

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

IMAGE AND THE TOTAL UTOPIA:
SCALING RACIOLINGUISTIC BELONGING IN SINGAPORE

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This dissertation is dedicated, first, to my grandfather,
Dr. Alan Chin, who inspired me to pursue a Ph.D.
It is also dedicated to the memory of Michael Silverstein,
my teacher, mentor, and advisor from 2011–2020.

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Acknowledgements

When I first came to Singapore in 2008, I never imagined that 14 years later, I would be defending a dissertation about it. Back then, the three towers and sky deck of the Marina Bay Sands hotels and casinos were still incomplete, three metal shards jutting skyward from a patch of land recently reclaimed from the sea just south of the place where the Singapore River emptied into the bay. The Gardens by the Bay, the soon-to-be site of the futuristic Supertrees, Cloud Forest, and Flower Dome, were little more than a ring of sea walls slowly being infilled by sand dredged from the Mekong Delta and surrounding Malay Archipelago. Then, Singapore was a “Fine City” (a pun that poked fun at the cost of the many monetary penalties imposed for everything from spitting in public to urinating in a lift), a “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” (the devastatingly catchy moniker by the science-fiction author William Gibson) known abroad for its supposed chewing gum ban and the 1994 caning of American teenager Michael Fay. These two broadly recognized, if rarely checked, “facts” were repeatedly mobilized in service of self-congratulatory celebrations of “Western freedom” opposed to “Asian authoritarianism.”

On a personal level, when I first came to Singapore, I experienced it as a kind of utopia. It was a place unlike any place I had ever been before, a place where everything worked (and worked well), where everything was clean and new, where everyone had their place, where “multi-ness” was an overt guiding ethic and ethos. This ran starkly counter to my experience in the U.S., where I often experienced a kind of racialized double-alienation (reading Robert Park’s “marginal man” theory in college was the first time I felt like I had something of a name to give to my experiences growing up as a so-called “mixed-race” person). Yet despite all this, it did not take me particularly long to realize that Singapore is located here on earth.

When I returned to Singapore to begin exploratory research in 2016–17 and long-term ethnographic research from 2018–20, everything had changed. By 2017, Singapore had landmarks worthy of being destroyed by extraterrestrials in the new *Independence Day* movie (2017, dir. Roland Emmerich), putting Marina Bay Sands (MBS) on par with the U.S. White House and Empire State Building. MBS and Gardens by the Bay had become widely-recognizable visual emblems of Singapore in the wake of films like *Hitman: Agent 47* (2017, dir. Alexander Bach) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018, dir. Jon M. Chu). Whereas nearly a decade and a half earlier, my cab driver on the way to the airport to catch a flight to Singapore told me with smug confidence that I should not chew gum in Singapore lest I be beaten in the streets (in response to my query, it turned out, of course, that they had never actually been to Singapore or looked into the matter personally, but had heard it from a “reliable source,” a family member who heard a report on the TV—or was it the radio?), the rideshare driver taking me to the airport in 2018 gushed for 20 minutes about how, after seeing a documentary about the world’s most luxurious hotels, the new item atop their bucket list was to stay for a weekend at MBS and swim in the Skydeck infinity pool. In place of the “Fine City” and “Disneyland with the Death Penalty,” Singapore had become a “hip, sexy place of wealth” (Chan 2019), an ever-exciting location for elite consumption as aspirational self-fashioning—at least for “global” (read: Western, American) audiences (Babcock and Huggins forthcoming).

Back in 2008, Singlish—or Singaporean Colloquial English—was something of an open secret, a kind of public shame, but also an inside joke from which foreigners in particular were generally excluded. By 2017, Singlish was openly celebrated as the most Singaporean thing there is—though of course not by everyone, and not in the ways that I might have expected (during my research term, I found plenty of older, non-elite Singaporeans who celebrated it, just as I found

many younger, elite Singaporeans who derided it). By this time, I had let go of my romantic impulse to see Singapore as a utopia, personal or otherwise, and had learned to listen better to those who challenged the kinds of romantic, utopian visions that I had earlier bought into. What was more, I learned to see attributions of “utopia” as a critique. This was crystallized for me when I heard a 2019 song by the same title, written as a collaboration between the independent Singaporean rapper Subhas and Migrants Band Singapore, a collective comprising instrumentalists and vocalists who work full-time in Singapore’s construction, security, and maintenance industries. “Utopia”—the song—was to be released as part of a *Channel News Asia* documentary series, “Roar! The Lion City Unmuzzled” in honor of Singapore’s 2019 National Day. Through its lyrics, the collaborators powerfully tackled systemic racism, gendered divisions of transnational labor exploitation, wage theft, and exposures to bodily harm faced by both domestic and non-domestic migrant workers (the former only in 2021 earning the legal right to one day of rest per week, the latter to this day continuing to be transported to and from their work sites in the backs of open-air lorries):

We live in a system that has normalised us
To window shop women as ready-made maids
And to walk oblivious to a brown man stopped and ID checked
Because he poses some kind of a threat...
And to see overcrowded lorries of sleep deprived men riding in the back with the
equipment
When birthdays and new years wishes are video calls
From parents to children they haven’t seen in years because
They have left their children to raise ours, to build our buildings
And fulfil our pleasures in this South East Asian Utopia

(Subhas 2021)

I was lucky to catch the song in a live performance since it was never publicly released. “Utopia” was abruptly pulled from the “Roar!” series after Subhas and YouTuber Preetipls together released a satirical rap video calling out racism in Singapore in late 2019—an act that was

deemed illegal based on what the courts deemed its “deliberate intent to wound racial feeling,” which would threaten Singapore’s “racial harmony.”

I want to be clear: I do not bring any of this up to demonize individuals or groups. The dissertation that follows is not a story with heroes and villains, even if my own affinities and alignments are clear. It do not seek to narrate a Manichean struggle of good over evil, a classic underdog story, a David-meets-Goliath allegory whose raciolinguistic battleground is the image of Singapore—but whose battle nevertheless accords a detachable “lesson” as value-added to academic, knowledge-appropriating arm of the white settler-colonial state, to cite Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s decolonial-pedagogical formulation (2014). If I offer a critique, it is not on the grounds of such simplified, binary tropes.

