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Contexts of Respectability and Freedom: Sexual Stereotyping in Abu Dhabi

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Contexts of Respectability and Freedom: Sexual Stereotyping in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract

Walking in Abu Dhabi is to join a parade of nationalities, religions, languages, and conflicting ideas on what constitutes appropriate public dress and demeanour for women. Clothing can signal nationality, religion and degree of, if not piety, then cultural conservatism, as well as socio-economic status. While women from strict conservative regions may experience the cosmopolitan mix of people, clothing, and lifestyles as somewhat liberating, others chafe against the prescription to keep arms and legs covered. They discover quickly that a woman's choice of clothing is also interpreted frequently to be a statement of her morality and sexual availability. In this article, we present some of the contrasting experiences of two groups of female migrants, Filipinas and Malayalis, as well as the perceptions about foreign women that are narrated frequently by Emiratis. Our ethnographic narrative is embedded in a critical analysis of intersectionality and similar categorisations that pay too little attention to context. In the superdiverse environment of the Gulf, it is context that dictates where a specific woman is "placed" in the good woman/bad woman/oppressed woman triangle.

Introduction

Walking in Abu Dhabi is to be part of an 'encounter space' (Faier & Rofel 2014) of nationalities, religions, languages, and conflicting ideas on what constitutes appropriate public dress and demeanour for women. In this article, we present some contrasting experiences and evaluations from two groups of female migrants (Filipinas and Malayalis¹) interwoven with some perceptions about foreign women that are narrated frequently by Emiratis. Interactions between migrants, hosts, and "other" migrants in the Gulf are frequent and multiple but thin, mostly reduced to public spaces and stereotyped repetitive situations, and often transactional, orbiting labour, service, or financial dealings (Bristol-Rhys 2012). 'Superdiversity' (Meissner and Vertovec

2015; Vertovec 2007) appears to be difficult to negotiate for states, shopkeepers and residents alike. Our earlier work on masculinities (Bristol-Rhys & Osella 2016), found UAE residents grasping at colonial stereotypes in their attempts to make others legible (stereotypes built in a regime of commerce and political rule that preferred to deal with people via modernist bureaucratic categories and racialized hierarchies and that sought to identify good bookkeepers, brave soldiers, hardy labourers and so on – Gupta 2010; Pandian 1995; Sinha 1995; Streets 2004). Womenfolk appear as less complexly configured in colonial stereotype, being reduced to the trinary division of 'proper decent woman', 'oppressed and backward veiled/eastern woman' or 'whore' (Grewal 1996; Jarmakani 2015). We found a similar tripartite division of the female seemingly at work in contemporary Abu Dhabi, with the significant complication that different groups look

¹ People from Kerala, South-west India, speak Malayalam and are more widely known as Malayalis than as Keralites.

for different signifiers to parse women out into a type. Unlike menfolk, typologies of women appear as very unstable, and do not necessarily follow clearly racialized lines, with named characteristics sutured onto ethnicised indicators. While Emiratis seem to concur that no foreign women can easily move into the 'proper decent woman' group, Indian migrants are as likely to marginalise and stigmatise their own womenfolk as they are short-and-tank-topped Filipinas or sundress-wearing Brits. And while body exposure is all-important for some observers, style of dress or behaviour is equally important for others. The appearance of such large numbers of women in Gulf public space is also comparatively new. Compared to an apparent relative stability among masculine stereotypes, and a clear sense of 'knowability,' linked back to colonial knowledge practices and encounters, women seem to be moving in a more anxious and uncertain space, where specific moments, individual performances, and on-the-spot evaluations are playing out in a less known socio-scape, where a variety of readings and judgments can be made and unmade.

While the instability and generality of the 'good-whorish-oppressed' triangle, as trope of the feminine, stands in contrast to the nuanced specificity and relative durability of stereotypes of masculinity, both configurations share the analytic predicament of difficulty in teasing out ethnicity and gendering. From studies of colonial masculinities (Sinha 1995; Srivastava 2004), through postcolonial nationalism (Anand 2008; Srivastava 2016), militarisation (Banerjee 2012), domesticity (Alter 1994), Pernau (2004), or sexuality (Krishnswamy 2011; McClintock 1995; Stoler 1995), and on into homonationalism (Rao 2014; Puar 2017), since the 1990s academics have been thinking about the ways in which sex/gender, desire, ethnicity, and race or nation appear over and over as intimates. To write in a 'critical race theory' or a 'sex gender theory' modality then becomes a stance and decision about where to source one's analytic priorities. Some writers tend to favour a 'gender first' or

'race first' stance – a problem which intersectionality was designed to get over but which has brought its own problems. We need to try to hold onto ethnicity/gender together, since the fact of co-implication is clear; the best way to handle this continues to be debated. A related question (given also that 'superdiversity' does not index the mere co-presence of 'many groups', but rather, names exactly this kind of complexity – as Meissner & Vertovec have been at pains to point out – 2015), is how best to handle the superdiversity of the space, and the ensuing contradictions and mis-matches in our respondents' responses. Our Emirati, Malayali and Filipina interlocutors frequently seem to be describing different societies. Even within national groups, opinions may differ widely. We choose to follow narrative and process-derived analytic frameworks that help us to remember that in the Gulf environment (and, by extension, other superdiverse spaces), it is made-in-the-moment event-spaces which decide how a specific woman is to be placed within the 'good-bad-oppressed' triangle – a process which does not, of course, go uncontested by those women themselves.

