

Racing whiteness in Asian bodies: The influence of American conservatism on Singaporean anti-colonial nationalism

Wee Yang Gelles-Soh 

The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Correspondence

Wee Yang, Department of Anthropology, The University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA.
Email: weeyang.winter@gmail.com

Funding information

Committee on Southern Asian Studies, The University of Chicago, Grant/Award Number: Small Research Grant; University of Chicago; Association for Asian Studies; University of Chicago

Abstract

In contemporary Singaporean sociopolitical discourse, comparisons with the West—particularly the USA and the UK—have become pervasive across a wide range of critical social issues. These comparisons often serve to reinforce the political positions of the Singaporean state by contrasting them with perceived shortcomings in the Western world. Utilizing a linguistic anthropological framework, this paper explores the phenomenon of anti-colonial nationalism, wherein state representatives dismiss challenges to the Singaporean status quo as unpatriotic, Western-influenced, and thus dangerously “white.” By demonstrating how Singapore’s anti-colonial politics is paradoxically shaped by the anti-liberal and populist rhetoric of the contemporary American right, this paper argues that anti-colonialism is a product of twenty-first-century neoliberal nationalism. Underscoring the importance of examining how political rhetoric crosses international borders, this study seeks to invite a conversation on the dynamics of nationalist discourses in the twenty-first century, and how the language of decolonization can be co-opted by new forms of state power and control through a racing of “whiteness.”

KEYWORDS

colonialism, decolonisation, discourse, media, nationalism, populism

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Nations and Nationalism* published by Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Within sociopolitical discourse in modern Singapore, comparisons with Western powers, primarily the U.S. and the UK, have become *de rigueur*. These comparisons permeate discussions on a range of sociopolitical topics, including race and minority rights, state governance and law enforcement, social activism, as well as education, business and industry. The persistent invocation of “the West” highlights its significance as a reference point in shaping modern Singaporean subjectivity. Using a linguistic anthropological framework, this paper examines Singapore's anti-colonial nationalism by focusing on how everyday Singaporeans respond to a perceived pervasive and ever-encroaching foreign whiteness. This exploration seeks to understand how these perceptions inform and justify a reactionary political stance aimed at opposing Western influences in Singaporean speech, thought and behaviour.

This paper argues that Singapore's governance is shaped by the intersection of two distinct orders of racialisation. The first, widely examined in postcolonial Southeast Asian scholarship, is the naturalised Furnivallian model of plurality and multiracialism, which organises Singaporean society into the categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO). The second, which is the focus of this paper, rearticulates the colonial white/nonwhite binary within a nationalist framework, a framework that is ironically influenced by the political rhetoric of contemporary American¹ conservative media. The convergence of these two orders has produced a political landscape where individuals can be racialised as both “local” and, paradoxically, dangerously “white.”

To explore the curious dynamics of Singapore's anti-colonialist nationalism, I focus on two key recent social issues of national significance: racial tensions and the death penalty for drug-related offences. Employing a conceptual framework rooted in linguistic anthropology, this investigation centres on the intricacies and consequences of language use within social contexts. To approach Singaporean discourse on the West as a sociolinguistic phenomenon rather than a direct reflection of reality acknowledges the narrative's socially coercive ubiquitous presence, drawing attention to its active role in framing, defining and conditioning local contexts of human action and behaviour—a concept articulated by linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein as “metapragmatic function” (1993). The aim is to examine *metadiscourse*: discourse about discourse. This involves exploring the pragmatic implications of how Singaporeans across the spectrum, from ordinary citizens to policymakers and academics, discern signs of Westernisation in fellow Singaporeans in order to regulate and even police their behaviours. Employing this semiotic framework will not only enable us to examine how speech registers set up political arenas with recognisable types of people that are in a moral conflict but will also enable us to examine the mechanics of transnational “grafting” (Gal, 2018, p. 4): how Singaporean state-representing actors invoke and adapt a particular genre of conservative political speech from the U.S. to Singaporean politics. Through grafting, a partisan model of politics is imported from American conservatism into a sense of defensive Singaporean nationalism.

The data for this article is drawn from a larger study on transnational political registers in Singapore conducted between 2019 and 2022. The study involved the collection of data across a range of controversial political issues, including racial tensions related to the NETS E-Pay and Hari Raya incidents, the Hong Kong democracy protests, the closure of Yale-NUS College, the death sentencing of Indian-Malaysian Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam, and the treatment of migrant workers in Singapore during COVID-19. The data sources included archival materials such as official government press releases and news reports, ethnographic encounters with everyday Singaporeans both online and offline, and semi-structured interviews with six Singaporeans in the immediate aftermath of the NETS E-Pay incident. The study documented over 120 instances of Singaporean discourse alleging that various sociopolitical activities in Singapore have been influenced by Westernisation. By conducting ethnographic research into these discourses, we explore the pragmatic² implications of profiling Singaporean speech and behaviour as “American” or “Western” for nurturing a sense of nationalism.

Anthropologists, sociologists and postcolonial scholars have examined how global white supremacy and anti-Blackness continue to shape the politics and societies of non-Western countries (Baugh, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 1997;

Flores & Rosa, 2023; Mills, 2011). This discourse is particularly relevant in Singapore, as highlighted by Joshua Babcock (2023), who observed that Singaporeans display an ideological commitment to linguistic whiteness closely tied to white European identities. Drawing on this concept of whiteness, anti-colonialism, as defined in this paper, refers to the mobilisation of an ideological image of foreign whiteness that, rather than challenging existing structures, ultimately reinforces neocolonial governance. While racial tensions and the death penalty will serve as the primary focal points of analysis in this paper, it is essential to emphasise that this anti-colonialism extends beyond these two specific issues in Singapore. This analysis delves into how the spectre of “the West” haunts contemporary Singaporean sociopolitics, invisible yet always invocable by Singaporeans in any interactional context to name and disclaim certain thoughts, behaviours and even social movements as “un-Singaporean.” By underscoring the importance of examining how political rhetoric crosses international borders, this study seeks to invite a conversation on the dynamics of nationalist discourses in the twenty-first century, and how the language of decolonisation can be co-opted by new forms of state power and control through a racing of “whiteness.”

2 | HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RACE RELATIONS IN SINGAPORE

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has implemented a **Furnivallian** model of racial governance, managing distinct racial groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO)—as separate, compartmentalised communities within a pluralistic society (Brown, 1997). This “CMIO” model was first standardised by the British to demographically account for immigrant populations in colonial Singapore and was subsequently adopted by Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government post-independence (Purushotam, 1998). Under the concept of “multiracialism,” described as one of the state’s “founding myths” (Benjamin, 1976), Singapore emphasises the necessity of strict management of race relations to prevent conflicts between racial groups and sustain the social cohesion essential for sustained economic success (Goh, 2008). This manifests in state policies that institutionalise racial categories, such as housing quotas, education policies and racial representation in parliament, which are designed to prevent racial dominance while promoting social cohesion (Chua, 2005).

Currently, the demographic composition of Singapore has been predominantly Chinese, constituting 74% of the population, while Malays, Indians and Others make up the remaining 26% (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020). As Chua (1998) notes, the CMIO model has essentialist implications because it treats race as an ineffaceable part of a Singaporean identity, flattening diverse language practices, customs, ancestral lineages and practices of hybridity into four singular racial groups. At the same time, under “multiracialism,” each racial group is envisioned to be equal yet mutually exclusive for the purposes of social administration. This “different-yet-equal” stance is deemed imperative for Singapore to uphold social order and fulfil its vision of meritocracy, wherein every Singaporean ostensibly has an “equal” opportunity to advance up the societal ladder and accrue wealth and status through diligent work and demonstration of merit and talent.

In its efforts to promote harmonious race relations, the Singapore government has adopted a strict stance towards regulating speech online and offline, prosecuting Singaporeans on numerous occasions for making comments deemed anti-religious and racist. In addition, the visual representation of Singapore’s “racial harmony” has been a crucial part of the government’s strategy to foster geniality and solidarity among Singaporeans. Such representations typically depict Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian (viz. Other) characters, identifiable based on skin colour and sartorial cues, co-existing happily within a single photographic frame (see Figure 1).