Writing this dissertation amid the perpetual precarity of life as a graduate student worker has been a strange, if not outright dissociative experience. This would be true under conditions that we¹ previously naturalized as un-exceptional, precedented times, but the feeling of temporal alterity has been heightened for me given the disorienting feeling amidst the pandemic of both a multi-scalar dilation and compression of time-reckoning, to quote Nancy Munn (1992), who draws on a long lineage of philosophical and social-scientific theorizing about temporality. I began the research that would eventually be selectively incorporated into this dissertation a lifetime ago—or was it last week? I began writing this document in earnest in September 2020, a

¹ My use of “we” is not actually intended to imply any universality to the collective so indexed. Rather, it is meant to draw attention to the strangeness of the first-person plural (in English, inclusive) pronoun to encompass the vast range of intersectional experiences both in and outside the academy. “We” have never been a monolith, just like “we” are not all in the same boat during the pandemic: to quote an oft-recurring meme, “we” might be in the same metaphorical storm during the pandemic, but some are clinging to scraps of driftwood while others are on 300-foot luxury yachts.

point in time that—by all accounts—should exist in recent memory, and yet I no longer recognize myself as the person who began writing in earnest less than 12 months ago.

I recently attended the dissertation defense for my colleague in the department, Emily Bock, who described the Introduction to her dissertation as an argument with her former self—the former self who had conceptualized, planned, and begun carrying out the research, but who was dramatically different from the person sitting in the chair in front of a webcam defending a dissertation during what seemed (at least in the U.S.) like it was going to be the end of the pandemic. Emily’s words poignantly resonated with my own experience of looking back over the drafts that had precipitated out of the congeries of real-time processes that together comprise what I call my Ph.D. journey. The person who started writing this dissertation is not the person who has finished it (“finished” in a provisional sense—this is version just one phase in a textual process that precedes, succeeds, and exceeds this document; see Silverstein and Urban 1996).

On the one hand, as the aphorism would have it, change is the only permanent thing in life. I have changed, you have changed, we have changed, the world has changed—and that is to be expected. On the other hand, I am poignantly aware of the ways I have been changed, and how, and why: the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright and many, many more made me finally understand far, far too late that the phrase “silence is violence” applies to my intellectual work, too—murders carried out both by the police arm of the liberal state, and the extra-legal murders carried out by individuals seeking to maintain the white-supremacist status-quo, to paraphrase Ruth Wilson-Gilmore’s definition of racism in her magisterial work, *Golden Gulag* (2007). To cite Savannah Shange’s (2019) incisive provocation, I understood that my work—my anthropology—had to become unapologetically abolitionist; to cite Ryan Jobson’s recent manifesto (2020), I had to fully commit to let anthropology burn.

This meant turning toward activists in acknowledgement of the fact that the space I now sought to inhabit was not a terra nullius of concepts or praxis. Through this turn, I found people committed to action—not as a denial of the complexities of the present, but in full acknowledgement of and commitment to work with that complexity. These were not just activists in the U.S.: they were activists in Singapore, many of them members of minoritized, marginalized, oppressed, and erased groups, but also allies. And of course, experiences of minoritization and marginalization are not the sum total of any of these individuals’ interests, hopes, and dreams, but merely one facet in their complex, whole personhood. Contra the dismissive, often ad hominem dismissals coming from many individuals voicing the state in Singapore, these activists were not mindlessly mimicking anything—Western, foreign, or otherwise. Instead, I found a network of individuals committed to what Savannah Shange and Roseanne Liu call “thick solidarity”: “a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences” (2018, 190). These activists (and many, many others) held this tension together and followed through on its entailments in and as method better than most academics I have encountered. They embodied and theorized what Yarimar Bonilla has called a commitment to working together from a place of political *alignment* rather than structural difference (2015) through the persistent practice of hopeful pessimism (Bonilla 2020).

And so, in place of a more conventional set of acknowledgements, this has become my breakup letter with academia. As far as breakups go, this one is relatively amicable. I will always value what we had—and what I still have, now and forever. It was because of academia that I encountered the works of queer Black feminists, the Black radical tradition, decolonial and postcolonial scholars, radical abolitionists, and more. The academy sowed the seeds of its own

destruction, at least for me, even if it (through its representatives) actively resisted these tools when they were used. (It is much more comfortable, after all, to keep using the master's tools when one knows they pose no real threat, as Audre Lorde has persuasively demonstrated; 2012[1984]). Granted, I did not *need* academia to find these works, but in this case, it still bears acknowledging that it was through academia that I *did*.

I would here like to thank the academy. Thank you to the instructors who assigned Hegel then insisted that the conversation had to “stick to the syllabus” when a student (rarely white) mentioned the absence of the Haitian Revolution in Hegel's writing. Thank you to the instructors who assigned radical thinkers and talked about decolonization while conveniently leaving out (often by refusing to substantively take up any mention of) the bits about whiteness and actually existing colonization in the conversation. My thanks in particular to the instructor who assigned Marx and then kicked off the discussion by asserting that no one in the room had ever worked in a factory, hence we hadn't the vaguest idea of the conditions Marx was talking about (I didn't then have the courage to correct them by saying: yes, I had). Thank you to everyone who ever offered their tips and tricks for “making it” in academia (solicited or unsolicited), insisting that this was so I (and others) could “empower ourselves” when what they meant was: “submit.” Thank you to everyone who insisted not only that academia *is* a lonely place, but that this *must be so* (I suspect this was because they recognized, on some level, that solidarity is a dangerous thing). Thank you to everyone who ever asked, “but isn't this really about class?” (or a similarly delegitimizing stance) when attention was drawn to race, or who otherwise treated real experiences of oppression, marginalization, harm, and violence as intellectual playthings to be taken up when convenient (often by playing “devil's advocate” to explain others' experiences to them). Each one of you demonstrated powerfully the kind of person I wanted to refuse to be.

Of course, the really radical texts were still there, even if they had been silenced. Like all silences, theirs was materially present as the result of an active, ideological process in service of power rather than a “mere” harmless absence, as Michel-Rolf Trouillot has shown (1995). And I was never actually alone in this: I found many other co-conspirators along the way. To borrow Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s formulation, I found fellow fugitives investing in undoing the university from the inside, who were doing the labor that can never be (re)incorporated into the professionalizing machine without threatening its very core—labor that is violently suppressed when it is found out, but which can never be fully stopped (2004).

