work within the dynamics of *unvalorized* labor, which in this case also includes the middle-class Lim family. In other words, *Ilo Ilo* thinks through the in-betweenness of classed and migrant categories. Moreover, as the "English" translation of the film's title indicates—that is, *Ilo Ilo* rather than "Father and Mother Not at Home"—the film puts a regional frame on its depiction of work and highlights the politics of transnational mobility. As Alden Sajor Marte-Wood writes, "Destinations receiving Philippine labor—like Bahrain, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia—become inextricably linked to the Philippines," and *Ilo Ilo* provides insight into the nature of those transnational intimacies.⁹¹ To be clear, "Iloilo" is not itself an English word but is actually the name of a city in the Philippines. It is also the title used for English-speaking audiences. As a "strategically located"

city that is “the center of commerce, trade, [and] finance” with “competent human resources” and a good “investment climate,” Iloilo city has much in common with Singapore in terms of how it is represented as a Global Asia site.⁹² Through the similarities in the economic trajectories of Singapore and Iloilo, Chen’s film draws attention to the 1997 Asian financial crisis as a pivotal moment in differentiating transnational labor and the impossibility of political solidarity in the Southeast Asian region, a point that can get lost in the sometimes sentimental humanizing focus on the film and migrant workers more broadly.⁹³ *Ilo Ilo* gets at the implications of Foucault’s claim about mobility as the necessary human capital investment by elaborating the social effects of only valorizing certain kinds of transnational mobility. In particular, Chen’s film depicts the ways that domestic worker transnational mobility disrupts the power that nationally embedded middle-class Chinese families accrued during Singapore’s manufacturing era and who now do not have the same ability to navigate a global economy. Mobility thus emerges as an organizing principle of social relations.

From its opening, *Ilo Ilo* presents domestic worker subjectivity in terms of mobility and immobility. Right before a scene when Terry emerges from a car at her new home, the film gives a brief shot of the windows of the home, an HDB building.⁹⁴ The camera pauses at the window of the HDB flat, showing a maid standing with her arms over a ledge and gazing wistfully into the distance. Her body language recalls that of a prisoner with her arms through a jail’s bars. Later scenes repeat such imagery: in exchanges with a domestic worker next door, Terry’s neighbor only appears behind the bars of her front door. The window shot then foreshadows a prominent theme throughout the film: by virtue of their occupation, domestic workers are immobilized, even imprisoned. In Singapore, where employers have to give maids just one day off a month, the employer’s home as a prison is hardly metaphorical. The theme of immobility continues as Terry settles in with the Lim family: Hwee asks for Terry’s passport under the guise of safekeeping, but in fact Hwee wants to prevent Terry from running away. While this is an ominous symbol of the curtailment of Terry’s mobility, the passport also marks Terry’s traversal of space. Moreover, the passport stands as a contrast to the highly localized space of the HDB flat that the Lim family lives in. Showing Terry around the flat, Hwee mentions that their phone cannot make international calls, so Terry must use a calling card and the pay phone downstairs to call the Philippines. The Lims’ flat, in other words, has no transnational connections. In fact, *Ilo Ilo* suggests that Terry is better able to navigate the changes in Singapore’s economy than her Singaporean employers as the more cosmopolitan subject. Terry is able to find a side job as a hairdresser, easily assimilating into Singapore’s knowledge and service economy. On the other hand, Teck cannot find a job despite his fifteen years of sales experience (he gets passed over for a young, English-speaking man) and Hwee’s secretarial position at a shipping company is far from secure. The Lims are stranded in the history of Singapore’s industrialized, manufacturing economy.

As Terry's economic viability increases, so too does her status within the Lim family: Teck and Jiale become fond of Terry as the film progresses, a fondness that is symbolically marked in the way Terry increasingly wears the old clothes that Hwee gives her. In a poignant scene involving the breakdown of the Lim family car, the role that mobility plays in Terry's assumption of Hwee's social role becomes especially evident. After realizing that Jiale and Terry are too weak to push the car—and his wife, heavily pregnant, is not able to—Teck asks whether Terry knows how to drive. Terry does know, and as she gets in to steer, Hwee's face telegraphs her dismay. Hwee stands unhappily off to the side, unable to participate as Jiale and Teck push the car with Terry steering. The family is able to get the car working again, and it is clear that Hwee feels alienated from her family life, unlike Terry, who is able to use the car—the very symbol of personal mobility. Later, Teck decides to sell the car for scrap because of their financial woes. This happens at the same time that the Lims decide that they can no longer afford to employ Terry. Both literally and figuratively, the car represents the Lims' ability—and inability—to move. The loss of the car not only marks the Lims' increasingly dire financial situation and descent in socioeconomic status, but foreshadows their inability to navigate Singapore's changing economy.