In recent years, observers have challenged the state’s policies on multiracialism. Scholarship on multiculturalism and race in Singapore has highlighted how the CMIO framework links racial categories to discursive characteristics and stereotypes (Ackermann, 1996; Velayutham, 2017). While this system is often presented as celebrating Singaporeans’ cultural roots, it is actually “a thoroughly inauthentic, planned construct” designed to project Singapore’s desired cultural future (Ang & Stratton, 2018, p. S78). The framework thus invests the concept of race



FIGURE 1 An image shared by the Media Literacy Council of Singapore on Twitter, depicting various races living in harmony. This representation of “Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO)” reemerges in the NETS e-pay ad (Figure 2). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

in Singapore with “a particularly salient heuristic power” (Prankumar et al., 2021, p. 158), shaping both policymaking and everyday social relations. Historically, “Singapore’s multiracialism [put] Chinese people under pressure to become more Chinese, Indians more Indian, and Malays more Malay, in their behaviour” (Benjamin, 1976, p. 124), but over time, the framework has functioned as a tool to promote the assimilation of racial minorities into Chinese Singaporean hegemonic values (Barr & Low, 2005; Velayutham, 2017). Policies that have reinforced Chinese cultural and economic hegemony include the selective Special Assistance Plan (SAP) programme, which is only open to students claiming Mandarin Chinese as a “mother tongue” (Zhuo, 2017); the informal restriction of the prime ministership to ethnic Chinese (male) candidates, based on the PAP’s assertion that Singaporeans are not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister (Gest, 2021, p. 82); and the fact that many Malays and Indians choose to learn Mandarin to improve their job prospects in a society that implicitly values Mandarin more than Malay or Tamil (Kathiravelu, 2017). Furthermore, the granting of permanent residency status to substantial numbers of immigrants from mainland China has been seen as a strategy to maintain the country’s “ethnic Chinese dominance” (Ang, 2021, p. 236). Scholars have demonstrated that the ideal Singaporean subject is closely tied to alignment with somatic and linguistic markers of (Singaporean) Chineseness, and have highlighted how racial stereotypes in Singapore are linked to historical and colonial tropes of anti-Blackness (Rahim, 1998; Teo, 2022; Velayutham, 2017).

While the existing scholarship on race in Singapore has been invaluable in uncovering the complexities of the CMIO framework and its reinforcement of racial stereotypes, I aim to contribute to and nuance this ongoing discussion by examining metadiscourses of race and governance through several case studies. These will reveal that the current understanding of race relations, framed by the CMIO model, only captures one dimension of Singapore’s racial landscape. Specifically, I will demonstrate how governance in Singapore is also informed by a thread of anti-whiteness that is inspired by American populist conservatism. In the following sections, I will explore how these dual racial orders intersect to inform governance and identity formation in Singapore.

3 | RACIAL TENSIONS AND THE STEREOTYPE OF THE AMERICANISED SINGAPOREAN

In 2019, a state-sponsored advertisement promoting the use of a new electronic payment (e-pay) system had Chinese-Singaporean actor and radio personality Dennis Chew impersonate different Singaporean CMIO characters: a well-dressed Chinese woman, a Malay woman in hijab, an Indian man in office attire and a Chinese labourer. Chew had his skin artificially darkened to portray the non-Chinese characters.

The advertisement drew criticism from ethnic minorities in Singapore for caricaturing their racial identities. Singaporean rapper Subhas and his sister Preeti Nair, a social influencer, attempted to critique the government's advertisement by releasing a rap video on Facebook and YouTube. In the rap video, while standing in front of a large banner of the e-pay advertisement, the Nair siblings accused the government and Chinese Singaporeans of engaging in “brownface” and disregarding a history of racism against ethnic minorities (Figure 2).

The video quickly drew condemnation for its confrontational tone and use of vulgar language, with critics paradoxically accusing the Nair siblings of fostering racism by echoing American anti-racism discourse. K. Shanmugam, Singapore's Minister of Law and the Minister of Home Affairs, castigated the Nair siblings for using “the language of resistance in America” (Kok, 2019). Meanwhile, Mathew Mathews, a principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), was quoted in *The Straits Times*, Singapore's leading English-language newspaper, stating that “Singapore lacks a history of severe oppression or ongoing discrimination, such as police brutality similar to that seen in the US, which would justify the ‘in your face,’ confrontational methods observed in some societies like America” (Ng, 2019). Multiple police reports were made against the siblings for “offensive” language against Chinese Singaporeans (Sim, 2019), and the Ministry of Home Affairs quickly ordered that the rap video be removed from all online platforms and forbade Singaporeans from recirculating the video (Menon, 2019; Sim, 2019). In an opinion



FIGURE 2 A video still of the Nair siblings rapping in front of the controversial NETS e-pay banner that featured Chinese celebrity and radio personality Dennis Chew playing Singaporeans of different races. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

piece in *The Straits Times*, cultural anthropologist Margaret Chan from Singapore Management University cautioned against using the term “brownface” in the context of Singapore:

My grandchildren always dress in Indian or Malay costumes for Racial Harmony Day. This signals our embrace of our fellow Singaporeans of different ethnicities. If we were in American society, we would be accused of appropriating another culture and, just like a white American woman in the news recently for wearing a cheongsam, we might have been slammed (Chan, 2019).

In her opinion piece, Chan contrasts racial dynamics in Singapore with those in the U.S., suggesting that actions construed as fostering racial harmony in Singapore might be perceived negatively in American cultural contexts. Chan's argument here that adopting American linguistic norms could jeopardize Singapore's societal harmony effectively curtails subsequent dialogue on race, dismissing the perspectives of minoritized Singaporeans, such as the Nairs, in determining what “brownface” means to them.

In challenging Singapore's dominant racial logics, the Nairs were not alone in being portrayed as Singaporean individuals heavily influenced by American culture. Two years later, another government-linked project was accused of caricaturising racial minorities. On May 28, 2021, a Malay Singaporean, Sarah Bagharib, discovered that her wedding photograph was appropriated without permission and used as a decorative cardboard cutout for a Chinese-Singaporean member of parliament's Hari Raya (Eid el-Fitr) greetings in a Singaporean public housing estate (Figure 3). She filed a complaint with the People's Association (PA), the statutory board responsible for overseeing grassroots communities and social organisations, which had authorised the neighbourhood's festive decorations (Sin, 2021). Additionally, she took to social media to express her concerns, asserting that the unauthorised



FIGURE 3 A cutout standee made from Ms. Sarah Bagharib's wedding photo on a decorative platform expressing seasonal greetings. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

use of her wedding photo constituted copyright infringement and perpetuated a “caricature of Malay people.” PA, in a Facebook response, acknowledged the cultural insensitivity of the incident but denied perpetuating systemic racism against Singapore's racial minorities. Countering Bagharib's claims, PA accused her of exaggerating the matter and baselessly alleging racism to manipulate public sentiment (PA Association, 2021). The ensuing exchange between PA and Bagharib garnered widespread attention and ignited a spirited debate regarding race and accountability.

Once again, direct comparisons to the U.S. were prevalent throughout this public discourse. On a community discussion page, Bagharib and her supporters were labelled as part of “the woke mob and cancel culture” (Gong Simi Singapore, 2021). Subsequently, Singaporean politician and former member of parliament Amrin Amin joined the discussion by resharing the PA's Facebook post that denied racism. When a commentator challenged this stance by stating, “[J]ust because you don't see it as racist doesn't mean the rest of us minorities have to agree with you,” Amin responded, “[D]on't take offence too easily snowflake,” using a pejorative term frequently employed by the American right at the time to criticize liberals (Figure 4).

In critical analyses of recent racial incidents in Singapore, scholars have highlighted how these events expose a politics of covert racism, contrary to state representatives' claims that Singapore's racial dynamics differ from those in the West. Terri-Anne Teo (2022, p. 13) argues that these incidents are embedded in global histories of minstrelsy and anti-Blackness, reflecting a denial and misrecognition of the lived experiences of minorities within the Singaporean “racial matrix.” Velayutham and Somaiah (2022) examine how state and public regulation of discourses on racism actually serves to normalise racism in Singapore. Vincent Pak (2021, 14) observes that Singaporean political discourse authorises “state listening subjects”—such as Chan, Shanmugam and Amin—who interpret and reframe the use of anti-racist language as itself racist, thereby restoring the status quo and reestablishing the disrupted racial order.



FIGURE 4 Amrin Amin calling a Facebook commenter a “snowflake,” creating further controversy. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Building on these insightful analyses, I extend the discussion to show that the politics of racism in Singapore involves more than the strict enforcement of the CMIO racial order. It also encompasses a distinct form of racialisation that positions racialised Singaporean subjects as American or Western. In an interview with “K,” a Singaporean who was investigated by the police for sedition after re-uploading the banned Nair rap video, K described feeling doubly silenced. As a minority-identifying Singaporean, K re-uploaded the rap video to an online website to encourage broader public dialogue about the challenges of growing up as a racial minority in Singapore. Instead of fostering the critical conversation he intended, his post was reported by an anonymous netizen to the Singaporean police, and he was subsequently investigated for inciting racial enmity.