I want to be clear: this is not my breakup letter with knowledge-production, or with the work of careful, rigorous, critical custodianship and growth of intellectual, scientific, and aesthetic traditions. I remain committed to this latter work: this work is necessary, irreducibly political, and never-ending. (I find it telling that this is how the phrase “breakup letter with academia” often gets read, as if breaking up with academia necessarily means a lapse into anti-intellectual, ideological dupery). I do not mean this breakup as a purely negative move; I am not making a move that stops at critiquing what already exists. This is a positive and affirmative move, one that affirms a future that is not yet here, a future in which the neoliberalized corporate university is no longer the default for how we imagine and co-inhabit our knowledge-producing institutions. This is not just about the future, but is about the here-and-now, too.

Because there is power in acknowledging the sources of my own influence and inspiration beyond its conventionally authorized sources, my first thanks go to my comrades in the Anti-Racism Working Group and Care and Accountability Committee of Graduate Students United, as well as to my compatriots in the white privilege accountability circle that formed at the start of winter break 2020 to work through Layla Saad’s (2018) *Me and White Supremacy*:

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power that alternative futures are impossible by *making these futures*, asking neither permission nor forgiveness. Refuse to be subordinate learners, as bell hooks would have it (1994), and never stop humanizing yourselves: continue to “place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 225).

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnography of the image of Singapore: a category through which differently positioned individuals and groups reflect on, contest, and reimagine the kind of place Singapore is and what it means to be Singaporean. I consider the image of Singapore not as an objective thing, but as an arena of social life (Gal 2018) and site of ideological work (Irvine and Gal 2019) at which voices and interests are materialized, made recognizable and repeatable across contexts. The interactions on which I focus get staged reflexively at a range of scales, from the intra-local to the global. I examine the differential production of raciolinguistic (non-)belonging in multilingual, multiracial, multicultural Singapore amid rising anxieties over the changing character of locality (Chan and Siddique 2018), over perceived threats of foreign interference, and over a hegemonic global (but largely Euro-American) gaze imagined to judge Singapore on the world stage. I consider who is or is not perceived by default to belong to the nation-state on account of their linguistic abilities, which are linked in turn to categories of racialized, group-based personhood. I track various projects through which the image of Singapore gets constructed and contested across online and offline interactional sites and media artifacts—produced in language-educational settings, national rituals, artistic productions, and informal interactions—to identify the strategies by which actors anticipate and respond to various audiences (Rutherford 2012; Alatas 1975) when constructing images of Singapore. Such audiences do not preexist their invocation in interaction, but are indexed through anticipatory labor that responds to expected (or actual) challenges to one’s own or others’ belonging. The arguments that I make throughout the dissertation’s chapters focus on two concerns. The first analyzes anxieties over the English language, both as it is localized and stigmatized through “Singlish” (or Singaporean Englishes; Wee 2018), and as it is externalized as a forever-foreign

code whose standards are linked to global structures of malleable and aspirational, yet unattainable, whiteness seen to lie beyond Singapore. The second concern analyzes anxieties over “Mother Tongue” languages as a necessary and essential, but still partible dimension of racialized belonging in the Southeast Asian island city-state. Crucially, the construction of group-based (non-)belonging is imagined by default as a transparently interpretable feature of reality—as something one merely looks at or listens for when determining who does (not) belong to the image of Singapore—rather than as a structured function of aesthetic textualities (Nakassis 2019) made experienceable via sociohistorical and institutional co-naturalizations (Rosa and Flores 2017) of language, race, and belonging. I analyze these two concerns to understand how Singapore gets positioned and experienced as a total utopia: a place where individual possibilities are regimented and delimited, but where desired alternatives can still be imagined and pursued (Bahrawi 2011; 2016). In this way, I show how totalizing projects for constructing the image of Singapore are never total, even if they are experienced as such by those who labor within and alongside them.

Keywords: image, raciolinguistic perspective, semiotics, race and racialization, exclusion and belonging, totality, Singapore

Introduction

What kind of place is Singapore, and what does it mean to be Singaporean? These are perennial questions both in and outside Singapore, questions whose competing answers get recurrently articulated, negotiated, contested, and rearticulated at myriad sites (with or without acknowledgment of the transformation that may have occurred). Like any ethnographic question, I am neither the first to ask nor attempt to answer these queries. Despite its short independent history (in 2021, the Southeast Asian island city-state marked 56 years since full independence) and comparatively short modern history (this dates back to 1819, when the Temenggong Abdur Rahman and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor signed a treaty that allowed Sir Stamford Thomas Raffles to set up a trading post in Singapore on behalf of the British East India Company), Singapore has received an inordinate amount of scholarly and other public attention relative to its small geographical size. Scholars, policymakers, public commentators, and individuals going about the everyday work of doing being Singaporean thus come together through their mutual orientations to these questions and their answers as a productive site of ideological work: a “focus of joint attention, for making construals and conjectures” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 22) about what is “worthy of notice” (ibid) in and about Singapore.

In drawing attention to these questions and answers, and in describing them as sites of ideological work, I do not mean to suggest that the questions rise to the level of awareness in most situations. Nor do I suggest that the work of (re)articulation, negotiation, or contestation includes participants’ attention to the constructed-ness of their answers as such, whether implicit or explicit. To the contrary, like most ideological descriptions, both the questions and answers are often deeply naturalized, and taken as mere descriptions of the world rather than arguments about it (Gal 2002, 79). By foregrounding the this constructed-ness, I also do not mean to

suggest that, when it comes to asking and answering these questions, anything goes. Quite the opposite. As variously institutionalized products of history, the questions and their various answers frequently come to appear as pre-given necessities, as features of reality rather than sets of resources that co-articulate with one another. This co-articulation itself becomes available for subsequent reflection and recruitment to processes for presupposing and entailing multiple, dynamic structures that mutually sustain one another through their interconnections. This observation has served as a core theoretical and methodological tenet for linguistic anthropologists and other scholars of ritual and ritualized communicative forms (Silverstein 1993; Nakassis 2017). For me, it serves as a starting point for analyzing the varieties of ritualized communicative strategies through which Singapore and Singaporean-ness get multiply constructed as a place, an identity, and a quality.