Methods

The material presented here draws out Emirati, Malayali and Filipina voices from our combined years (since the 1990s) of speaking with a variety of Abu Dhabi based interlocutors (around 150 total), supplemented by some specifically targeted work on gendering and on cross-cultural encounter that was undertaken as part of a funded joint project from 2012-2014 and during Osella's REALM Project from 2017-2019². In the literature on Gulf migration we perceive

² We thank our research respondents for their generous frankness and their stories. We gratefully acknowledge Zayed University UAE, SOAS London & REALM Project RRI-O-008 (<http://www.incite.columbia.edu/realm/>) for financial and other forms of support for the research. We thank Nadeem Karkabi, Sahil Warsi, Sabiha Allouche, Deepak Unnikrishnan, Neha Vora, Sheena Vachhani and participants at seminars in Sussex, Oxford and Bristol Universities for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

something of a problem in the way that ‘female domestic worker’ and ‘male labour-camp dweller’ have become iconic, brought into almost every media report and much academic and policy work, while there is less enthusiasm for investigating the lives of other migrants – small-time entrepreneurs, biscuit factory workers, shopping mall security guards, Ayurvedic physicians, schoolteachers, physical therapy clinicians, stock-control clerks, swimming coaches, hotel bar staff, hairdressers, maintenance engineers, property managers, CADD technicians, archaeologists, orthodontists – to mention just a handful of the various situations inhabited by migrants we know (Unnikrishnan 2017). Our migrant interlocutors are not homogenous in social class or occupation, and we have met them as part of the usual ethnographic snowballing methods over the years. We acknowledge two pressure-points on our material: firstly, while Caroline has worked with some wealthy Gulf-based Indian Muslim entrepreneurs and their families (2009), and Jane has a long entanglement with Emiratis (2010), we more usually find ourselves to be in a position of privilege, power and assumed higher social status than our respondents (Besio 2003; Wolf 2018); secondly, migrants are sometimes fearful of expressing criticism of Emirati citizens or society. These factors make formal interviews less helpful than rolling relationship-building and informal participant-observation, which is what we have more often relied upon. We have long-term relationships of over 20 years with some of our respondents; others we have met in the past five years. We know some people’s wider families or Gulf house-mates, have been to some respondents’ homes, but many migrants we know as lone migrants and as part of social networks, and most of our discussions take place in public spaces. While we undertook several single-ethnicity focus groups and informal interviews during 2012-2014 (mixed groups would have been linguistically and socially uncomfortable for our respondents), this paper is not based on any sample, nor is it even built upon any reified ‘methods’ in attempts to mimic an

assumed scientific rigour³. Rather, the discussion has emerged from the kinky empiricism of the long-term ethnographer (Rutherford 2012), who takes up fragments of conversation as and when they happen, notices patterns, and sometimes pushes an interaction towards a topic of interest. This has especially been the case for the conversations with Emiratis. Our paper is also not an attempt at symmetrical or comparative analysis, but an unravelling of narratives and moments experienced during ongoing participant-observation. Being ourselves immersed in several different regimes of Gulf gendering, led us into situations, dress-codes, conversations and then more formal interviews in which we gathered material that spoke about how female migrants and hosts are perceived by each other. In the hyper-diversity of the UAE, people have an unprecedented opportunity to observe others, in what Caillol indexes as ‘regimes of visibility’ (2018) and to be forced – whether willing or unwilling – to objectify their own ethnicity and cultural practices, where ideas about appropriate gendering and gendered behaviours sit right at the heart of everyone’s ideas about what makes a proper social person, or a respectable subject. As with our material on menfolk, this is of course not new: the tangled mess of ‘race’ and ‘femininity’ has a huge literature, from witnessings to the prevalence of images of ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’ of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1993; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989), which often extend into feminisation of the sentimentalised homeland itself (Lauenstein, et al. 2015), the land as female sacred body (Ramaswamy 2001; Uberoi 1990), via studies of gendered militarisation and sexualised violence in war (Cockburn 2010; Enloe 2014) to discussions of feminine-maternal respectability and domesticity as essential part of growing a nation’s next generation (Donner 2012; Thapan 2004), through to recent discussions of homona-

³ Note that there was no formal ‘research visa’ or ‘research permission’ process during our project period and also that people are not used to being ‘interviewed’ outside short market research or journalistic frames.

tionalism, porno-nationalism and so on (Anand 2008; Puar 2013). What we present here is some empirical material set against questions about how we might frame and analyse the encounter-space.

A growing body of literature on migrants working in the Arabian Gulf, generally situated within the fairly new sub-regionalism of 'Gulf Studies'⁴, focuses on their living and working conditions, on connections maintained with home and families, and on their lived experiences in various Gulf cities (Ali 2010; Bristol-Rhys 2010b; 2012; Gardner 2010a and 2010b; Ghanam 1998; Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Longva 1997; 1999; Mahdavi 2011; Marsden 2008; Nagy 2008; Vora 2008; 2013). While the Gulf pulls in regional studies scholars with narrow empirical focus, we can also – as we are attempting here – allow this material to speak in wider comparative conversations around multi-ethnic workforces in other global cities. When we do this, aspects of assumed Gulf exceptionalism fall away.

Analytically, we refuse to allow UAE to be put forward as an 'exceptional state', which continually pushes its residents, especially its migrants, into 'states of exception' (as compared to, e.g. Ali 2010; Cooke 2014), but rather we take the Gulf region as a somewhat more hyper example of generalized processes and conditions which are familiar across the world, in a shared global condition of 21st century capitalism, media saturation, income inequalities, interesting mixes of state regulation and de-regulation, and so on. Like any place, UAE is unique, but it is not 'exceptional'. It is an example of a superdiverse space – and a very helpful one. Ye (2017) has recently noted that much work on encounters and superdiversity takes place in European settings, and suggests to us that, because managing diversity is what is increasingly at stake in all global cities, there is a case to make for de-centering the Western city and placing Asian cities such as Singapore at the centre of understanding how a situation of 'being-with' is lived and at the same

time, subject of governance and management. 'Thinking Abu Dhabi' responds to this call, while responding also to the over-researching of Dubai as metonym for 'Gulf'.

While we are of necessity interested in thinking about migrant residents within frames of labour or property, citizenship and belonging, sex/gender is the main axis of analysis that we take in this paper and again, we prefer to avoid Gulf exceptionalism and connect the region into global regimes of sex/gendering. Back in 1997, much of what Constable wrote about Hong Kong was recognizable across the Gulf – patterns of migrant domestic labour and childcare are familiar from global perspectives (Constable 1997; Cox 2015). In another parallel, Mcdowell et al (2009) refer us to the complex 'assembled' workforce in London's hotels, and to the ethnic stratification at work there, which – exactly like the Gulf – places a premium on whiteness. Similarly, Batnitzky (2009) deals specifically with 'gender flexibility' and notes a split between those male migrants in the UK who are willing (constrained) to take on 'women's work' for motives of economic and familial support and those who are not – another theme we can find in UAE. Nagy's classic article was landmark in tracing for us the ways in which ethno-gendered status impacts upon Gulf employability (1998), ground retrodden by others since (Percot 2006; Guevarra 2014; Ewars and Dicce 2016). The ways in which Gulf employability is ethnicised and gendered is exactly mirrored in work on Singapore (Huang & Yeoh 1998). Our subject in this paper, then, is a generalisable one: the confusion, mis-firing and illegibility that happens when different regimes of gendering meet (Mahdavi 2013). Our analytic goal is to understand how best to write about this phenomenon.