As a racial minority, K felt his lived experiences were consistently overshadowed by state narratives of racial harmony. Moreover, his attempts to highlight covert racism, like those of other Singaporean activists, were constantly dismissed as being “too American” or “too woke,” a characterisation he found deeply ironic and hypocritical. He noted that “woke” was a fashionable pejorative term borrowed from the American right to criticise others for being excessively liberal or progressive. To underscore his point that Singaporeans have been consuming and internalising American conservative nationalist content, K showed me a video by American conservative commentator Ben Shapiro. The video, in which Shapiro criticises the liberal left, was trending among Singapore's top videos on YouTube that very day. K scoffed at the notion that his critique of racism was deemed overly American when Singaporeans were actively adopting American conservative rhetoric to uphold the status quo.

The double silencing K described arises from a dual construction in which he was simultaneously positioned as a brown-skinned racial minority and, paradoxically, as “white” within Singaporean discourse. In his influential work on enregisterment, anthropologist Asif Agha's (2005) details how registers of speaking are deeply bound to social stereotypes and embedded in macrosocial regimes of value. Enregisterment describes the historical process through which language registers are formed by associating specific language uses with particular types of speakers. The references to the U.S. by state representatives when evaluating speech from other Singaporeans illustrate this enregisterment process. For example, when Chan criticizes the Nairs' language as vituperative and out of context for Singapore, and when Amin labels Bagharib's supporters as “snowflakes,” they are engaging in enregisterment by dismissing these arguments based on sociolinguistic signals. These state actors effectively frame aggrieved anti-racist Singaporeans as having assimilated American leftist ideology, portraying them as provocateurs who threaten Singapore's social fabric.

In contrast, state representatives implicitly signal what they deem to be the “correct” sociolinguistic register for addressing social issues in Singapore, one that is the opposite of the so-called Americanised Singaporean register. This strategic co-construction of discourse, where one signals an emblematic status for oneself while critiquing another, is what Silverstein (2003) refers to as “second-order indexicality.” Simply put, by rejecting the Americanised register, state-aligned Singaporeans signal that they are adhering to a superior, more legitimate way of speaking about politics in Singapore. In this context, “whiteness” in Singapore becomes linked to the use of unsanctioned registers in discussing social issues and labelling a Singaporean as “white” functions as a control mechanism to police the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

In the following section, we delve into the public discourse surrounding Singapore's stance on capital punishment for drug trafficking in 2022, illustrating how this metadiscursive logic unfolds in a completely different context.

4 | “LIBERAL” ACTIVISTS AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG TRAFFICKERS

Singapore's zero-tolerance stance on drug use and its administration of the death penalty for drug trafficking offences are well-known. From 2011 to 2022, 41 out of 50 executions were for drug trafficking (Statista, 2023), and the Singapore government's public stance is that the death penalty is a needed deterrence against trafficking (Shanmugam, 2017). The government has also frequently cited high levels of support for the death penalty among

Singaporeans as a reason for its retention (Chan et al., 2018). Nevertheless, calls for its abolition have been growing in Singapore with activists pointing to several reasons: inadequate statistical evidence supporting its deterrent effect, concerns regarding hasty sentencing and potential wrongful convictions, inadequate access to legal representation for death row inmates, and the disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities and individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds among these prisoners (Ravi, 2010; Sato, 2023; Transformative Justice Collective, n.d.).

One recent drug trafficking case reignited debate both within and beyond Singapore regarding Singapore's stance on the death penalty. Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam, an Indian Malaysian apprehended while travelling from Malaysia to Singapore, received a death sentence for transporting heroin in 2009. Nagaenthran's case drew international attention, with many activists and international organisations pleading for Singapore to commute his death sentence due to his intellectual disability (MalaysiaNow, 2022). The Singapore government ultimately denied these claims, and after several delays, he was executed on April 27, 2022.

The media attention surrounding Nagaenthran's execution reached its peak in October 2022, when British billionaire Richard Branson criticised Singapore's system of capital punishment on his blog, saying that it is “fundamentally broken, inherently unfair, and completely disproportionate to the challenge [of the problems of drug misuse]” (Branson, 2022b). Responding to Branson's remarks, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs issued a press release, countering his claims, reaffirming the efficacy of the death penalty as a deterrent against drug trafficking and abuse, and extending an invitation for an all-expenses-paid trip to Singapore for a televised debate with Minister K. Shanmugam (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022b). Asserting that Branson, as a British individual, lacks moral authority, the press release argues:

[W]e do not accept that Mr Branson or others in the West are entitled to impose their values on other societies. Nor do we believe that a country that prosecuted two wars in China in the 19th century to force the Chinese to accept opium imports has any moral right to lecture Asians on drugs ... Our policies on drugs and the death penalty derive from our own experience. We are satisfied—as are the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans—that they work for us. Nothing we have seen in the UK or in the West persuades us that adopting a permissive attitude towards drugs and a tolerant position on drug trafficking will increase human happiness. Where drug addiction is concerned, things have steadily worsened in the UK, while things have steadily improved in Singapore (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022b).

The language employed in the press release achieves multiple categorical reductions: it first identifies Branson as British, then merges his viewpoint into a generalised representation of imperialist Western ideals. By introducing a geopolitical dichotomy between the “West” and “Asia,” the press release disqualifies Branson's viewpoint due to his whiteness. According to this line of reasoning, Westerners are incapable of comprehending effective policymaking in an Asian context because they are motivated by neocolonialist interests in imposing Western ideologies on Asia. This sentiment is echoed by other state-aligned figures, such as Adrian Tan, former president of the Law Society of Singapore, who remarked in a pointed commentary that “the Englishman has lost this round of the Opium Wars” (Chua, 2022). By invoking the Opium Wars, these Singaporean representatives attempt to historicise and compare the state's embattled position to past injustices faced by the broader Asian region under Western imperialism.

This rhetoric of an irreconcilable West–Asia ideological divide did not spare local voices. After declining the Ministry's invitation for a televised debate, Branson issued a follow-up blog post urging Singaporean leaders to actively engage with local and regional stakeholders (Branson, 2022a). Numerous Singaporean activists and organisations also called on the government to debate them instead (Annamalai, 2022). However, these calls were disregarded. Local activists were instead diabolised as “narco liberals and apologists for drug traffickers” and “persons who turn to foreigners like Dr Mahathir and Mr Branson to pressure Singapore, because they do not get much support from Singaporeans” (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022a; Shanmugam, 2022). This rhetoric, lambasting death

penalty activists and Nagaenthran supporters as “Western,” “liberal,” or “woke,” has permeated everyday conversations among Singaporean netizens:

Even though there was minimal involvement from prominent American voices in Nagaenthran's execution, Singaporeans on online discussion forums went to the extent of branding any opposition to Nagaenthran's execution as “American” activists blindly advocating Western human rights values and accusing them of “cultural colonialism” (selected examples shown in Figure 5). The patterns of these criticisms closely resembled that used by governmental officials and political commentators in national news outlets and press releases. In criticising local activists for overlooking the safety and stability Singapore has carefully upheld through strict legislation, these Singaporean netizens engage in several semiotic reductions. Firstly, they portray opposition to the government's stance as foreign, suggesting that locals who oppose the death penalty must have been influenced by Western thinking and should therefore be disregarded. Secondly, they conflate the “American,” “British,” and “Western” categories, lumping all of them under the banner of “colonialism.” With these reductions, state-aligning Singaporeans evoke a particular historical understanding of “colonialism,” one that sees the West as a monolithic threat that is opportunistic and hypocritical, always seeking to subjugate the Asian body under its power. Through this discourse, a drug trafficking case's legislation has become intertwined with a broader political framework with historical, moral and racial dimensions—dissenters are labelled as foreign, American and colonialist if they disagree with the state's stance.