Though Singapore has long been associated with Western commentators' not-so-subtle racist, Orientalist accusations of authoritarianism,¹ illiberalism, and inauthenticity—a “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” (to quote science fiction writer William Gibson's infamous formulation)—today this image has largely changed. Through global media partnerships, brand-management, and creative-cultural production, Singapore is today more often presented as a “hip, sexy place of wealth” (T. J. Chan 2019) and site of futuristic urban-, techno-scientific-, and social innovations. Yet beyond these recent transformations, Singapore is perhaps best known as a global success of multilingual-, multicultural-, multireligious racial harmony, a place where diversity is truly celebrated: where citizens “pledge [themselves] as one united people, regardless

¹ John Kelly interprets this recurrent framing as a sort of “wish-fulfilment for liberal and neo-liberal orders” (2016, 92) linked to a Cold War-era idea that the “world was dividable into free states and others, and that the others must thematically be opposed to freedom” (ibid).

of race, language or religion” (to quote the National Pledge), and where belonging transcends and encompasses difference of all kinds—at least ideally.

Historically, the search for an identity—that is, a *national* identity—outweighed public concern over the shifting bounds of belonging. Inheriting a system of racialized, group-based distinctions from the British—a “plural society” whose sub-groups were thought by colonial administrators to never truly interact, but merely to co-occupy the colonial marketplace—the challenge for statecraft and governance in independent Singapore came to be centered on the containment of “faultlines” in the service of “harmony” (D. P. S. Goh 2010, 561–2). As much as these colonial legacies presented real consequences for the post-independent state, they also served—and serve—an important myth-making function. I draw this insight from the Singaporean editors and contributors to the 2017 volume *Living with Myths in Singapore*. Following Roland Barthes, these theorists do not transparently contrast “myth” with “reality.” Rather, myth refers to the ways that historical contingencies are made to seem natural through active and ongoing, if never totally orchestrated, work. The chapters in the volume explore four broad sets of myths in and about Singapore: first, the “Singapore Story,” a hero-driven narrative strategy for constructing Singaporean history and nationhood; second, “from Third World to First,” a subset of the previous myth, which posits a teleological arc from un(der)development to development; third, “vulnerabilities and faultlines,” tropes for framing Singapore as a nation perpetually under threat both internally and externally; and last, “Singaporeans as a deficient people,” a socially and politically immature populace requiring careful management and disciplining (Loh, Thum, and Chia 2017, 7–11).

Such observations about myths are not restricted to academics. Indeed, it is something of a truism among Singaporeans—acting at a range of sites and speaking from a range of social

positions—to call attention to the fact that Singapore is a “made-up nation.” This polyvalent expression can be voiced affirmatively, a claim about its *creatio ex nihilo*, a creation out of nothing. It can also be voiced negatively, an accusation of forgery or fakery as Singaporean statecraft. Many commentators have lent their voices in debates about what Singapore’s harmony actually looks like—its (im)possibilities, (broken) promises, and (unavoided) pitfalls—as well as about what it can be or ought to be. I will not rehash these debates in-depth (I refer readers to *Living with Myths*). Instead, I focus on this to draw attention to the fact that, much like the fetish of the commodity, unmasking the ideology here does not necessarily dispense with it. Similarly in Singapore: many are quick to acknowledge that any claim to identity—any answer to the question, *what kind of place is Singapore, and what does it mean to be Singaporean?*—will, like all things ideological, be partial and interest-laden, multiple, contestable, and contested (Woolard 1998, 10). Yet despite this, answers continue to be given and demanded, and continue to guide conduct as if they were necessary, not just as a matter of conceptual reflection, but at the level of feeling, as sensing or perceiving the answers—and the objects to which they putatively refer—as ontologically real, at least when rendered felicitous by the authoritativeness that comes from history, institutions, and their entailed interactional concomitants.

“Identities”—as the anthropologist John Jackson, Jr. reminds us, writing about the Black Hebrew Israelites in diaspora—“rely on archives. Public recognition requires supporting documentation[,]. . .actively building an archive, collecting and assembling records that prove a particular version of the past” (2013, 11). Of course, “there are always other people with conflicting histories to promote, alternative accounts buoyed by their own data” (ibid). In Singapore, this dynamic can also be seen at work, but this work is complicated by the fact that identity construction always proceeds on two partially distinct orders: the national and the sub-

national. Each of these rests on their own (also partially distinct) archives and techniques of documentation. Within this ideological perspective, the national must be actively produced, while the sub-national is always-already there. But despite the seeming contradictoriness of this statement, it does not necessarily rise to the level of awareness as a contradiction; neither does it amount to a higher synthesis.

Image and the Total Utopia: Scaling Raciolinguistic Belonging in Singapore is about the contradictions that are entailed by trying to pin down the kind of place Singapore is, and what it means to be Singaporean. As I develop it in this dissertation, the image of Singapore is a local category that draws together Singapore (a place), the Singaporean (an identity), and Singaporean-ness (a quality). I argue that to be Singaporean is to do being Singaporean: to concern oneself with, to inhabit, and to be called upon to navigate the gap between two models for constructing the image of Singapore. The first model is predicated on a metasemiotic assemblage, or the bringing-together of heterogenous elements; the second is predicated on the existence of a shared quality or essence. Each of these models entail techniques for constructing raciolinguistic personhood in Singapore as a condition of possibility for (non-)belonging, comprising both discourse strategies and habits of embodied perception or feeling. Neither discourse strategies nor feelings are ineffable, nor is one merely epiphenomenal to the other. Rather, they mutually sustain one another without being either identical or reducible to one other. Each of these models further points toward distinct audiences that expect, request, or demand different presentations of and responses to the image of Singapore. These audiences are not given in advance, but are an effect of strategies deployed in interaction, as I describe later.

The remainder of this Introduction proceeds in five parts. In the next section, I present a series of scenes that illustrate the competing models through which actors situationally and

processually construct (and contest) the image of Singapore. The next three sections elaborate my theorizations of image, the total utopia, and the raciolinguistic perspective, respectively, linking each to the broader work of unpacking the racialized and linguistic construction of belonging in and to the image of Singapore. The final section gives an overview of the six chapters comprising this dissertation.