As Terry's cosmopolitan capability and economic viability are posed as the most threatening to Hwee's matriarchal status, the film subtly suggests that it is the Singaporean state that will save her, even though it is the state that sets up the conditions for the devaluation of Hwee's economic subjectivity to begin with. Not only is Hwee alienated from her own family, but the film makes a point of Hwee's failed attempts to neoliberalize herself when she starts attending self-help motivational seminars only to later discover that the speaker she is enamored with is arrested for fraud. In contrast, Terry fits the state's vision of an ideal Singaporean citizen as the transnationally mobile, enterprising neoliberal subject. But Terry is a racialized, second-class citizen and will never be recognized as an ideal Singaporean. Of course, this is not a new insight: after all, migrant workers are codified as such in Singaporean immigration law. But what is interesting is how the film depicts Terry's second-class status. The film, instead of emphasizing Terry's abjection, shows how Terry is capable and resourceful and perhaps even uncritically celebrates her agency. Terry's neoliberal capabilities do not amount to any resolution or self-realization, however. Terry's narrative arc ends abruptly, after the Lims tell Jiale that Terry has to go back home. The film hardly dwells on Terry's departure: she is in the car with a sullen Jiale, and after he cuts a lock of Terry's hair to remember her, she is rushed out of the car to avoid another embarrassing spectacle with Jiale. Terry tells Jiale, "Learn to take care of yourself," and with that, she is gone. The Lim family power here is felt more acutely in their ability to dispense with Terry and end her narrative arc.

The film closes with Hwee giving birth, which is where she finally aligns ideologically with the state. Hwee's reproductive capability recenters her as a significant

contributor to the state's efforts to increase Singapore's population and human capital through pronatalist policies. Just as the state's economic agenda alienates Hwee, so too does it restore her standing.

In this way, Terry is not presented as an existential threat to Singapore or even an economic threat but a more minor, social threat. Within the Lim family, Terry challenges Hwee's authority and plays an intermediary, bonding role between Teck and Jiale. When Teck and Jiale are in the waiting room during Hwee's cesarean section surgery, through shared earphones they listen to the song "Kahapon at Pag-Ibig" by Asin on a cassette tape that Terry left behind. As the English translation of the song's chorus reveals, the lyrics roughly repeat Terry's farewell to Jiale: "Take care of your life, because that is your only wealth." One could describe such lyrics as the very thesis of neoliberalized human capital.⁹⁵ Thus, in this scene, it is actually Terry who emerges as the nationalist, ideological voice of neoliberal morality in the Lim family, whereas Hwee reproductively maintains its biological, racialized infrastructure. It is this split—posed in the film as conflict—that stymies the potential for a coalition politics and does the work of labor differentiation.

Ilo Ilo at once calls for a nationalist recognition of migrant "unskilled" labor and exposes the conceptual limits of how that recognition can be performed. While the film usefully depicts how the elevation of workers like Chiah Deng or those in *Conversations* play out in other parts of Singapore's social hierarchy by examining the micropolitics of a middle-class family's drama, it grants Terry political agency only insofar as it articulates with the state's economic agenda. The humanization of Terry, the film warns, does not operate outside the terms of state discourse. Labor differentiation, *Ilo Ilo* reminds us, is not only performed through legal categories of citizenship or state representations of Singapore as First World, but through the perception of antagonisms as they play out in the politics of what Leow describes as the "absence and substitution" of Hwee by Terry.⁹⁶ Indeed, these social tensions are crucial for maintaining the distinction between kinds of transnational labor. By suggesting that Terry is the voice of neoliberal reason, *Ilo Ilo* demonstrates that postcolonial work—that is, capitalist labor in the name of national sovereignty—increasingly has an international dimension.

POST-CAREERS AND POSTCOLONIAL COLONIALISM

My aim in this chapter was to read for the interrelations of power between corporation and nation in an intuitively neoliberal genre, the coming-of-career narrative. As I show through my reading of *Mammon Inc.*, the pleasures of work derived from the coming-of-career narrative are as much a response to the strong state of early postcolonial capitalism as they are to the ideological workings of Global Asia. As *Conversations on Coming Home* further demonstrates, Global Asia works in concert with other capitalist forces to compel labor from its subjects. Recognizing the diminishing returns of a nation-motivated work ethos, the Singaporean state

attempts to recruit its citizens abroad by representing Singapore as a site where the coming-of-career narrative can climax. The Singapore setting is made legible through the work pleasures and work-life balance it can offer. Moreover, by representing the nation as if it is free of a strong state and aligning returned Singaporeans with foreigners, the state appeals to postcolonial anxieties of inadequacy and desire for expatriate privilege. As a counterpoint to the class limitations of the coming-of-career narrative, Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* illustrates the ways that the cosmopolitan, transnational labor—a characteristic of Singaporean career narratives—shape the social dynamics of undervalued workers. I close this chapter with readings of two texts that gesture toward future directions: Troy Chin's *The Resident Tourist* graphic novel series and Rebecca Bustamante's *Maid to Made* (2014).