In this metapragmatic discourse that seeks to binarise voices into “American/Western” or “Singaporean/Asian,” two contrasting social archetypes within Singaporean society emerge: the unscrupulous Americanised Singaporean and the aspirational, ideal Singaporean (Table 1; rightmost columns). The ideal Singaporean, often embodied by state-affiliated individuals speaking in the first person, continually assesses who qualifies as American or Singaporean. This process perpetuates the differentiation among Singaporeans, recurring across various political contexts and issues. Through enregisterment, state-aligned Singaporeans employ moralising frameworks to position

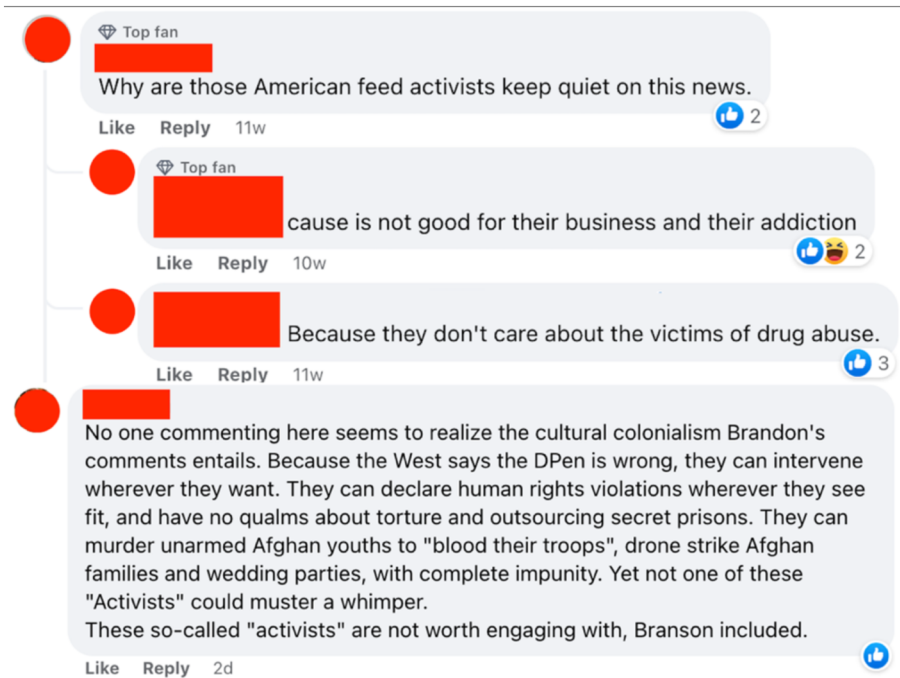


FIGURE 5 Singaporean internet users commenting on public Facebook threads discussing drug trafficking, associating activists against the death penalty with “America” and the “West.” [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/amaa.13980)]

TABLE 1 The linguistic features of the polarized political registers in Singapore and their comparison with the partisan American registers that have influenced them.

Figure of personhood	American political sphere		Singaporean political sphere	
	The American liberal	The (conservative) ideal American	Americanized or westernized Singaporean	The (authentic) ideal Singaporean
Parties responsible for enregisterment	Self-identifying American Republicans who align with and adopt Trumpian political rhetoric		Government officials and state-representing Singaporean subjects, especially those who advocate for maintaining the current social order as the optimal state	
Register's media of dissemination	Conservative news outlets, political commentary blogs and podcasts, think tanks, and social media channels		Official government communications, national news editorials, and social media platforms	
Register names (non-exhaustive)	“Liberal,” “Libtard,” “Leftist,” “Woke,” “Cancel culture,” “Snowflake,” and “Mainstream media”	“Conservative,” “American,” “Truth,” and “Factual”	“American,” “Liberal,” “Progressive,” “Westernized,” “Woke,” “Cancel culture,” and “Activist”	“Asian,” “Singaporean,” “Traditional,” and “Pragmatist”
Meta-descriptions of sociolinguistic repertoire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confrontational and impassioned discourse - Prosody, accent, or language perceived as elitist, excessively politically correct, or overly fixated on social justice issues - A broadening range of terms linked to contentious subjects in the USA, covering issues such as social justice, vaccines, and social welfare, among others. For instance, individuals employing terminology such as: “patriarchy,” “white supremacy,” “minimum wage,” “diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI),” and “mandatory vaccinations” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repertoire is commonly depicted in contrast to the American liberal register. - Language that disparages individuals who employ terminology as depicted in the adjacent left column. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Argumentative, confrontational, and emotional speech - Prosody, accent, or language that indexes westernized upbringing or influence - An expanding lexicon aimed at pinpointing issues within various sociopolitical matters and typically challenging certain established norms in Singapore: On race: “Oppression,” “Chinese privilege,” “systemic racism,” and “cultural appropriation” On death penalty: “Justice” and “#StopTheKilling” More broadly: “Freedom of speech,” “human rights,” “authoritarianism,” “LGBTQ,” “patriarchy,” and “censorship” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repertoire is commonly depicted in contrast to the Americanized Singaporean register - Language that disparages individuals who employ terminology as depicted in the adjacent left column while promoting terms that uphold the existing norms: On race: Depictions of CMIO “racial harmony” On death penalty: “Deterrence,” “safe Singapore,” and “Singaporean consensus” More broadly: “Meritocracy,” “multiracialism,” “Asian values,” and “pragmatism”

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Figure of personhood	American political sphere		Singaporean political sphere	
	The American liberal	The (conservative) ideal American	Americanized or westernized Singaporean	The (authentic) ideal Singaporean
Constructed cultural stereotype	The American liberal is often stereotyped as elitist and self-interested in their political beliefs, prone to hysteria and employing exaggerated rhetoric, and perceived as disconnected from the broader American populace.	Through acts of self-representation, the ideal conservative American is often portrayed as rational and measured in speech and thought, grounded in social and economic realities, embodying hard work and virtue, and upholding America's founding values.	The Americanized Singaporean is often stereotyped as emotional and impulsive, lacking careful consideration in speech and thought, and placing a higher value on selfish, individualistic ideals rather than communal values.	Through acts of self-representation, the ideal Singaporean is depicted as culturally, religiously, and racially sensitive, exercising prudence in speech, committed to communal values, and guided by a pragmatic ideology that prioritizes practicality over abstract ideals.

themselves as the objective voice of reason, contrasting with those who oppose their views on the death penalty, whom they label as American-influenced activists. The local Singaporean body who does not see and endorse the legitimacy of existing laws and societal norms is branded as having internalised Western ideals, corrupted by a whiteness that is colonial in nature. Consequently, the entrance of colonialism into the frame necessitates a national endeavour to address and counteract the perceived colonial infractions. Within Singapore's anti-colonial crusade, any Singaporean corrupted by whiteness, such as the Nair siblings who challenged prevailing racial paradigms or the activists who protested against Nagaenthran's execution, must be publicly rebuked and disciplined in order to demonstrate the preeminence of the Singaporean ethos.

Through this process of enregisterment, the Singaporean milieu is formulated as no mere antithesis, but an exceptional alternative to Western liberalism. State-representing actors who frequently warn against adopting Western speech patterns assume that Singapore has already achieved a desirable state of peace and prosperity. These arguments exemplify what Inoue (2004) describes as an "indexical inversion"—a comparison that inverts time and causality to produce the very image of reality it depicts. In the cases analysed earlier, state-representing actors idealise Singapore by contrasting it with the U.S. and the UK. In this narrative, those who object to Singapore's management of social matters are portrayed as disrupting the continuity of an ideal, peaceful Singaporean society. The indexical inversion presents the ubiquitous presence of whiteness as evidence of a threatened Singapore, obscuring the fact that this depiction is an instrument used to support and sustain these narratives. Rather than acknowledging that their response to sociopolitical issues stems from an ideological commitment to an anti-colonialist nationalist image, state representatives invert the cause-and-effect relationship, leveraging the turmoil of sociopolitical events to justify claims that Singapore is threatened by Western influences.

Participation in the Singaporean public sphere within this anti-colonialist framework necessitates the performative act of disavowal: to be taken seriously, individuals must continually and ceremonially demonstrate their non-whiteness by adhering to the sanctioned ideal of Singaporean discourse on social issues. Given the risk of being labelled as Americanised—and thus un-Singaporean—in sociopolitical discussions, it has become crucial for Singaporeans to carefully navigate the delicate boundary between these two registers when addressing critical social issues. In the media spectacle surrounding Nagaenthran, some Singaporeans in online discussions have expressed discomfort over how state-representing actors have conflated dissenting views with Western colonialism, with one respondent noting that it has become "essentially impossible to have a debate on this issue"

(Substantial_Orange85, 2022). Through these metapragmatics, the social archetype of the Americanised Singaporean, a menace to Singaporean society, is kept alive but at a distance, repeatedly conjured only to be performatively and ritualistically rejected.