Voices, Interests, Enregisterment—A Drama in Four Scenes

2.1 “From Singapore to Singaporean.” On 28 January 2019, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took to a podium on the steps of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), on a platform purpose-built for the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial. Despite its name, the Bicentennial was to be a yearlong program of events commemorating not 200, but 700 years of Singapore history. As Prime Minister Lee explained during his speech just after nightfall, this 700-year focus did not diminish the significance of 1819 as the birth of “Modern Singapore,” but would merely give a fuller understanding of Singapore’s journey “from Singapore to Singaporean”—that is, from being a place with mere strategic locational advantage to a people with a shared sense of destiny and a “uniquely Singaporean DNA.”² Lee’s mention of 1819 would be familiar to Singaporeans (and others acquainted with its history) as the year when East India Company secretary and British statesperson Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore. Lee’s speech, and the various mediatized and promotional talk leading up to the Bicentennial launch, ritually invoked this moment in the present, linking the Bicentennial commemoration both discursively and spatially to the moment of Raffles’ arrival: the speech was delivered at the ACM because the museum stood near the site of the 1819 arrival.

² “From Singapore to Singaporean” was the Singapore Bicentennial’s tagline.

Following these ritualized pronouncements, Lee invited a group of 50 torch-bearers onstage carrying 200 softly glowing white spheres, representing “50 groups who had worked hard and sacrificed to call Singapore their home, and who worked together in spite of their differences of race, religion, and creed to make the Singapore that thrives today.” Speaking to a friend later that night, standing where the crowds of attendees had stood just an hour before, watching the Bicentennial light-and-water show that had been installed in the Singapore river for the occasion, they scoffed: why were there representatives from 50 groups (and not more, or less)? Are they trying to make us forget about the four races they taught us about for so long?

2.2 “Are You Local?” A few days after the Bicentennial Launch, I returned to the ACM to see the exhibition, “Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the Scholar and Statesman” (on view from 1 February–28 April 2019). I visited with another anthropologist whom I had met through the National University of Singapore, but it was not the exhibition itself that was most memorable. As we stood in the first gallery reading the wall text, a gallery attendant—an older Chinese-Singaporean man—approached us with a clipboard, asking if we would be willing to complete a feedback form. Smiling, we deferred, noting that we had only just arrived. Nodding, the man encouraged us to be sure to fill out the form before we left. As was common in such encounters, he then asked me where I was from, how long I would be in Singapore, whether it was my first time visiting. After I gave my responses, he turned to my friend, repeating his first question: “Where are you from?”

“Singapore.”

“Really? You don’t look Singaporean.”

“What do you mean?”

Slightly flustered, the man resumed from a different angle. “So- You are Singaporean born and bred?”

“Yes, Singaporean born and bred.”

“I can hear the accent,” he replied deliberately, once again nodding emphatically, “but most Singaporeans do not wear the hijab in this way.” My friend’s final, curt reply before we moved on was something to the effect of, *if you look around, I think you will see that there are many different ways to wear the hijab*. When I brought up the incident later in the museum visit, they replied with annoyed resignation: “Here in Singapore, this happens more often than you might think.” As we continued to discuss, the man’s initial inquiry was likely sparked by the fact that she was with me, a foreigner, but this kind of routine—asking after someone’s identity, then challenging the answer given on the basis of embodied or other material cues—was narrated to me by myriad others over the remainder of my fieldwork research term; I was also able to observe myriad instances for myself, with varying degrees of proximity.

2.3 “It’s in the Name.” Months later, as I was concluding my fieldwork research, the COVID-19 pandemic began to worsen, and in February 2020, Singapore’s threat assessment level was raised from yellow to orange. What followed soon became a familiar sight globally: shoppers flocked to supermarkets, clearing shelves of dry goods and toilet paper, a form of collective behavior labeled “panic buying.” Images of empty shelves and long checkout queues with both masked and unmasked shoppers circulated widely online and in traditional mediatized outlets. In the wake of this, public figures from government ministers to the CEO of Fairprice, a major grocery store chain, weighed in to assure residents that there was no shortage of food or masks in Singapore. Yet in addition to this, the then Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing also issued a statement that circulated widely in the weeks that followed: if Singaporeans

did not stop panic-buying, the world would lose confidence in Singapore, thinking that Singaporeans are unable to handle themselves in a crisis.

Many online commentators disagreed, however. In comment threads on various mediatized reports, they insisted: Singaporeans have always been kiasu—an etymologically Hokkien item meaning ‘going to extraordinary lengths to avoid missing out—and kiasi—‘going to extraordinary lengths to avoid risk.’ As they reframed the matter, there was no shame in queuing to stock up on food, and, moreover, it showed the world how adaptable Singaporeans are. Still, others disagreed from yet a different position. Online commentators on a *Channel News Asia* story (A. Tan 2020), for instance, claimed the following:

[anonymous] This is NOT Singaporean culture, this is Chinese culture. Just look at the photo.. all Chinese

[Reply from A. K.] So true!! Its in the name. kiasu and kiasi are Hokkien, Indian and Malay don't have such concept in our culture

[Reply from S. S.] If went to the shop n supermarket at this time confirm will only hear Chinese spoken! (Comments in response to A. Tan, 11 February 2020, *Channel News Asia*)

2.4 “They Don’t Look Singaporean at All.” In August 2020, during the mid-pandemic, socially distanced National Day Celebrations, a digital storytelling agency released a video online titled “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You!” (The Royal Singapore 2020). It featured a trio of siblings in their 20s, African-Singaporeans of Zimbabwean descent. The five-minute video quickly went viral, shared thousands of times on social media and messaging platforms, garnering hundreds of comments in the process. The video began with the youngest sibling narrating in a phonologically and prosodically Zimbabwean English, before suddenly

breaking into Singaporean Colloquial English, or Singlish (L. Wee 2018).³ The opening scene concluded with one of the other siblings speaking Mandarin, asking rhetorically, “Why is it when we speak just a bit of Mandarin”—the siblings here began to perform their use of elementary Mandarin to order food, before breaking again into a performance of exaggerated shock from the fictionalized addressee—“Wow! Their Mandarin is so good!”

Among the hundreds of digitally mediated responses, many commentators posted comments expressing their surprise. Many online commentators remarked on the siblings’ Mandarin-use, with comments such as, “Wah they speak Chinese better than me! So Singaporean.” Others responded to these commentators’ linguistic evaluations: “You know Malay is still the National Language...” Still others explicitly voiced their evaluations of the siblings’ attributed non-local appearance: “It gave me a shock! They don’t look Singaporean at all.”