Much like how *If We Dream Too Long* anticipated the diminishing returns of a strong, nationalist emphasis on productivity in an industrialized manufacturing economy, Troy Chin's autobiographical graphic novel series, *The Resident Tourist*, calls attention to the weakening of the coming-of-career narrative's ideological hold. Chin's novels remind us that even as the ideological power of neoliberalism vis-à-vis the coming-of-career narrative can feel totalizing, it is also vitalist, which is to say, its energies run out. *The Resident Tourist* (2007) depicts Chin's return to Singapore to pursue illustration of comics after giving up his music industry career in New York City. Throughout the novels, Chin is confronted by characters who question why he would give up his successful life in the United States, especially when he has no career plans in Singapore. While the kind of questioning Chin receives is not in itself peculiar, what is striking is how the disbelief at Chin's decisions are so often framed in nationalist terms. For example, using Goh's language, his childhood best friend, Kampong Boy, accuses Chin of being "a 'quitter' who has returned a nobody." He later goes as far as to accuse Chin of not being Singaporean enough: "That's the other thing, you're from Wharton, and what are you doing? Art. You're wasting your education. No Singaporean would do that."⁹⁷ The rebuke of Chin's art pursuits is framed in terms of impracticality: there is no clear professional career path for many Singaporean writers and artists. Without a clear coming-of-career narrative, in other words, Chin is not legible as a Singaporean.

Though Chin's career status ascends later in *The Resident Tourist*, after he wins the National Arts Council Young Artist Award, it briefly explores Chin's lack of legibility and what it means to tell a life story that is not emplotted according to a career telos. Chin embraces his "nobody" status by often representing himself without expression—his glasses cover his eyes—seemingly resisting the affective exuberance so often associated with neoliberal subjects who pursue passion projects for work. When asked about what his graphic novel series is about, Chin simply responds that it is about "nothing" as a way of countering the teleological narratives that demand meaning.

While the series offers an implicit critique of the coming-of-career narrative, the alienating effects of which are amplified by family and friends, Chin still longs

for a more harmonious dynamic with the state as a condition of being home even as the series seems to embrace Chin's estrangement from Singapore as a "resident tourist." During a television broadcast of Singapore's National Day, Chin is struck by a line in the prime minister's speech: "Singapore is a city of possibilities." In response and with his trademark blank face, Chin thinks, "Somehow, I wanted to believe him *so* badly."⁹⁸ There is a curious reversal here from the other coming-of-career narratives this chapter discusses. The promise of work pleasure to Singaporeans in *Mammon Inc.* and *Conversations*, we recall, is based on the perceived retreat of the state. Feeling like a foreigner, in Chin's depiction, is a matter of feeling incompatible with the state rather than a matter of privileged status. Even as *The Resident Tourist* tries to imagine work narratives outside of conventional ideas of success, Chin's desire to experience consensus with the state points readers to the utopic postcolonial nationalist desires that continue to underwrite Singaporean experience, a desire that seems especially counterintuitive and critically significant. If neoliberalized work partially operates through the rejection of a strong state, what does this seeming nostalgia for a more omnipresent state suggest about how work ethic will change as postcolonial capitalism continues to evolve?

Bustamante's memoir, *Maid to Made*, also invites questions about how to comprehend state power in the Global Asia context of postcolonial capitalism. Her coming-of-career narrative is simultaneously a rags-to-riches story: working her way from her position as a maid in Singapore, Bustamante is now "made" as the founder of Chaire Associates and president of Asia CEO Awards. The book combines chapters dedicated to Bustamante's biography and chapters providing business advice, ostensibly based on her wealth and success. With chapter titles such as "What Real Success Means," "Obstacles to Success," and "You and Your Goals at Life," Bustamante's book is typical of the business self-help genre in terms of the advice she offers about goal setting, time management, motivation, and hard work. Much like the state's ideal twenty-first-century Singaporean, Bustamante's memoir performs her cosmopolitanism through her citations, which include (mostly Western) examples of successful people such as James Earl Jones and Abraham Lincoln.⁹⁹ Perhaps in an effort to be diplomatic to her potential Singaporean readers, the details of Bustamante's three-year stay in Singapore are rather thin. Readers are told that Bustamante's work as a maid in Singapore was "hard but fulfilling."¹⁰⁰ It is in Singapore, during her one day off a month, that Bustamante enrolled in an accounting course at the Singapore Institute of Management. When the opportunity to emigrate came, her employers initially refused to give Bustamante a reference, because "they were only upset to lose their cherished maid."¹⁰¹ But even with such vague details, Bustamante's language reveals her time in Singapore as disciplined: her fulfilment is qualified with struggle, her time is restricted, and her economic mobility is hindered. What we can glean about Bustamante's experience in Singapore speaks to her subjectivity as "unskilled labor," which assumes

a particular kind of power dynamic with the state in which she is marginalized and oppressed.