5 | SINGAPOREAN ANTI-COLONIALISM: SELF-ORIENTALISING ASIANISM MEETS AMERICAN-STYLE ANTI-LIBERALISM

In this section, we will explore the influence of contemporary American conservative rhetorical strategies on Singaporean anti-colonial nationalism.

Singapore's emphasis on its distinctiveness from the West is a long-standing tradition rather than a recent development, rooted in the country's historical efforts to establish an ideological divide between "the West" and "the East." As a new postcolonial nation, Singapore has branded itself since independence as a "global city" in which long-term survivability is largely reliant on growing internationalised production, of which the U.S. is seen as its "vanguards" (Rajaratnam, 1987). Such a heavy reliance on global capital means that Singapore must present itself as an amenable city for foreign investment in the terms of the West—Singapore must appear "democratic" and "liberal" in a post-Cold War world or suffer potential economic consequences (Rodan, 2004, p. 81). However, since the 1980s and 90s, Singaporean politicians have expressed concern over the influence of US-led liberalism on the nation's social fabric and sovereignty, fearing that Western "hyper-individualism" would bring crime, unemployment and other social ills (Chua, 1998). To counter the perceived threats of Western liberalism, particularly exemplified by incidents like the international dispute over the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in 1994, the PAP institutionalised the concept of "Asian values" that was first outlined in a white paper (Prime Minister's Office, 1991). This national ideology of "Asian values," based on Confucian principles that prioritise the community over individualism, was made a nationalist symbol against Western imperialism and liberalism.

Singapore's institutionalisation of "Asian values" has been widely discussed as part of the broader Asian region's efforts to assert its identity and resist Western hegemony. As Ang and Stratton (2018, p. S62) note, Singapore's policy of multiracialism serves as a strategic form of "Asian self-identification" against Western influences in a postmodern context, where emerging Asian economies challenge the Eurocentric narrative of the developed West versus the rest. However, as Dirlik (1996) analyses in his discussion of the "self-orientalisation" of Asia, Asian societies, in their efforts to assert their identity and resist Western dominance, often end up adopting and internalising Western Orientalist perspectives of themselves. By portraying Asia as communitarian and harmonious in contrast to a decadent and individualistic West, this self-orientalisation ultimately reinforces, rather than disrupts, colonial-era conceptualisations of global geography.

The manner in which Singaporeans today perceive, detect and respond to Westernisation is rooted in a recurring image of whiteness as an infiltrating, corrupting force that perpetually encroaches upon the Asian body. Within linguistic anthropology, "image" has been theorised as enduring patterns of signs that serve as vehicles through which cultural categories are experienced, contemplated and embodied (Barker & Nakassis, 2020). As sensuous and aesthetic structures of coherence, images arise from the circulation of registers within social and political life (Gal, 2018). The significance of an image lies not in the social fact or entity it represents, but in its ability to dictate the terms of interaction across diverse contexts. The image of Westernised agents inciting unrest on national soil (re) emerges whenever Singaporean state representatives categorise opposition or dissenting voices in any discourse as "Americanized" or "Westernized." As anthropologists have theorised, perception or simply the act of seeing and listening, is an ideologically driven action that is made by a particular person at a particular time and place to create societal markers of difference (Babcock, 2023; Inoue, 2006). By assimilating sociolinguistic elements across a diverse range of sociopolitical contexts, these images standardise them all as signs of the same type while concurrently presenting them as supportive evidence for the image's legitimacy. Essentially, the image of a Western threat is reinforced through its manifestation across a broad range of contemporary sociopolitical issues, extending far

beyond racial relations and drug-trafficking laws. By framing the state's stance to these diverse issues as a response to a Western threat, state representatives reinforce the view that whiteness, equated with colonialism, remains a pressing social issue in Singapore.

This anti-colonialist rhetoric obscures the reality that Singaporean leaders and institutions have consistently drawn from the language, symbols, ideals and even contradictions of American culture. Singaporean politicians, news outlets and social commentary platforms often echo American “anti-liberal” talking points. Prominent examples include *Critical Spectator*, a controversial blog primarily run on Facebook, which gained traction in Singapore by adopting American-style “anti-leftist” rhetoric to commend the PAP while criticising local social activists. Some of *Critical Spectator's* posts denying racism in Singapore's public housing system were shared by Ho Ching, wife of then-Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Romero, 2021). Po-Han Lee (2016) has also discussed how “traditional family values” promoted by homophobic groups in Singapore are rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions from the West. Additionally, *Lianhe Zaobao*, Singapore's main Mandarin Chinese newspaper, published an editorial warning against the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Singapore (see, 2021a; 联合早报, 2021b), echoing concerns raised by American right-wing media about CRT during the same time period (Gibbons & Ray, 2021; Power, 2021). In a widely circulated video that was praised by prominent figures on the American right, then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned of the dangers posed by “wokeism,” characterising it as a Western-born movement that promotes excessive hypersensitivity and burdensome social norms (Romero, 2024). By cautioning that wokeism threatens social cohesion, Lee's remarks highlight Singapore's paradoxical stance—adopting anti-liberal rhetoric from Western sources to define its governance and societal values in opposition to the West.

The speech patterns of Singaporean political and state representatives here are directly influenced by anti-liberal politics in the U.S., a key component of the rebranding strategies adopted by factions within the contemporary American Republican Party. The linguistic strategies used by Singaporeans to establish a polarised dichotomy between American and ideal Singaporean registers closely mirror how contemporary Republicans in the U.S. draw a divide between liberal and conservative registers. As shown in Table 1, there are clear sociolinguistic parallels between how Singaporean state representatives conceptualise whiteness (rightmost two columns) and how contemporary American Republican media and advocacy groups—such as Fox News, The Daily Wire and Turning Point USA—identify and critique liberalism in the U.S. (left columns).

Political communication scholars have extensively examined the deliberate efforts of American conservative media to employ rhetorical strategies aimed at condemning liberalism within American society (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2021; Hemmer, 2016; Krzych, 2021; Major, 2015). As part of this strategy, the modern American conservative movement has generated a variety of derogatory terms to criticise and condemn fellow citizens perceived to hold liberal views (McIntosh, 2020; Neiheisel, 2016). Contemporary American conservative media has successfully portrayed liberalism as a pervasive and harmful ideological menace embedded in the fabric of everyday life. This portrayal has garnered significant populist support and deepened polarisation across social issues, ranging from immigration and healthcare to labour reforms, education and foreign policy (Krzych, 2021). The construction of liberalism as a major threat to American society forms the foundation for establishing two contrasting registers: one representing liberalism and its counterpart, conservatism, viewed as the embodiment of the ideal American. Liberals are often caricatured as self-centered, elitist, lazy and intolerant of dissent—qualities starkly opposed to those attributed to conservatives. Through enregisterment, contemporary American conservative media employs binarism to teach Americans how to identify and recognise liberals in everyday interactions through sociolinguistic cues.

Examining Singaporean political discourse alongside American conservative discourse reveals similar sociolinguistic stereotyping at play, with the primary difference being the labels used. Just as the American political sphere enregisters liberal and conservative identities, the Singaporean state constructs a dichotomy between the Americanised Singaporean and the authentic Singaporean. While American conservatives focus on identifying liberal compatriots, Singaporean state-aligned actors remain vigilant for signs of Westernised Singaporeans. In both contexts, the perceived threat is not only ideological but also proximate—those encountered in daily life could pose a danger. Both the Westernised Singaporean and the American liberal are depicted as argumentative, emotionally

driven and overly or insincerely preoccupied with social justice issues. This portrayal serves to limit interpretive possibilities, polarising political debates by categorising stakeholders as either national threats or virtuous citizens. Once a sociopolitical issue is framed in this binary manner, addressing it on its own merits becomes impossible. Instead, the issue transforms into a battleground for identifying and rooting out individuals deemed unpatriotic and corrupted. As a result, those holding dissenting views are forced into a defensive position, compelled to prove they are not enemies of the state or the populace.

Despite being different countries with distinct histories, the political dynamics in both the U.S. and Singapore are startlingly similar. In both countries, nation-representing political parties have found success by engaging an aesthetics of polarisation and purification. While these tactics effectively foster patriotism by intensifying the perception of external threats, they redefine who is worthy of state resources and compassion. As a result, similar to how political activism has become stigmatised and reduced to a derogatory label in both nations, individuals who seek to highlight social issues or drive positive change risk facing censure and vilification as threats to society.