* * *

I have selected and paired these scenes impressionistically rather than systematically. Two of the scenes reappear in the chapters that follow (the Bicentennial Launch in Chapter 1, and “These Afro Kids” in Chapter 6); two do not. However, I also selected them because the interactional dynamics and discourse strategies they index were recurrent throughout my research term. These scenes illustrate the complicated relationships to colonial legacies; the tensions between national unity and internal difference; the practices of ritualized performances of the nation to itself (or contestations thereof); the interactional routines through which individuals ask after others’ belonging and challenge the answers given; the efforts at contesting racialized representational hegemony by dismissing claims about “national” character as instead

³ A portmanteau of “Singapore(an)” and “English,” the label “Singlish” indexes a shifty category (Fong, Lim, and Wee 2002), sometimes used for Singaporean Englishes broadly, other times for a particular basilectal variety in a Singaporean lectal continuum. I elaborate this in Chapter 4.

being signs of racialized attributes; and the drawing of boundaries around what a Singaporean can look or sound like. Together, the scenes illustrate the multi-scalar, shifting imagining of audiences for whom a given representation is presented: in some moments, it matters that the world is watching; in others, Singaporeans become audiences for one another, anticipating how others will respond and preemptively responding to what others will think and do. To be clear, I am not weighing in on what is or is not an expression of Singaporean versus Chinese culture. Indeed, I seek to refuse such monolithic constructs altogether in my analysis. Rather, what I want to draw attention to here is the fact that “race” is multiply projected across these scenes as a salient unit of analysis by commentators, posited as the bearer of both language and culture, with causal links capable of being drawn in multiple directions: from language to race, from race to language, from race to culture, from culture to race. I suggest that these slippages, tensions, and ambivalences come together to animate the work of constructing the image of Singapore, which I elaborate in the following section.

The Image of Singapore

This dissertation examines the racial and linguistic ordering of life in Singapore from the standpoint of ongoing contestations over Singapore (the place), being Singaporean (an identity), and Singaporean-ness (an imagined quality). Together, I refer to these as the *image of Singapore*: not a visual image,⁴ but a felt necessity of interpretation by which interactants posit and interpret orderly arrangements of material qualities in historically and culturally meaningful ways. By

⁴ Even though image does not narrowly pertain to *visual* images, many of its theorizations nevertheless rest on a visual default—notably, a distinction between “image” and “picture” that is foundational to the field of interdisciplinary visual studies (Mitchell 2015, 16; see also Taussig 1993). In anthropology, image has often been invoked in analyses of mass culture and media, as in “mass-mediated image-objects” (Mazzarella 2013) and the “commodity image” (Mazzarella 2003). Such works often trace images in graphic artifacts—like cartoons (Flood 2013; Jackson 2013), photographs (Poole 1997; Chavez 2001; Ball 2017a; 2017b), and others.

centering my analysis on the image of Singapore, I aim to keep in view the fact that Singapore is an idea (T. Y. Tan 2020). Further, it is not one idea, but many. These ideas achieve a self-evident, authoritative status as real—when they do, in the ways they do, to the degree that they do, with the degrees perdurance that they do, etc.—as an effect of the negotiations and contestations that together comprise the image of Singapore as an arena of social life (Gal 2018, 3–5) and site of ideological work (Gal and Irvine 2019, 21–22).

The four scenes in the previous section index the immense variety of implicit-to-explicit assumptions about racial, linguistic, national, and other forms of belonging in Singapore—which are used to (re)produce boundaries as often as they are used to construct belonging. In the remainder of this section, I unpack the concept of *image* as both an ethnographic and theoretical concern. I track multiple, competing constructions of the image of Singapore across a range of sites to ask: who inquires after, contests, and responds to queries about belonging (*voices*), for what purposes (*interests*), and with what effects (*enregisterment*)? I analyze how voices, interests, and enregisterment processes (projected and construed according to cultural value-schemata; Silverstein 2003) enact models for comparison—or *scales* (Gal 2016a; Gal and Irvine 2019)—by which individuals or groups get included or excluded from a national community.

In theorizing image, I take inspiration from scholars in anthropology, visual studies, history, and performance studies for whom image has been a longstanding matter of conceptual and practical concern. Given my own socialization and professional identity as a linguistic anthropologist, I draw most directly from theorizations of *image-texts* by Constantine Nakassis (2019). Images are an emergent projection from what Nakassis calls *aesthetic textuality*: a “principle for construing the sensuousness of semiosis” via “emergent structures of qualia[, materialized abstract qualities,] that co-textualize each other to form [both] diagrammatic-iconic

textures in events of semiosis—and image texts” (2019, 70, emphasis removed; on qualia, see also Chumley 2017; Chumley and Harkness 2013).

While many individuals and groups are invested in the image of Singapore (albeit in various ways and to differing degrees), I observed, learned from, and participated alongside members of four groups whose work is centrally concerned with the images’ production, contestation, and maintenance. These groups were, first, members of Singapore state institutions, especially the Singapore Bicentennial Office and Ministry of Education; second, place-branding practitioners; third, independent artists and members of arts organizations; and finally, language professionals. I refer to these, together, as *image-makers*. Though their work is internally differentiated in its institutionalized forms, histories, and concrete activities, I draw them together because they co-participate in the making of images of Singapore—the associations, attachments, and feelings connected to the place.

I draw these groups together not because of their agreement or alignment, but they frequently co-participate in public *contestations* over the image of Singapore. Instead of taking these differentiated positions as given in advance, I emphasize their mutual constitution in and as an ever-changing problem-space: a nexus of askable questions and their entailed answers, which constitute two (or more) sides of an ideological structure (Scott 1997). Of course, the work undertaken by image-makers circulates to non-expert arenas, and interactions that take place in non-expert arenas often come to impact expert activity as well. Such contestations are always oriented toward, and shaped in anticipation of, the potential uptake of imagined audiences.