Though Bustamante's bootstraps narrative might simply seem like generalized neoliberal delusion, her business strategy and personal branding is strikingly Singaporean: she is an example of, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has put it, "Singaporeanization."¹⁰² As president of the Asia CEO Forum, Bustamante hosts an event that "promote[s] [the] Philippines as a premier business destination to global decision makers," much like how Singapore's economy gained capital by attracting multinational corporations with a promise of Global Asia.¹⁰³ Like Lee Kuan Yew's famous refrain of Singapore's "Third World to First World" trajectory, Bustamante tells her story of "Maid to Made" as a motivational speaker, relying on her status as an exceptional economic model for her business. Bustamante even frames her work ethic as nationalist, commenting that her time in Singapore inspired her to start a company that would counter the prejudiced behavior she experienced: "In Singapore, I heard foreigners say many negative things about Filipinos so I hoped that someday I could tell the world about the positive side of the Philippines and Filipinos."¹⁰⁴ For Bustamante, the formation of a transnational corporation is in the service of a nationalist project of positive representation.

Because low-wage, noncitizen workers are not the typical site for cultivating nationalist ideologies of postcolonial capitalism, what is unexpected about the Bustamante case is that it suggests a stronger ideological relation between state and noncitizen that goes otherwise uncaptured by biopolitical theories of neoliberalized governance.¹⁰⁵ Though Bustamante's self-help guide and interviews do not offer enough to deconstruct the process of interpellation, we have to assume that her ideological embrace of Singapore's economic doctrine had something to do either with her experience in Singapore or with her experience living in a Southeast Asian nation proximate to it. Though maid recruiting agencies in the Philippines represent Singapore as a favorable place to work, Bustamante performs a much more specific engagement with Singapore beyond general admiration, and in fact, she does not outwardly depict any approbation. Bustamante's assimilation of Singaporean state economic doctrine emerges from a relation of colonial dominance between state and noncitizen worker—that is, of racial hierarchy and Singaporean supremacy. Given this colonial dynamic in which we assume Bustamante absorbed state economic doctrine, her case invites us to ask: How does postcolonial capitalism colonize?

Most obviously, one could argue that postcolonial capitalism colonizes through the (Singaporean) family, but the humanitarian discourse that shapes the OFW's experience in Singapore is also key. As already mentioned, Singapore has been criticized for its treatment of migrant workers. Consequently, the state has allowed a number of parastatal organizations and government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) into the country to support the needs of migrant workers. Some of these are considered more acceptable than others. For example,

in Singapore's National Report 2021, a human rights review written as part of Singapore's obligation to the United Nations as a member state, three organizations are named as "invaluable partners in shaping the MW [migrant worker] landscape": the Migrant Workers' Centre, the Centre for Domestic Employees, and Aidha.¹⁰⁶ Describing their mission to "empower and provide opportunities for foreign domestic workers and lower-income women to transform their lives through sustainable wealth creation," Aidha appears as very ideologically attuned to the values of the coming-of-career narrative.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the organization offers a number of courses with titles such as "Manage Your Money and Tech," "Plan your Financial Future," and "Start Your Business."¹⁰⁸ Such course titles have resonances with both Bustamante and *Ilo Ilo*. This is not to suggest that these humanitarian organizations are simple ruses for the state. But, as I have argued, state power works off of or combines with other institutions. Reading for the future of postcolonial capitalism will thus require further examination of how constellations of institutions work together rather than simply critiquing the totalizing power of one.

The aesthetics of postcolonial work, as they are reflected in the mirror scene in *Mammon Inc.* and in representations of labor differentiation in *Conversations* and *Ilo Ilo*, reveal both Singaporean and non-Singaporean audiences for Global Asia. *Mammon Inc.* and *Conversations* shows us how the totalizing force of neoliberalism shields the Singaporean state from accountability in the formation of capitalist cultures. This erasure of the state serves as reassurance to Singaporeans, who remember a stronger, disciplinary state from the decolonization and Asian Values eras. In the conflict between Hwee Leng and Terry in *Ilo Ilo*, we see how Global Asia relies on the dissociation of Singapore from the Philippines and how that dissociation is socially maintained among nonelite workers. Such a disassociation sustains Chinese racial privilege in Singapore and serves as a reassurance for a global audience. As Singapore announces we are not those "darker nations," to quote Vijay Prashad, Global Asia reassures onlookers that your best capitalist life in Singapore will not be disrupted by any Third Worldist solidarity politics. Taken together, *Mammon Inc.*, *Conversations*, and *Ilo Ilo* elucidate how postcolonial erasure yokes the internal and external workings of Singapore as Global Asia.