6 | ANTI-COLONIALIST NATIONALISM AND THE RACE TO CONTAIN WHITENESS

Within Michelle Christian's (2019) global critical framework on white supremacy, "whiteness" represents an aspirational set of Eurocentric norms that signify status, desirability, economic and symbolic capital and power—qualities that countries, groups and individuals strive to acquire. In our postcolonial, postracial, "colorblind" era where past systems of overt racism have given way to more covert mechanisms of racial profiling (Goldberg, 2009; Winant, 2008), "whiteness" has acquired what Christian describes as a malleable quality, allowing individuals to capture and channel its affordances. In Singapore, this "positional whiteness" manifests through ideological investments in linguistic whiteness that is associated with Europeanism (Babcock, 2023).

Singapore's linguistic strategy of enregistering Asian-ness against white-ness can certainly be read as part of a self-orientalisation that reinforces the global racial dynamic of white supremacy, but reading anti-colonialist discourse as simply an extension of global white supremacy poses problems for an easy conceptualisation of "whiteness." To illustrate these problems through a recent notable example in Singaporean academia, sociologists Daniel Goh and Chong (2020) published a critical rejoinder in response to their colleagues' advocacy of the concept of "Chinese privilege," arguing that its application in Singapore lacks contextual specificity and is an uncritical import from American discourse. Goh and Chong asserted that the usage of the concept "Chinese privilege" oversimplifies Singapore's racial dynamics and neglects the historical discrimination faced by Chinese Singaporeans under the same political system. They further accused proponents of the usage of the concept "Chinese privilege" of engaging in performative anti-racist gestures that sidestep genuine action. In doing so, Goh and Chong's critique invokes the "Americanized Singaporean" register to dismiss an anti-racist vocabulary that was developed to illuminate covert racism among racial minorities, framing it as divisive and influenced by American liberalism.

If we consider this dispute through the lens of global white supremacy, which party embodies "whiteness": the party that has adopted anti-racist activist vocabulary, or the party that has borrowed anti-liberal language from American discourse? In this case, both parties are drawing on global discourses indelibly shaped by whiteness, whether it be in the form of progressive activism or conservative backlash. This incident demonstrates that asking 'Who is white?' can itself be a trap, highlighting the complexities of how whiteness functions not as a fixed racial category or merely as a set of aspirational markers, but as a series of ideological frameworks that can be mobilised in various ways through interaction. If we consider the fact that Goh represents a decolonial perspective and has previously critiqued Singapore's racial policies in a well-cited article (Goh, 2008), we arrive at the uncomfortable conclusion that a professedly "decolonial" anti-white stance can inadvertently embody malleable whiteness and perpetuate the neocolonial "colorblind" logics as described by Christian's (2019) framework of global white supremacy.

As illustrated by Goh and Chong's rejoinder and other examples in this paper, anti-Western (and anti-white) rhetoric can rearticulate and defang legitimate challenges to the legacy of Eurocentric colonial power, a power that has been reborn as nationalist governance in a postcolonial era. While a comprehensive theorisation of decolonisation versus anti-colonialism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to recognise that anti-colonial nationalism itself is a colonial legacy. Despite its explicit intention to dismantle the logic of coloniality, anti-colonialism appropriates the terminology of decolonisation and inadvertently reproduces the very structures of coloniality it seeks to dismantle (Hew & Chan, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Anti-colonialism encapsulates the endeavour of uncovering the supposedly insidious and pervasive coloniality in modern life and subsequently engaging in hygiene practices of cleansing, detoxifying and expunging it from the collective social body. Anti-colonialism is the *modus operandi* by which postcolonial nations like Singapore self-determine in the model of the neoliberal, sovereign nation-state. It reproduces hierarchical structures, resubscribes to Western cosmological constructs of racialised identities and essentialises the Asian nation-state as a foundational basis for epistemology (Chen, 2010). Bestowing upon state representatives the authority to oversee epistemic practices, anti-colonialism paradoxically reproduces forms of hegemonic control and exclusionary politics that predetermine who may or may not participate in public discourse. In this epistemic space, a select few with the authority to define "whiteness" hold the power to shape how societal issues are interpreted and addressed on behalf of the nation-state.

By examining the poetics of political speak, we are able to track how a transnational register of anti-liberalism has collided with Singapore's postcolonial racial history to racialise certain local non-white individuals as dangerously white. By adopting the political rhetoric of modern American conservatism, Singapore's discursive landscape has begun to mirror that of the U.S., where conservative media has successfully reframed societal problems as stemming from certain "dangerously liberal" citizens. In the U.S., once-vaunted societal aspirations such as "diversity," "justice," and "equity," along with science-based concepts like "global warming" and "vaccination"—and even the institution of higher education itself—have all been denounced by right-wing populist rhetoric as threats to society (Blake, 2023; Ignatieff, 2023; McCoy, 2023). As a result, these have been transformed into contentious battlegrounds, with public dialogue polarised, constructive discourse replaced by ideological clashes, and evidence-based policymaking undermined by intellectual laundering and politicisation. Singapore's adoption of this rhetoric has led to a fixation on perceiving and combating perceived liberal emergences within the social fabric under the guise of decolonising the Asian body. With the language of social justice subverted and framed as a threat to hardworking citizens, tackling modern societal issues and envisioning more equitable, sustainable ways of living has become increasingly challenging.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper endeavours to elucidate how the adoption of a political rhetoric model propagated by conservative American discourse can paradoxically fuel anti-colonial discourse in Singapore. This phenomenon empowers state-representing actors to unify disparate sociopolitical issues, spanning from race and the death penalty to education and LGBTQ rights, within a predictable discursive framework characterised by prescribed social archetypes and parameters for engagement. By showing that measures to preempt and combat Westernisation distort the reality that state-representing agents continually cite, adapt, affirm and innovate upon neoliberal models of thinking and speaking that originate from beyond Singapore's borders, this paper points at problems with a "decolonisation" that is shaped under the auspice of a nationalistic authority that remains fundamentally colonial in nature.

It is important to recognise that Singapore is not unique in having its local politics shaped by a transnational populist register that can be traced back to contemporary American conservatism. During presentations of earlier iterations of this paper at a Singaporean academic forum and at an Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference panel, helpful discussants observed that this reactionary, anti-colonial politics is not unique to Singapore and can be

observed in other Asian countries such as Korea, Japan and Indonesia. Observers are increasingly recognising how this form of American anti-liberalism, now circulating under the label of anti-“wokeism,” is shaping political debates even in traditionally more liberal regions like Europe (Ayona, 2023). The bogeyman of “the American liberal” serves as a powerful catalyst for nationalism in various countries, helping to shape symbolic nationalism across different local sociopolitical contexts and events. The perception of a nationalist threat justifies the mobilisation of the nation-state’s bureaucratic, ideological and even military might against the perceived foreign threat. Nationalism, then, functions as a potential smokescreen, deflecting attention from local social issues and the enduring imperialistic tendencies embedded within postcolonial nation-states, as explored by Asian studies scholars Chen (2010) and Iwabuchi Koichi (2010).

To reject the frame of anti-colonialism is not to charge hypocrisy on the part of state actors, especially when all nation-states continue to be influenced by the politics of *Pax Americana*. Redrawing the line between the East and the West and reinstating an original “pre-colonial Asian spirit” against the “colonial West” merely perpetuates the myth of anti-colonialism. Such an approach fails to acknowledge not only the fact that all nation-states are inextricable from the same global politics and history, but also overlooks the subtle yet universal mechanisms of ideological construction in shaping individual and group identities today. Instead, it is crucial to recognise that while the names and identity labels may differ, the dynamics of co-opting the language of civil rights, decolonisation, and anti-fascist movements in the service of ethnonationalist imperialisms are strikingly similar across modern, neoliberal nation-states. On this note, it is essential—not only for scholars and activists but also for politically engaged citizens—to look beyond identity categories and critically examine the political schemata that continue to divide societies into polarised categories of virtuous citizens and society-endangering threats.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Sujith Kumar Prankumar, Robert Gelles and Eman Elshaikh for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Additionally, I am deeply thankful to Constantine Nakassis, Susan Gal and participants of the University of Chicago Semiotics: Culture in Context workshop for their valuable feedback. I am also indebted to Mai Van Tran, Merlyna Lim, Dien Luong and attendees of the “Control and Contention across Civic Spaces in Southeast Asia” panel session at the 2024 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference, as well as to Linda Lim, Miyako Inoue, Ja Ian Chong and participants of the Academia.SG Junior Scholar Seminar for their detailed and constructive feedback. Research for this paper was supported in part by the Committee on Southern Asian Studies (COSAS) at The University of Chicago.