Though the four groups’ members’ work is internally differentiated, and is oriented toward a range of goals and ends beyond the production and maintenance of the image of Singapore as such, I nevertheless argue that this image-work shares the fact that it operates via

two models. I call the first *image-as-metasemiotic*; the second, *image-as-quality*. These models are not contradictory per se—indeed, they are often deployed together—but nevertheless pose challenges for one another in the concrete events in which they are deployed. When the image of Singapore is represented metasemiotically—that is, when it is taken as a metasign, or higher-order sign typifying other sign-vehicles (Agha 2007a, 22–23)—claims about the image can be challenged through appeals to provenance. This is common in descriptions of Singapore as a “hybrid” place—often using the etymologically Malay lexical label “rojak,” meaning ‘eclectic mix.’ In this view, things like Singlish are rojak, and thus partakes in a likeness with the image of Singapore broadly, making it a perfect emblem for Singapore; at the same time, any individual item within Singlish can also be claimed as the linguistic patrimony of other raciolinguistic groups, hence not Singaporean broadly, but part of a racialized group’s “Mother Tongue” repertoire. When the image of Singapore is taken as a quality—an abstract, experienceable property or characteristic—claims about it can be defeated by attributions of infelicitous reference. For example, as in scene three in the previous section, it is commonplace to describe *all* Singaporeans as kiasu and/or kiasi, two etymologically Hokkien terms that refer to a ‘selfish attitude driven by fear of missing out’ and ‘going to great lengths to avoid an undesirable outcome,’ respectively. In response, others—generally non-Chinese-Singaporeans—might counter this by asserting that these are not *Singaporean* qualities, but *Chinese(-Singaporean)* ones. Often, as in the previous examples, this happens by positing language as a cultural index.

As should be clear, the difference between these models is not about their content, but rather points toward differential enregisterment of the semiotic practices through which the image of Singapore is indexed. Enregisterment here refers to the processes by which semiotic forms come to have “regularity of recognition” for a social domain of sign-users (Agha 2005,

38). The existence of a register, or a product of an enregisterment process, is “an aspect of a dialectical process of indexical order” through which a cultural schema is brought to bear on tokens taken to be indexical of—to point toward—that order (Silverstein 2003a, 193–194). These cultural schemata are neither static nor fixed: because they are implicated in a dialectical process, they can be (and are) transformed in constantly in and through their deployment. This shiftiness itself gets commonly focalized in ideological awareness, and thereby motivates institutional processes of various kinds designed to stabilize features of registers (Agha 2003). Such institutional processes are important for granting authority to culturally mediated “sensory and somatic experiences” of qualia in various modalities (Chumley 2017, S1; Munn 1986).

This dissertation explores how models for projecting and construing images of Singapore come together with two different raciolinguistic-ideological orientations: first, toward *language-as-resource*, in which the regularities of language structure itself exerts a stipulative, regulative, or framing function with respect to context-implicating and -creating (pragmatic) phenomena (Silverstein 1993, 33); second, toward *language-as-object-and-focus-of-value*, in which language becomes the focus of ideological projects of value-creation. A great deal of local metapragmatic awareness, in my view, tends to focus on this latter orientation. But linguistic structure also rises to the level of awareness, especially in situations where lexical items are taken to point from language toward culture, from culture toward race, etc. A focus on linguistic structure often focalizes lexical items—i.e. words—but not always. This dissertation investigates the processes of enregisterment through which *language-as-resource* and *language-as-object-and-focus-of-value* work to differentially animate the work of evaluating—and institutionally stabilizing aspects of—the registers into which competing images of Singapore are projected and construed.

In this way, I build on existing scholarship that has productively deployed image in the analysis of language phenomena, particularly to theorize how speakers project and construe figures of personhood (Agha 2011, 172–173), stereotypic personae (Agha 2005), or models of identity (Wortham 2006, 6). Scholars both in (e.g. Bate 2009) and outside linguistic anthropology (e.g. Mazzarella 2003) have made productive use of the concept of aesthetics to evaluate how cultural categories come to be *felt*, hence how they come to serve as resources in political projects of differentiation. Qualia in particular act as culturally productive sites for anchoring categories, as well as for motivating categories’ enregisterment as bodily-perceptual dispositions (Goodwin and Alim 2010; Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Gal 2013). This is especially so in cases where speech varieties are taken to index images of racialized personhood, and vice versa (Alim 2005; Lo and Reyes 2008; Gaudio 2011). Such racialized images of group-based personhood can be enacted through the presence or absence of racialized shibboleths, code choice, or selection among register alternants, but also through code-switching activity (Rosa 2019; Woolard 2004). In the next section, and the dissertation more generally, I build on this scholarship to track how image—and image-making—get enregistered in totalizing projects at various sociohistorical and institutional scales, albeit without ever achieving totalization.

The Total Utopia

As the Singaporean director, writer, and educator Woo Yen Yen put it during a 2020 interview, “[in Singapore] we are always dreaming of things, but why must our dreams always be contained within a very fixed plan?” (Y. Y. Woo 2020). Woo’s semi-rhetorical question responds to a common refrain in talk about Singapore: that in Singapore, there is always-already a plan for everything. As this refrain often continues, unlike most other places, where it is an open question whether plans get implemented at all (Laurian et al. 2010; Talen 1996), plans in

Singapore seem to lead inexorably to their desired ends. Implementation is often achieved through acts of “creative destruction” (Roy 2006). Such creative destruction is a well-known fact of life in Singapore: reiterating a well-known joke about the island city-state’s perpetual (re)construction, playwright and writer Alfian Sa’at has quipped that Singapore’s national bird is the crane. Because of the pace of the city’s (re)construction, in Singapore, narrative always gives way to documentary by default (2019). Creative destruction forges ahead, leaving behind only ephemeral traces—in film reels and digital files, memories and text—of the pasts deemed by the Singaporean Plan as in need of supersession.

The sheer preponderance and hypervisibility of *specific* plans give weight to the idea of the Singaporean Plan. Beyond the various plans governing urban form and growth—from the Singapore Master Plan, which governs land-use, to the Singapore Concept Plan, which acts as a “strategic blueprint” for urban growth—Singapore’s hundreds of social-engineering campaigns have earned it the moniker “city of campaigns” (Chew 2009). Campaigns range from the Courtesy Campaign (designed to make Singaporeans friendlier) and the Stop-at-Two policy (designed to slow population growth) to interventions aimed at Singaporeans’ language-use, like the Speak Good English Movement (1999–present) targeting Singlish and Speak Mandarin Campaign (1979–present), originally targeting dialects (non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties).