Gender and Modesty

Abu Dhabi, like other Arabian Gulf cities, imposes a considerable measure of gender segregation in public schools, national universities, and in some commercial institutions and government offices. Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank in the downtown

⁴ <http://agaps.org/>

area has a separate entrance for female customers. Several other banks, none of which follow Islamic regulations, have “women only” queues with, of course, a female bank teller. Young Emirati women who are considering options for a first job mention commonly that they would prefer a “women only” office because they are not used to being around men. This, despite the reality that even women-only environments will have “men” working too, as it is South Asian men who clean, make and serve tea, make copies, and run errands throughout the day. Those men are not given the social status of ‘men’ because they are not Emirati and are, therefore, not considered ‘dangerous’ sexually or socially (Bristol-Rhys and Osella 2016).

India, too, is a nation in which large parts of the population observe some degree of gender segregation in the name of social norms, class respectability, and/or public morality. While young people in India’s metro cities might study in mixed classrooms, socialise without chaperones – and may even date and party together – in small towns and rural areas, gender mixing past the age of puberty is viewed with significant suspicion. Even among young children, there is a naturalised push-pull of girls towards the women’s realm of domestic, kitchen, indoors, while boys follow elder brothers, uncles and fathers around and about outside the home. Women often send boys from the household to the shop or street market for daily fish or vegetable buying (Osella and Osella 2006). Across India, marriages are still arranged overwhelmingly by families to shore up caste, class, and linguistic group endogamy; and to further wider familial projects of mutually advantageous alliance. Mixing of the sexes poses a dangerous threat to familial steering of young people’s romantic and sexual lives (Dwyer 2004; C. Osella 2012; Patel 2004; Titzmann 2013). After marriage, too, Indian women continue to labour under an imperative to perform family respectability and social status publicly by carefully guarding their behaviours. A degree of circumspection when outside the home, or interacting with menfolk, is bedrock of Indian feminine status, even

in the cosmopolitan metropolis (Phadke 2007). The southern states, of which Kerala is one, are noted for their punctiliousness in matters of gender segregation and norms, often coded as ‘decency.’ Not only is India a major migrant home, but Kerala has been the highest sending state and so Keralite / Malayali attitudes are highly relevant to understanding Abu Dhabi’s population (Dhak 2015; Jain 2015; Willoughby 2006; Zachariah and Rajan 2012). Kerala’s gender conservatism is recognised throughout India and is notorious among Indian feminists (Devika 2009; Jayasree 2015; Kumar 2015; Arun 2017).

The situation in Philippines is a little more ambivalent. Commentators and the state alike proudly repeat that, according to the 2016 World Economic Forum (WEF) ‘Global Gender Gap Report,’ the Philippines is the world’s seventh most gender-equal society among 144 economies, and number 1 in the Asia-Pacific. However, at the same time, President Rodrigo Duterte is notorious for his sexually offensive behaviours, women in public life are few, and those who take a close look at the WEF statistics point out that while education is high, female participation in the workforce is very low (Albert & Vizmanos 2017; David 2017). In this deeply Catholic society, drinking and dancing, dating, love and love-marriage are all permitted, but women are intended to aspire to status as wives and mothers, and to act as guardians of the family. While there is no gender segregation (outside of gender-separate sections in schooling), nor a body-covering dress code, and while women’s freedom of independent movement is not rigidly circumscribed, there are clear moral strictures around feminine chastity. At the same time, women are generally expected to assert their respectability by adhering to familiar globalised feminine aesthetics, with neat skirts, ‘tasteful’ make-up, and styled hair (Cruz 2012). Contemporary Philippines society is heavily gendered, and shows little trace of its 18th C. alleged lack of gender differentiation (in common with other South-East Asian societies – to the horror of arriving Europeans – Brewer 2004).

A corollary to the Gulf norm of gender segregation is that of personal public modesty for both genders. While personal public modesty is valued in Islamic societies generally, in the Arabian Gulf, body covering is taken very seriously. Emirati “national dress,” as it is called, consists of long flowing garments that cover the individual, both male and female, from shoulders to ankles and the full length of the shoulder down to the wrist. What might or might not be worn underneath the *kandoura* (male) or the *abayah* (female) is up for debate, but the requirement of public presentation of Emirati self has been met. However, the clear majority of the population in Abu Dhabi and, indeed, the nation of the UAE, is not Emirati, but foreign migrants who have come to work.⁵ It would be misleading to read national Emirati dress or behavioural codes as a public culture ‘norm’; rather, we have jostling norms. This is an especial predicament for females, where the clothing that others may perceive to be less than modest can also be presumed to be an advertisement of sexual availability, if not an outright invitation. The streets, shops, and malls of the city are filled with South Asians, Southeast Asians, Europeans, Africans, Chinese and North and South Americans, with very different cultural beliefs and norms concerning the inter-related notions of modesty, appropriate clothing, public presentation – and even whether a person is to be judged by their appearance at all.

When comparing Filipino and Malayali norms of dress and behaviour, any policy-maker’s imagined gross category of ‘Asian woman migrant’ violently splinters right away (Kapiszewski 2017). Several of our Filipina interlocutors complained vehemently that they had learned not to wear what they named as their “normal” clothes when they were in public in Abu Dhabi because men of

all types and nationalities would approach them, “like we were prostitutes!” “Normal clothes” for these women, all in the middle to late 30s, married, most with several children, was a pair of shorts, a tank-top, and slippers (flip flops) for shoes. “That is Filipino national dress. It is what we wear everywhere at home!! And what kind of prostitute wears shorts and slippers?” asks Mari-cel, shaking her head with disbelief. She came to Abu Dhabi 7 years ago to work for a retail group and 3 years ago she married Bobby who works in a restaurant. “Even when I am with Bobby when we go to Ikea for breakfast on Friday morning (the weekly day off), there is always some Arab man who follows us around the store.”⁶

Among the Filipinas we spoke with, problems with public transport was another recurrent topic. These women mostly avoid taxis because of the cost, and take the bus, but complain that even sitting in the ‘women only’ section does not mean that migrant men using the service will avert their eyes or keep distance. Alternatively, they report, that if they choose to avoid the bus and walk, being on the street somehow seems to put them “out there” – meaning that to be seen on the street wearing shorts or a vest is interpreted by many men to be some sort of communication of availability. This assumption is unfathomable to these women. Some women laughed, some were indignant, most were incredulous, that so many migrant men assumed they were looking for a man. As women recounted it to us, the last thing any of them want is a man, already having one dependent and often feckless husband at home (cf Parreñas 2005). Women told us that their focus is on making money, spending as little as possible and sending remittances home for their children and families. Only 3 of the 25 Filipina women who were core in our discussions do not have children, and most of our respondents are married and very family-focussed.