ORCID

Wee Yang Gelles-Soh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6658-2785>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In everyday language in Singapore, “America” is commonly used to refer to the United States. For consistency, throughout this paper, all references to “America” and “American” align with this conceptualisation, representing both the United States and its symbolism as a Western superpower.
- ² In this paper, the term “pragmatic” is employed in the linguistic sense, indicating how diverse social contextual factors shape the understanding of discursive actions and how these interpretations guide subsequent practical behaviours and actions. This usage of “pragmatic” should not be confused with the specific “pragmatism” espoused as the official state political philosophy by Singapore’s ruling party, the People’s Action Party.

REFERENCES

- Ackermann, A. (1996). “They give us the categories and we fill ourselves in”: Ethnic thinking in Singapore. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 4(3/4), 451–467. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718119620907283>
- Agha, A. (2005). Voice, footing, enregisterment. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15(1), 38–59. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2005.15.1.38>

- Ang, I., & Stratton, J. (2018). The Singapore way of multiculturalism. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 33(5), S61–S86.
- Ang, S. (2021). The myth of migrant transience: Racializing new Chinese migrants in mobile Singapore. *Mobilities*, 16(2), 236–248. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885835>
- Annamalai, K. (2022) Dear Minister K Shanmugam Sc, please pick on someone your own size, sir, Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/kokila.annamalai/posts/pfbidOPcFdX3ajcfvMPLDe7CpSQjqzUYJw8sSWu43muZvSawJBZ62zDcZirSzUYpa2wGrI> (Accessed: 2 January 2023).
- Ayona, D. (2023). A preliminary overview of “Wokeism”: Three major issues for IR research. *IR-UI Commentaries*, IV(6), 1–7.
- Babcock, J. (2023). (De)coupling positional whiteness and white identities through “good English” in Singapore. *Signs and Society*, 11(1), 23–44. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/722624>
- Barker, M., & Nakassis, C. V. (2020). Images. *Semiotic Review*, 9: Images [Preprint]. Available at: <https://www.semioticreview.com/ojs/index.php/sr/article/view/61>
- Barr, M. D., & Low, J. (2005). Assimilation as multiracialism: The case of Singapore's Malays. *Asian Ethnicity*, 6(3), 161–182. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360500226606>
- Baugh, J. (2003). Linguistic Profiling. In S. Makoni (Ed.), *Black linguistics: Language, society and politics in Africa and the Americas* (1. publ. ed.) (pp. 155–168). Routledge.
- Benjamin, G. (1976). The cultural logic of Singapore's “multiracialism”. In R. Hassan (Ed.), *Singapore: Society and transition* (pp. 115–133). Oxford Univ. Pr.
- Blake, J. (2023) How conservatives use ‘verbal jiu-jitsu’ to turn liberals’ language against them, CNN Politics, CNN. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/20/politics/conservatives-verbal-combat-blake-cec/index.html> (Accessed: 19 March 2024).
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>
- Branson, R. (2022a) My response to Singapore's Home Affairs Minister on the death penalty, Virgin.com. Available at: <https://virgin.com/branson-family/richard-branson-blog/my-response-to-singapores-home-affairs-minister-on-the-death-penalty> (Accessed: 2 January 2023).
- Branson, R. (2022b) World day against the death penalty: What's the matter with Singapore?, Virgin.com. Available at: <https://virgin.com/branson-family/richard-branson-blog/world-day-against-the-death-penalty-whats-the-matter-with-singapore> (Accessed: 1 January 2023).
- Brown, D. (1997). *The state and ethnic politics in Southeast Asia*. Repr. Routledge (Politics in Asia).
- Chan, M. (2019) ‘Brownface’ is not Singaporean, The Straits Times. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/brownface-is-not-singaporean> (Accessed: 6 September 2019).
- Chan, W.-C., Tan, E. S., Lee, J. T. T., & Mathi, B. (2018). How strong is public support for the death penalty in Singapore? *Asian Journal of Criminology*, 13(2), 91–107. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-017-9260-y>
- Chen, K.-H. (2010). *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smwvj>
- Christian, M. (2019). A global critical race and racism framework: Racial entanglements and deep and malleable whiteness. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(2), 169–185. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218783220>
- Chua, B. H. (1998). Racial-Singaporeans: Absence after the hyphen. In J. S. Kahn (Ed.), *Southeast Asian identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*. St. Martin's Press.
- Chua, B. H. (2005). The cost of membership in ascribed community. In W. Kymlicka & B. He (Eds.), *Multiculturalism in Asia* (pp. 170–195. Available at: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199277621.003.0008>
- Chua, I. (2022) Law society president Adrian Tan slams Richard Branson for rejecting TV debate with Shanmugam, says reasons ‘don't make sense’, Mothership. Available at: <https://mothership.sg/2022/11/lawsoc-president-richard-branson/> (Accessed: 1 January 2023).
- Department of Statistics Singapore. (2020) Singapore Census 2020. Available at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnribpajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.ashx> (Accessed: 5 April 2024).
- Dirlik, A. (1996). Chinese history and the question of orientalism. *History and Theory*, 35(4), 96–118. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505446>
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2023). Undoing competence: Coloniality, homogeneity, and the overrepresentation of whiteness in applied linguistics. *Language Learning*, 73(S2), 268–295. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12528>
- Gal, S. (2018). Registers in circulation: The social organization of interdiscursivity. *Signs and Society*, 6(1), 1–24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/694551>
- Gest, J. (2021). Majority minority: A comparative historical analysis of political responses to demographic transformation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(16), 3701–3728. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1774113>

- Gibbons, A. and Ray, R. (2021) 'Why are states banning critical race theory?', Brookings, 2 July. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/> (Accessed: 29 January 2022).
- Goh, D. P. S. (2008). From colonial pluralism to postcolonial multiculturalism: Race, state formation and the question of cultural diversity in Malaysia and Singapore. *Sociology Compass*, 2(1), 232–252. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00065.x>
- Goh, D. P. S., & Chong, T. (2020). "Chinese privilege" as shortcut in Singapore: A rejoinder. *Asian Ethnicity*, 23, 1–6. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2020.1869519>
- Goldberg, D. T. (2009). *The threat of race: Reflections on racial neoliberalism*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444304695>
- Gong Simi Singapore. (2021) 'What the heck is really going on between Sarah Bagharib and PA?', 15 June. Available at: <https://gongsimisg.com/what-the-heck-is-really-going-on-between-sarah-bagharib-and-pa/> (Accessed: 2 January 2022).
- Grossmann, M., & Hopkins, D. A. (2021). Placing media in conservative culture. In S. E. Jarvis (Ed.), *Conservative political communication: How right-wing media and messaging (re)made American politics* (pp. 9–25). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351187237-2>
- Hemmer, N. (2016). *Messengers of the right: Conservative media and the transformation of American politics*. University of Pennsylvania Press (Politics and culture in modern America. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293074>
- Hew, W. W., & Chan, N. (2024). Idealized past, exclusivist present: Right-wing appropriation of the decolonial rhetoric in Malaysia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 56(4), 625–651. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2024.2400219>
- Ignatieff, M. (2023) 'Why the populist right hates universities', *The Atlantic*, 6 August. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/08/viktor-orban-illiberalism-ron-desantis-universities/674915/> (Accessed: 19 March 2024).
- Inoue, M. (2004). What does language remember?: Indexical inversion and the naturalized history of Japanese women. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 14(1), 39–56. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2004.14.1.39>
- Inoue, M. (2006). *Vicarious language: Gender and linguistic modernity in Japan*. University of California Press. Asia-local studies/global themes, 11
- Kathiravelu, L. (2017). Rethinking race: Beyond the CMIO categorisations. In K. S. Loh, P. Thum, & J. M.-T. Chia (Eds.), *Living with myths in Singapore*. Ethos Books.
- Koichi, I. (2010). Undoing inter-national fandom in the age of brand nationalism. *Mechademia*, 5, 87–96.
- Kok, Y. (2019) Controversial rap video would cause more racism, not less: Shanmugam, *The New Paper*. Available at: <https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/controversial-rap-video-would-cause-more-racism-not-less-shanmugam> (Accessed: 6 September 2019).
- Krzych, S. (2021). *Beyond bias: Conservative media, documentary form, and the politics of hysteria*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197551219.001.0001>
- Lee, P.-H. (2016). LGBT rights versus Asian values: de/re-constructing the universality of human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 20(7), 978–992. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2016.1192537>
- Major, M. (2015). Conservative consciousness and the press: The institutional contribution to the idea of the "liberal media" in right-wing discourse. *Critical Sociology*, 41(3), 483–491. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514528816>
- MalaysiaNow. (2022) Singapore to execute Nagaenthran on April 27 as lawyer appeals to Putrajaya. Available at: <https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2022/04/20/singapore-to-execute-nagaenthran-on-april-27-as-lawyer-appeals-to-putrajaya> (Accessed: 31 December 2022).
- McCoy, J. (2023). *The 'spillover' effect of politicized COVID-19 vaccines*. Boston University School of Public Health. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2023/the-spillover-effect-of-politicized-covid-19-vaccines/> Accessed: 19 March 2024
- McIntosh, J. (2020). Crybabies and snowflakes. In N. Mendoza-Denton (Ed.), *Language in the trump era: Scandals and emergencies* (pp. 74–88). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108887410.005>
- Menon, M. (2019) I feel terrible: Dennis Chew apologises for e-pay 'brownface' advertisement, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/actor-and-dj-dennis-chew-apologises-for-e-pay-brownface-advertisement> (Accessed: 13 April 2020).
- Mills, C. W. (2011). *The racial contract*. Nachdr. Cornell Univ. Press.
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (2022a) MHA's response to Sir Richard Branson's blog post on 31 Oct 2022. Available at: <http://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/mha-response-to-sir-richard-branson-blog-post-on-31-oct-2022/> (Accessed: 2 January 2023).
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (2022b) Ministry of Home Affairs' response to Sir Richard Branson's blog post on 10 October 2022. Available at: <http://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/ministry-of-home-affairs-response-to-sir-richard-branson-blog-post-on-10-october-2022/> (Accessed: 1 January 2023).
- Neiheisel, J. R. (2016). The "L" word: Anti-liberal campaign rhetoric, symbolic ideology, and the electoral fortunes of democratic candidates. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(3), 418–429. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916648011>

- Ng, C. (2019) Discuss race issues openly, work to make things better: Shanmugam, The Straits Times. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/discuss-race-issues-openly-work-to-make-things-better-shanmugam> (Accessed: 6 September 2019).
- PA Association. (2021) PA statement on the use of photo in Hari Raya Decorations, Facebook. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10159106344728766&id=165507888765 (Accessed: 2 January 2022).
- Pak, V. (2021). (De)coupling race and language: The state listening subject and its rearticulation of antiracism as racism in Singapore. *Language in Society*, 52, 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404521000373>
- Power, L. (2021) Fox News' obsession with critical race theory, by the numbers, Media Matters for America. Available at: <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-news-obsession-critical-race-theory-numbers> (Accessed: 29 January 2022).
- Prankumar, S. K., Aggleton, P., & Bryant, J. (2021). Belonging, citizenship and ambivalence among young gay, bisexual and queer Indian Singaporean men. *Asian Studies Review*, 45(1), 155–174. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2020.1773762>
- Prime Minister's Office. (1991) 'Shared values' : Singapore National Printers. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/36190449/Shared_Values_White_Paper_ (Accessed: 10 September 2019).
- Purushotam, N. (1998). Disciplining difference: Race in Singapore. In J. S. Kahn (Ed.), *Southeast Asian identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (pp. 51–94). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press.
- Rahim, L.Z. (1998) The Singapore dilemma: The political and educational marginality of the Malay community. : Oxford University Press (South-East Asian social science monographs).
- Rajaratnam, S. (1987). Singapore: The global city. In H. C. Chan & O. u. Haq (Eds.), *The prophetic & the political: Selected speeches & writings of S. Rajaratnam*. Graham Brash; St. Martin's Press.
- Ravi, M. (2010). Wanted for mercy: Singapore and its mandatory death penalty east Asian law journal. *East Asian Law Journal*, 1(2), 107–114.
- Rodan, G. (2004). *Transparency and authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*. RoutledgeCurzon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421017>
- Romero, A.M. (2021) 'Ho Ching called out for sharing a post of Critical Spectator blogger', The Independent Singapore News, 28 June. Available at: <https://theindependent.sg/ho-ching-called-out-for-sharing-a-post-of-critical-spectator-blogger/> (Accessed: 9 February 2022).
- Romero, A.M. (2024) Elon Musk praises Lee Hsien Loong's comments on wokeness » Singapore News, The Independent Singapore News. Available at: <https://theindependent.sg/elon-musk-praises-lee-hsien-loongs-comments-on-wokeness/> (Accessed: 17 September 2024).
- Sato, M. (2023) Singapore's death penalty for drug trafficking: What the research says and doesn't, Eleos Justice. Available at: <https://www.monash.edu/law/research/eleos/blog/eleos-justice-blog-posts/singapores-death-penalty-for-drug-trafficking-what-the-research-says-and-doesnt> (Accessed: 5 April 2024).
- Shanmugam, K. (2017) Parliamentary debate on the motion on drugs “Strengthening Singapore's Fight Against Drugs” - Speech by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, Ministry of Home Affairs. Available at: <http://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/speeches/parliamentary-debate-on-the-motion-on-drugs-strengthening-singapore-s-fight-against-drugs-speech-by-mr-k-shanmugam-minister-for-home-affairs-and-minister-for-law/> (Accessed: 31 December 2022).
- Shanmugam, K. (2022) Horrific massacre of innocent children in Thailand, and drugs, Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/k.shanmugam.page/posts/pfbid028ZZ64JbXapGEQySM2fv59p5aySV5oHRqdxMPQKsP3pvxXVEFP4uhL3aQi4NAjCql> (Accessed: 2 January 2023).
- Silverstein, M. (1993). Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic Function. In J. Lucy (Ed.), *Reflexive language: reported speech and metapragmatics* (pp. 33–58). Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 193–229. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00013-2)
- Sin, Y. (2021). Woman in Hari Raya wedding photo controversy responds to PA's cancellation of planned meeting | The Straits Times.” June 15, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/woman-in-hari-rama-wedding-photo-controversy-responds-to-pas-cancellation-of-planned>
- Sim, D. (2019) Singapore siblings offer 'subversive' apology over rap row, South China Morning Post. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3021216/sorry-not-sorry-siblings-singapores-rap-row-offer-subversive> (Accessed: 13 April 2020).
- Statista. (2023) 'Number of capital executions in Singapore from 2011 to 2022, by crime committed'. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/961037/number-of-capital-executions-by-crime-committee-singapore/>

- Substantial_Orange85. (2022) 'LawSoc president Adrian Tan calls out Richard Branson's "feeble excuse" for declining debate on death penalty', r/singapore. Available at: www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/yja228/lawsoc_president_adrian_tan_calls_out_richard/ (Accessed: 2 January 2023).
- Teo, T.-A. (2022). Minstrelsy beyond the "west": Deflections, continuities and the un/knowing of race in Singapore. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43(1), 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2021.1997955>
- Transformative Justice Collective. (n.d.) #StopTheKilling - Debunking myths. Available at: <https://www.stopthekilling.sg/dive-deeper/debunking-myths> (Accessed: 31 December 2022).
- Velayutham, S. (2017). Races without racism?: Everyday race relations in Singapore. *Identities*, 24(4), 455–473. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2016.1200050>
- Velayutham, S., & Somaiah, B. C. (2022). Rap against brownface and the politics of racism in Singapore. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(7), 1239–1260. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/014119870.2021.1928253>
- Winant, H. (2008). The modern world racial system. In M. Marable & V. Agard-Jones (Eds.), *Transnational blackness: Navigating the global color line* (pp. 41–53. Available at: Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230615397_4
- Zhang, C. (2023). Postcolonial nationalism and the global right. *Geoforum*, 144, 103824. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103824>
- Zhuo, T. (2017) The special assistance plan: Singapore's own bumiputera policy, Equality and Democracy. Available at: <https://equalitydemocracy.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg/2017/12/07/the-special-assistance-plan-singapores-own-bumiputera-policy/> (Accessed: 9 September 2019).
- 联合早报. (2021a) 理性探讨敏感种族课题, Zaobao. Available at: <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/views/story20210615-1156218> (Accessed: 29 January 2022).
- 联合早报. (2021b) 社论:扩展公共空间促进种族和谐, Zaobao. Available at: <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/editorial/story20210609-1153760> (Accessed: 29 January 2022).

How to cite this article: Gelles-Soh, W. Y. (2024). Racing whiteness in Asian bodies: The influence of American conservatism on Singaporean anti-colonial nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.13080>