⁵ None of the GCC nations publish population statistics that are broken down by nationality or ethnicity other than to use the category “other Arab” in some cases. However, embassies do track their citizens and a 2014 publication puts South Asians (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal) at 50.12% of the total population and Filipinos at 5.49%. (Gulf Labour Markets and Migration 2016).

⁶ The imprecise term ‘Arab’ is used in Abu Dhabi only when referring to non-Emiratis and so can include individuals from the entire Middle East and North Africa region. Emiratis are called ‘nationals’ or ‘locals’.

While body-covering is an important gendered norm among Indians, it is never enough to guarantee 'decency'. Even the carefully covered and gender-segregated Emirati women are likely to be perceived in Indian circles as being lacking in morality or decency, because of the degree of physical mobility and freedom they have – using cars, visiting the city without menfolk in tow – and because of the amount of time and money they spend on physical appearance. Their heavy use of cosmetics and perfume comes up in most discussions, playing a large part in an opposition Malayalis draw between women who are 'simple' and those who are not. *Simple* here is a positive moral attribute which becomes a widespread goal especially (but not uniquely) appropriate to women across South India, among all religious communities. The lingerie and night-wear in Kerala stores bazaar is overwhelmingly functional and modest, with few takers for the racier styles; women here have not been drawn into the modalities of sexual subjectivations now utterly normative among contemporary Westerns (e.g. McCaughey & French 2001) or alluded to as emerging in metropolitan India by Srivastava (2007) or Phadke et al (2011), or in the Middle East (e.g. Syria, Halasa & Kevorkian 2008) and the Gulf (Al-Qasimi 2010). Arab women, with their high glamour and their easy access to freedom of movement (cars with drivers) and to luxury, appear as utterly corrupted and the diametric opposite of South Indians' precious and jealously defended reputation for being *simple*.

Don't show skin because there will be trouble if you do

During an extended group interview with nine Filipina this same topic came up over and over again. "If you show any skin at all when you are out in public then you are going to have trouble with men." As Amy says this, the others around the table nod vigorously in agreement and three roll their eyes in either amazement or disgust. Amy continues, "it is not the local men (Emirati), well, not usually at least. It is all the men here!" The other women agreed. "Actually, it is never

younger local men, they are all okay and respectful. The older ones can be annoying and pushy but they are more pathetic than dangerous – old men, you know?"

Walsh confirms that even British 'expat' high status and whiteness is no protection from such assumptions: bared flesh is legal, but widely read as sexual availability and lack of propriety (2015:244). In conversations with a group of Filipinas working for a nail salon chain, the women explained to us that because they have to wear uniforms (smart top and pants) 6 days a week, they want to feel comfortable and casual when on their "off" – and resent being judged for that. We note here that the few domestic workers who are included in our discussions all work via agencies and for Euro-American clients: a maid working for an Emirati family would not dare to be seen outside the house in shorts. The Emirati code is that the maids/drivers etc represent the "house" (*bayt*) when outside just as much as the children of the family do (cf. Arnado 2013).

Among our Filipina interlocutors, there is some sense of bafflement at a public dress code (as seen among Emiratis and many South Asians) that demands a consistent covering. "Sure, we cover up when we go for church, but that's *church!*", came out, as women suggested to us that in their opinion, full covering in daily life is over the top and unnecessary and, moreover, does not underwrite modesty. These women admired those who have the cash to manage to own clothes to match the moment: being able to have a nice blouse and skirt for church, a smart shirt and pants for work, and a set of vest and shorts for going to the mall and so on. This they understand as being 'modern', which we see as both an appreciation of the 'flexible self' (Bauman 2013), and as indexing an internalised sense of Catholic purity and sacrifice (Bautista 2015). A woman who self-sacrifices by going overseas to support her family is, from this point of view, clearly a good woman and responsible mother – far from being immoral or lax (Parreñas 2005).

During another group chat, Janeen, taps on the table to get our attention. She works as a

maid for an American family now but she used to be a cleaner for a service company. She is 36 years old and married. "I used to go jogging on the new path built outside of our compound. It is very nice and I enjoyed that, but I had to stop because there was an old man who followed me each time I went out for a jog. I changed the times and still he was always there!! It was as if he waited nearby until I appeared and then he would drive his car very slowly beside me on the road. It was creepy and I became frightened and stopped jogging." The other women had not heard this story and they had many questions for Janeen, beginning with "who was he?" Janeen smiled and continued, "well, it all turned out okay because my boss got very angry when he learned why I had stopped jogging and he took me to the police station to make a report. I was very scared at that idea and did not want to make trouble but he said we must so we went. The police told me to go jogging the next day at 10 am and that they would stop the man in the car and that is exactly what they did. I started my jog and the old man in the car began to follow and then came the police car to stop him!" She was smiling broadly with the recollection of the day. "They took him to the police station but before they left, one police man came and told me that I was safe to jog every day now and that if anyone was rude or bad again to come and tell the police. He said that the UAE does not permit this sort of bad action!" While Janeen was pleased that she was able to jog again, a few of the other women were somewhat cynical. "The man who followed you was not a local, they wouldn't have made trouble for a local, you know!" Another added, "more than half of the women who report rape in this country end up accused of adultery! It is so stupid and unfair."

At another gathering of Filipinas, other topics emerged. "We can't just go out and have some fun as a group of women on a Thursday night. We love music and we love to dance but it is too much trouble, because there really is no place that is safe here. If there is music and dancing, then there is alcohol and that makes every-

thing worse." When we asked Florence what she meant by "safe," she replied that a safe place meant that men would go away when she said no. "Some of the men are so pushy and rude – they act as if we must do what they want, like they own us."

A view from another place

While Filipina women recognize that they are shamed and subject to open harassment in Abu Dhabi, Indian women tell a more ambivalent story – one that we were not expecting to hear, but were told from several Malayali respondents. When we asked them to single out the major most important difference in the experience of life in the Gulf versus Kerala? The responses from young and older women, and some men as well, were similar versions of, "There is respect for women here."

Malayali women repeatedly told us about their joy in being able to move freely without fear or censure in public space, their amazement at a public dress code which permitted some women to wear shorts and tank tops, such that suddenly western-style pants and T-shirt are not seen to be daringly inappropriate as they would back home, but respectable. In the Gulf, Malayalis also pick up the idea that 'westerns' are linked to middle-class self-presentations such as 'office worker' or professional status, making these clothes not merely tolerable but even desirable (for non-Muslims). Other notions are accommodated as well. A Gulf style *abayah* is now prestige clothing for Malayali Muslims while for non-Muslims, a long and flowing skirt, even though calves might be partly visible, becomes appropriate – whereas only teen girls would wear such a garment in Kerala. In the Gulf, body covering becomes rather relative as comparisons are made across the clothing worn by European and Filipino women. Kerala men and women alike report a sense of freedom about what the Gulf clothing demands of feminine respectability have to be, and escape from anxieties about how Kerala womenfolk will be perceived by outsiders if wearing 'westerns'.

Taking tea in a Malayali apartment, one man told us that, “Women have top place here, they take priority. A woman will be treated well, given respect, and you must not treat her badly.” The others in the room (a group of five Malayali men and two women), all nodded assent, and one of the women went on to relate in detail her experience of a rise in status and respect offered since moving to UAE. This was quite an unexpected response and it speaks at once to the ferocity of Kerala gendered demands upon women and to the success of Emirati projects of getting girls and women into college, workplace and public spaces where they visibly act as guarantor that modest and conservative respectability need not demand feminine domesticity (Hodgson, et al. 2015; Shallal 2011). The general sense of what we heard from Malayalis in Abu Dhabi can be summarised as: Women are not treated as non-subjects here, but are expected to be educated, to be employed, to be treated decently and have their voices heard. Plus, “women here are safe, unlike India; they are not at risk of public harassment or sexual violence on the street” (Osella 2016; Basu Roy & Dastidar 2018). This makes an interesting contrast with Filipina respondents’ stories, above, and gives interesting gendered nuance to Smith’s delineation of some of the narratives of Dubai affect as heavily laced with fear (2010).

Of course, what these respondents are overlooking is all kinds of harm being done, both the well-recorded violence practised in some households upon female migrant domestic workers, and questions of domestic and intimate violence – not to mention an ignorance about how gender distinction and limitations play out in Emirati family and private spaces – but the point is made clearly: Indian women and men know that women and girls are safe on the streets of UAE, because the law is so strict, and this fact alone is experienced as a form of respect and as a major freedom and relief on both sides. Freedom for women, to be mobile and move around alone; and for men, freedom from acting as continual protector and anxiety about what might hap-

pen to their own loved womenfolk, and freedom from duties of having to do all the public work (like shopping or going to the bank) because women need to be kept home safe, as is a widespread expectation in Kerala. At the same time, because Abu Dhabi communities are partially segregated from each other and make judgements about each other based heavily on public behaviours, Kerala migrants are reading Emirati women’s freedom to work, to move in public spaces like malls, and the enforcement by police of prosecution for rape and harassment, in terms of a generalised ‘respect for women’ – an interpretation which might raise a wry smile among Emirati women themselves.

Younger women in post 1990s India are stepping out into workplaces and public streets – but with some clear gendered expectations on them, and with respectability remaining a key issue (Donner 2012; Uberoi 2009). In India, a woman in public must demonstrate moral purpose – she is off to work, to buy food, to pick up the kids from school and so on. She must also perform respectability on the street, by avoiding eye contact, looking busy, and moving with purpose. Regardless of female college education and employment, and despite a degree of mixing and female leisure in the new public spaces of coffee shops and malls, the ‘bad public woman’ and ‘good household woman’ binary is still widely upheld – nowhere more than in India’s southern states (Chant 2013; Devika 2009).

Kerala women would not wear shorts and tank tops even in the home, abiding by a stringent norm of covering from neck to ankle. Witness the public furore and scandal that erupted when a TV company attempted to replicate the ‘Big Brother House’ format with a ‘Malayalee House’ show. The scandal and public fury circled around two major moments: one, there were suggestions and hints that a man and woman not married to each other might have exchanged kisses off camera; and two, there was a notorious shot where a woman’s thighs appear to be seen in the half-light as she changed her clothing. This was enough to draw fury, an energetic public debate,

TV producer-contrition, and public apologies in Kerala's public arena (Mini 2015).

While Kerala was momentarily famous in 1980s / 90s India for its 'soft porn' literatures and film industry (Mini 2016), an outsider accustomed to globalised porn standards would find the material extraordinarily tame. Harder pornographic material is certainly known and consumed, and there also exists across Kerala, and in the Gulf, a multitude of twilight secret lives of sex-work, adulterous liaisons, sexual assaults, and consensual premarital sex. As for drinking alcohol, dancing or free sociality across the sexes, all these parts of life are part of the hidden, disavowed night-time semi-secret life available to men who have the cash for a visit to a bar where paid bar-girls entertain. Such venues are strictly off-limits for Kerala women. In Kerala, freestyle or partner dancing is for kids only; drinking alcohol is the men's dirty little secret, albeit an open one (F. Osella 2012, 2015).

At the same time, several commentators have argued that since the 1990s Kerala has been in the grip of increasing conservatism and the reconstitution of a neo-conservative and neo-patriarchal order (e.g. Devika 2009; C. Osella 2012, 2016; Kumar 2015). Across Kerala, maintaining a good public face of carefully guarded decency is imperative, and it would be the utmost bad taste to reveal or challenge the hypocritical gap between public performance and private lives. As one Malayali man tried to explain to us, "In the West, you do everything, drinking, dancing, sex, and it is not a problem or seen as a bad thing. For us, it is not so much that doing all that stuff is impossible, but doing it so openly, like you do, that is the really bad part and what we do not like about your culture." What he did not add, so taken for granted is it, is that only men have access to the semi-clandestine illicit life, as even a cursory examination of online small ads or hook-up sites will demonstrate. Kerala womenfolk generally conform, publicly and privately, to South Indian stringent norms of female respectability.

For Kerala women, 'decent dress' is imperative, but the religious community makes a strong

mark upon what is considered decent or indecent dress, such that 'Kerala woman' also falls away as helpful descriptor. Kerala Muslim women's dress codes correspond closely to Emirati ones – to the extent that Kerala women, like their Tamil, Hyderabad and Sri Lankan Muslim counterparts, have adopted the *abayah* back home as a form of a more glamorous, modern and sophisticated *pardah* to replace the old-style simple black coat and scarf.⁷ Muslim women generally prefer full-length sleeves and the tunics of their *kameez* or the blouse for their sari to be loose and long. Hindu and Christian women do wear short sleeved and more body-fitting designs of *salwaar kameez*. While 'westerns' are popular for small kids, in Kerala most adult women do not wear them. When thinking about dress codes, modesty, and decency, Malayalis are accustomed to comparing themselves (favourably) with North Indian metropolitan women, or with Western tourists and workers. When Kerala men and women talk about Western dress, or about those who wear it, they draw a particular line of respectability and decency around women who refuse 'westerns' dress' in favour of Indian dress – while even Kerala menfolk are subject to negative evaluations of blue jeans as being non-respectable (Banerjee and Miller 2003; Miller and Woodward 2011; Wilton 2012).

Meanwhile, in the Gulf, many Kerala women are happy to find that they can still be considered decent in public space without having to wear *sari* or *salwaar kameez*. Ajitha, age 33, married, and a mother, explained, "Here I can wear jeans. Well, in Kerala I can also wear jeans, but the difference is that if in Kerala I am in my own car going to work wearing jeans, still someone will phone my mother and tell her, 'I saw Ajitha in jeans, why is she running around like that?'" Shorts and tank top would be considered highly

⁷ Osella has written about this and about Muslim fashion in Kerala, where females over 8 or 9 years old come into line with a norm whereby only hands, face and feet can be shown for full 'decency', with more anxiety about showing arms than about hair covering and with long, loose, body-concealing clothing being standard use (Osella and Osella 2007a).

indecent dress across most of India, and akin to underwear in Kerala. While Malayali women would not think this clothing suitable for females past puberty, even in a reconstructed Gulf set of values, the fact that this clothing combo can be widely seen on Abu Dhabi streets, and is considered decent among some groups, works to reposition jeans or long skirts in relative terms as well within public modesty boundaries.

Emirati Perspectives on Female Migrants

There are relatively few sites of social interaction between Emiratis and foreign migrants. Those migrants who work as domestic servants in Emirati homes obviously interact with the family members continuously, but only within the parameters of the employer-employee construct. They are often given uniforms to wear by the employer that are considered decent and class-specific suitable, such as a long loose housedress or loose pants and a long top. Some others may be employed as shop attendants, accountants, office managers, and the like, but again, the interaction in those situations is shaped by the specifics of job and role. Migrants with what are considered “professional qualifications,” such as architects, doctors, professors, teachers, and a wide array of management consultants, have more opportunity to interact socially with Emiratis, but still there are many constraints. Weddings are the most common entry point into Emirati society, with invitations given widely for a child’s or a sibling’s wedding. These are often elaborate affairs – at least, the women’s celebrations – and, to many foreign women, are something that ‘one should do once, and only once’ because they are perceived to be quite boring (Bristol-Rhys 2007).

Alcohol acts as a social divide between communities in several ways. Emiratis, indeed all Muslims resident in the UAE, are prohibited from consuming alcohol and so most are not comfortable frequenting locations where it is served.⁸

⁸ To purchase alcohol one must possess an Alcohol License that requires considerable documentation: passport copy, Emirates Identification Card, and a salary statement from one’s employer. Hotel bars and

The non-Muslim “professionals” or “expats” as they are often shorthanded socialize in the restaurants, clubs, and bars in which alcohol is served and that might well be considered the key ingredient for a night out (Coles and Walsh 2010; Walsh 2007). Emiratis appear to be becoming more comfortable dining in restaurants where alcohol is served, and it is no longer uncommon to see Emirati couples and groups of friends seated at tables next to foreigners who are drinking wine with their meal. However, it is decidedly rare to see an Emirati and a foreigner at the same table with the non-Emirati drinking alcohol, as that would probably make both parties uncomfortable. As mentioned, Malayali society cannot tolerate public drinking, but a network of discrete Indian bars caters to men (only) who want to drink and watch paid female dancers. Kerala women are not expected to drink, at home or outside, whether in Kerala or in Abu Dhabi. Filipino migrants have similar backstreet spaces for drinking and dancing, as do other nationalities with sizeable populations in Abu Dhabi but the Filipino bars and clubs are mixed-sex, and are not hidden away, as socializing with alcohol is acceptable.⁹

Male Emiratis have considerably more public freedom than their sisters, cousins, aunts, and mothers. Emirati women socialize primarily with members of their extended family and now increasingly with female friends from university or work. They most emphatically do not go to clubs or bars and usually dine out as a group. Perhaps because they have no experience with “night life” as it is operationalized by others, or,

clubs do not consistently or even frequently request a patron’s license and so those individuals who cannot safely purchase alcohol go to where it is served.

⁹ The clubs that serve alcohol must be attached in some form or another to a hotel, in most cases, old and situated in areas that are no longer fashionable. Most also have musicians and female dancers and/or “hostesses.” An infamous Abu Dhabi landmark was the so-called African Club at the Zafer Hotel that catered to Sudanese and interested others, and was popular with “expats” as well because of the pool table. There are also “social clubs” such as the Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Egyptian that are family oriented.

indeed, given that many assume that “all Westerners drink alcohol all the time,” the Emirati women who spoke to us appear to assume that the bars and clubs of Abu Dhabi are filled with drunken foreigners, especially foreign women behaving badly. The perception has fanned the belief that the majority – if not all – of the foreign women in the city are sexually licentious and, a considerable number are convinced that those women are on the “hunt for a rich Emirati man.”¹⁰ This suspicion extends widely throughout Emirati society. In part, it has been supported by the fact that Emirati men can indeed marry non-Emirati women while Emirati women are encouraged to marry within their society (Bristol-Rhys 2007).¹¹ Emirati men have married foreign women in considerable numbers and while there are certain nationalities that are considered especially “dangerous” by Emirati women. Filipinas are high up on the list, because there are many who have married Emirati men. However, this anxiety has been generalized to include most young foreign migrant women.

Emirati men, on the other hand, are certainly not anxious about being pursued by a voracious woman, but our respondents all indicated that they were very aware that Emirati women believed them to be under siege. In conversations with Emirati males, aged 19 to 27, it became evident that very few went to clubs and other places where foreign women could be met. Their perceptions were not that dissimilar to the wom-

en’s: “We couldn’t be seen in such a place! What if we were seen entering or leaving? Besides, we don’t know how to dance or do anything that goes on in those places.” Some were candid about where they might meet a foreign woman. “Mostly coffee shops and now that foreigners are smoking shisha, we often see Western women at one of our hangout places.” When asked if the women started conversations with them or the other way around, Ahmed said, “Well, both ways really, but usually it is us who starts talking.” We pursued this idea, trying to tease out the assumptions that these young men had about the women they were meeting with questions about what type of women they would speak to and what they expected to happen if a conversation ensued. The responses were uniform: they all assumed that a foreign woman, alone or with another woman, in a coffee shop or shisha place was probably sexually available to them. “Why? That’s easy, because they are foreign and in that place. If they don’t speak to us, then fine, we find another.” While Emirati respondents commonly parse foreign women in the fields of employment (as good nannies, well-trained teachers, skilled hairdressers and so on) and in matters such as suitability for limited entry into Emirati space (e.g. wedding invitations), when it comes to the question of social respectability, it seems that all non-Emirati women, whether they go to bars or not, smoke shisha in coffee shops or not, fall way short of the respectability and decency mark. ‘Foreign woman’ thus emerges as some sort of apparently meaningful category to Emiratis, even as ‘Asian woman migrant’ splintered for us at the first analytic hurdle. Who speaks an identifier into being – and why – is critical.

When sex/gender and ethnicity collide?

Indian women reiterated repeatedly that ‘migrant’ means a lot of valued freedoms, small and large, many of them gendered, and all of which can make for a liveable life. They tell us that what ‘woman’ means, and what one must do ‘to be woman’ / ‘do woman’ is significantly more demanding back home. The Gulf Indian

¹⁰ We note that Emiratis rarely denote the nationality or ethnicity of foreigners. They use the words “worker(s)” and “foreigner(s)” consistently. They do not use the term “expat” and tend to lump Europeans, North Americans, and Australians together as “Westerners.” Emiratis never use the term “Asian” to refer to anyone but if talking about South Asians, generally they would use “Indian” as an all-inclusive term.

¹¹ There is no legal prohibition in force but social pressure is comprehensive as is the economic pressure because, as in all Muslim societies, the children of such a union will take on the citizenship of their father and thus lose their Emirati entitlements. President Khalifa has introduced a new law that allows the children of Emirati women born to foreign fathers to apply for citizenship upon their 18th birthday.

diaspora community is far more forgiving than the homeland one. Emirati norms of public interaction and distance also make for safer streets and a less sexualised experience of being out in public. In direct contrast, Filipina women emphasise that the norms for being 'woman' here in the Gulf are unfathomably stringent both in questions of dress and public interaction. At the same time, respondents recognise the difficulty of predicting how any specific encounter will go. One Emirati man might harrass, another may protect. While Indian or Pakistani men might extend respect and protection to some women, others they may feel entitled to stare with impunity on the street. It may be banal to conclude that freedom is relative, norms are variable, and analysis must account for this, but this needs to be repeated (Mahmood 2006). Although we know there are flows of power such as citizenship, skin colour, national stereotype and (mis)-read dress codes, we also cannot always know when those flows will be mitigated or when things will run along predictable grooves.

In anthropology and other qualitative disciplines, we always live a tension between, on the one hand, ethnographic singularities, stories, individual case-studies and on the other hand a 'sociological' demand for generalisation or categories. We gather singular life stories but observe some apparent regularities and recurrences. We can castigate journalists or chide our respondents for producing and reproducing the labels and distinctions which then force us into thinking about people in terms of objectified ethnicity, ramping up the Gulf ethno-scape and buttressing its divisions, whether we name them as 'ethnocracy' or not (Longva 1997; Vora and Koch 2015). But we find that academic analytics such as intersectionality also push us towards reproducing these kinds of logics. Do we name each single respondent in journalist-speak as: Indian, woman, lower-middle-class, under 30, mother, lower caste; Filipina, shop-manager, single, diabetic, keen dancer, devout Catholic, and so on and so on? Our material sharply reminds us that what counts as 'woman' is always per-

formative, unstable, and makes a category such as 'woman' meaningless. In an ironic gesture, intersectionality and similar taxonomic analytic frameworks attempt to nuance blunt large categories by insisting upon parsing and making specific the micro details of particular women, how they are positioned, and what other forces are at play. These frameworks ultimately rest upon an idea of intelligible 'woman' and inform decisions about which modifiers or forces are important.

Our current position is that it is always helpful to think about 'race' and 'gender' as articulating, mapping onto each other, co-constituting. But there are many other possible important aspects to identity; and, moreover, that it is specific moment which decides which aspects of potentially limitless identity descriptors or qualifiers come into play in any given situation or encounter. This means, effectively, that a subject only comes to being in very specific located contexts of performance and normative expectations, and that an observer cannot presume to know or predict those contexts. Sometimes, age will be hyper-salient; sometimes, it will recede into the background and ethnicity will be what is at stake in an encounter; sometimes, both might be of lesser importance than some – perhaps unexpected – aspect such as hair colour or the fact that two people regularly see each other at the counter of the same juice bar. Recent research on racism argues that even 'thin' repeated encounters can soften prejudice and imaginings of 'Otherness'. Peterson (2017) compares the comparatively 'thick' encounters at the community centre, where people engage with each other, with the relatively 'thin' encounters at the public library, where folk merely register each other's presence in public space. He finds that even these short glimpses of different norms and styles do work towards shifting people's evaluations of each other simply, due to repeated exposure and the fact of co-presence. The findings suggest that, if you see enough difference often enough, it becomes banale and acceptable (Peterson 2017). Longer-term processes of repeated mutual 'seeing' is the key here.

Our fieldwork narratives also push us towards more process-oriented approaches (Faber & Stephenson 2011; Stengers 2008). The lives we've gotten entangled with over several decades of research, and the stories we hear, prompt enormous, complex ambivalence and only ever make sense as part of a densely-textured life-course. As time goes by and we have known some of our interlocutors for nearly twenty years, extra points of nuance, re-evaluation and the wisdom of hindsight come to our respondents and to us, such that the story they would tell us of their working life or arranged marriage or attempts at motherhood, and our ethnographic analysis of those events are necessarily subject to shift (compare Qureshi 2016). Our bottom line then, might seem to be the familiar anthropological one, which is that ethnographic material, lived lives and everyday practice will always outstrip and flummox theory (Carr 2015). This should urge us once more to slow right down and listen a little closer to our respondents and to check our presuppositions and assumptions. We need to hold on to process and narrative, pausing to think when we say 'Young Woman' as if it necessarily meant something stable, context-free, or transparent to analytic force outside of a particular narrative and set of life-moments (Graham 2015).

Indeed, 'context', including specific situational moment, needs to move from acting as background to being substantial part of the analytic moment (Kuper, et al. 2014). We need careful attention to be given to everyday embodied lived moments and specific concrete situations where 'figure' and 'ground' are understood as co-constitutive in a specific moment, and are probably going to help us into more nuanced and ethnography-respectful analyses (Rosiek 2013; Rothblum 2010). Starting from the ethnographic study of how lab physics works, work by Karen Barad refuses a break between ontology and epistemology and demonstrates the truth of the (still-under-operationalised) revelation that the instrument of measurement will play a role in what you find (Barad 2007). One impor-

tant strand in this kind of thinking is letting go of a 'context' and 'foregrounding' metaphor and understanding that everything is potentially both/either, within any singular event or moment (Stengers 2008; Shaviro 2012). One person's own personal history of encounters and exposure to difference would be part of this complexity.

Conclusions

Emirati women, migrant women, and the men-folk who evaluate and interact with them, are all at once conscious of being in a densely plural space, saturated with competing values, aesthetics and requirements for proper personhood and gendering, but this knowledge does not necessarily help them navigate that space. For one thing, the diversity is bewilderingly complex, such that even one's own immediate workplace and social networks throw up intensely demanding situations and call for social skills which probably nobody could ever have time to develop. The plurality of most public and social spaces also means that it is impossible to do 'impression management' towards one other group; one is always going to be falling foul of somebody else's standards.

For a casual Friday night mall shopping and coffee outing, one woman's insufficiently covered immodesty (shirt and pants) is another woman's excessively over-dressed formality; the shirt and pants combo which some will read as a prestigious smart, modern and decent dress, others will interpret as inappropriate business-like office wear – insufficiently stylish-casual and suggestive of poverty and a small wardrobe.¹² In the superdiverse Gulf space, different regimes of gender, respectability and decency, of social class, weave in and through the space, touching each other just enough to be abrasive, puzzling, liberating, or sexually enticing (Meissner and Vertovec 2015; Vertovec 2007). Retreat into single-

¹² We resist here the gendered and orientalist trope of 'veiling' as specific object of study / discussion; in line with Osella (2007, 2013) we are considering veiling a non-exceptional sub-set of a wider category of 'modest dress' or 'being dressed decently'.

ethnicity space beckons as a relaxing – and safe – possibility. But such space can hardly be found in a city like Abu Dhabi and much of people's lives will necessarily involve exposure to diversity.

Time can also shift the degree to which Emiratis and migrants alike live the superdiverse space as baffling overdose of Otherness, abrasive co-presence or a light form of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Rovisco 2016). Work in UK shows that even in the midst of hardcore racism and white supremacist narratives, conviviality also exists (Back & Sinha 2016). We must also note that in UK, a highly manipulated political discourse around 'zombie multiculturalism' or the 'failures' of diversity frame the scene (Shannahan 2016), in ways which are quite different from Abu Dhabi, where the demographics make Emiratis a minority, and where the stakes for holding onto peaceful coexistence are high.

Our understanding of Abu Dhabi, its past entanglements and its likely future, is then very different from anything offered by Nile Green in his recent controversial article (2016) and is much more like a continuation of the longstanding dynamics of mutual entanglement and cultivation of knowledge described by Vora and Koch (2015). While Vora's Indian business-class respondents perhaps represent a very specific group (experiencing a relative decline in power and wealth in the fast-paced consolidating UAE national culture, compared to their 19th C position), we would argue, with them and with Vora, that a pre-national situation of hybridity and exchange has not been entirely replaced post 1980s by communities in silo (Onley 2007; Osella and Osella 2007b; Vora 2008). There will continue to be moral judgments, social misfires, gossip, and so on. Yet we also witness the furious pace of information-transfer from old hand to new migrant, and the continuing processes of fast change among Emiratis, with women now representing 44% of the workforce (Hodgson, et al. 2015) – albeit with some barriers – and a majority of GCC college graduates (Rutledge and Al Shamsi 2015; Rutledge, et al. 2011). Emiratisation means an intensification of encounter

between Emirati citizens and migrants, and more outsider interactions among – and with – Emirati women.

This all means that, while stereotype and harassment will persist, so too do refusal, reporting, public outcry, public sphere discussion, personalised explanations and justifications, and private narratives of complexity and entanglement which go way beyond the newspapers' headlined shorthand. Media, commerce, interpersonal interactions and transactions continue to make it impossible, whatever anybody's will, for any of the superdiverse Gulf communities to live in a complete enclave, or for all non-Emiratis to be completely excluded from public culture and shaping the nation. As Vora and Koch (2015) argue, and as our long-time respondents confirm, questions of belonging are not decided by passport alone. Emirati norms of gendering, dress and comportment represent one very small strand in a hyper-complex Gulf society and everyone in Abu Dhabi is sharply aware of living in amongst others who hold different norms. Finally, then, if recent work on conviviality and encounter are pointing towards possible positive outcomes in situations of superdiversity, and if we hold on to processual methods and analytics and work to help birth them into public discourse, we might hope that, eventually, we will reach the point whereby gross rhetorical devices such as the colonial 'whore-oppressed-respectable' triangle and the journalistic 'Asian single mother migrant' taxonomy will both bend towards an appreciation of singularity and pluralism.

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