In a similar way, the sheer preponderance and hypervisibility of totalizing terms of reference for talking about Singapore give weight to the idea that there is some unitary totality underlying the labels: terms include “Disneyland with the death penalty” (Gibson 1993); “authoritarian tourist city” (Luger 2017); “Potemkin metropolis” (Koolhaas 1995); “Little Red Dot” (by former Indonesian President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, quoted in Ashraf 2015); “developmental city-state” (M. Perry, Kong, and Yeoh 1997); “city of the future” (see Babcock

2019 for a discussion and overview); or the world's first "Global City," coined by Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, a longstanding Singaporean Minister and co-founder of the People's Action Party. Rajaratnam devised this concept decades before "global city" became a political or social-scientific buzzword (Rajaratnam 1972; also Chua 2011). Often, when individuals challenge such totalizing terms of reference (and their assumed referents), they merely propose alternative, equally totalizing references (and referents).

Beyond these overtly contested terms, tensions also subtly arise among other terms of reference. In this dissertation, I repeatedly refer to Singapore as a "Southeast Asian island city-state"—the world's only sovereign island city-state—but even these seemingly neutral physical-geographical categories index defaults that conflict with or mutually trouble one another as paradigms of spatial reference. This is because each term indexes a host of cultural assumptions and ideological defaults: *sovereignty* is a deeply naturalized condition imagined for (nation-)states in the contemporary world, albeit one that is riddled with contradictions and built on inescapable political interdependence (Bonilla 2015; Rutherford 2012). *Southeast Asia* refers not to a natural geographical or cultural subdivision of space, but to a Cold War geopolitical imaginary of a world of discrete "regions" whose shared political, cultural, or other traits made them useful for military intelligence-gathering and for "the West's" efforts at countering Soviet-Communist expansion (Price 2016). *Island*, a seeming natural geophysical entity, in fact has served as a figure for a great deal of political imagining. As a figure of socio-political desire, the island has long seemed—to political theorists from Thomas More [*Utopia*, 1516] to Francis Bacon [*New Atlantis*, 1626] and beyond—the perfect setting for imagining utopias (Dodds and Royle 2003; Peckham 2003). The island has also served as a useful visual-cartographic category for imagining the nation-state (it is no accident that islands on modern maps look like islands,

nor that nation-states have been theorized and governed as if they were, or ought to be, islands; Steinberg 2005). Finally, *city-state* indexes, through its collocation, a central typological tension—salient in everyday use—between treating Singapore as a political entity and a government (i.e. a state) and treating it as a densely built-up conurbation (i.e. a city).

Of course, language participates in this as an object and focus of projects of value-creation, too. Beyond the fact that language a medium through which totalities (and their images) get articulated and commented-on, it is itself drawn into totalizing representations of various kinds. Indeed, the felt reality of the discrete, bounded character of *a* language like English, Singlish, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and the like can serve as a basis for naturalizing other kinds of representations. Just as *a* language—say, English—is felt to self-evidently differ from all other languages (Singlish, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, etc.) at the level of form, so too are the language communities who orient to these denotational codes taken to differ from one another, discretely and self-evidently. As I will describe further in the next section, this means that language—treated transparently as a denotational code and a medium of expression through which to encoding semantic values—also becomes available as a model for imagining and imaging racialized, group-based identities.

I deploy the concept of the total utopia to bring together these various conceptual strands. First, by totality I refer to a distinctively modern practice, which the scholar Michel de Certeau calls the “view from above,” a metaphorical extension of a bird’s-eye or god’s-eye view in acts of “totalization” and the socialized pleasure that accompanies the projective act of “seeing the whole” (de Certeau 2011[1984], 91) in otherwise non-discrete assemblages. Images of totality, and totalizing modes of thought, are common both in modernist expert-technical practices—like city planning, which de Certeau is concerned with—as well as in modernist academic theory and

in everyday life. More this, all ideologies are totalizing visions (Gal and Irvine 2019, 21), and all axes of differentiation are totalizing schemata (ibid, 118). At the same time, I want to steer clear of analyses that uncritically equate totality with domination or totalitarianism, which are often applied without definition or specificity to places like Singapore. I am concerned instead with the things that projects of totality are used *to do* or accomplish. I follow the anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolf Trouillot in considering the histories of actually existing utopian projects that sought to offer new ways of imagining place and possibility (Trouillot 1991); I also follow the comparative literature scholar Nazry Bahrawi to consider utopia as process (Bahrawi 2011; 2016). The total utopia, then, is a figure of desire—of imagined possibilities for raciolinguistic belonging, and the processes for their actualization—which is animated by an image of totality.

My coinage of total utopia is also intended as a reference to interactional sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of the "total institution" (1961[1957]), a site—like an asylum or prison—at which life is managed, timed, and regulated totally. I started thinking with the concept of the total institution over the course of my research, as I heard countless people repeat a trope about Singapore: that life is meticulously managed; that the place is small and claustrophobic; that its normative structures (especially cognitive and interpersonal) are inescapable. For Goffman, the total institution is "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life" (Goffman 1961, 11). The "totality" of the total institution, for Goffman, is based on four conditions:

First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried out in the immediate company of a large *batch* of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same things together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled with one activity leading at a pre-arranged time into the next, the whole sequence of events being imposed from above by a system of explicit, formal rulings and

a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single *rational plan* purportedly designed to fulfill the *official aims* of the institution (ibid, 17).

As much as this matches the aforementioned narratives about Singapore, I do not take this unproblematically or at face value. It still matters *for whom* this narration takes place, as well as *to whom* it is directed: in other words, what social positions are occupied in the events during which someone narrated Singapore to me as a totalizing place? And what are the social positions my interlocutors thereby recruited me to occupy, whether or not this recruitment was felicitous?

In investigating and analyzing images of totality, I thus consider where ideas about totality come from, and how particular images of totality are achieved. This connects my research to classic anthropological and sociological analyses: Pierre Bourdieu famously analyzed the Kabyle house as a diagram of Berber social, cosmological, and cosmogonic orders (1970), and Durkheim (1995[1912]) and Mauss (1979[1950]) offered the “total social fact” as a way to methodologically unite physiological, psychological, and social being. Unlike these classic theorizations, however, my use of “totality” is empirical, not analytical. While I have heard Singaporeans talk about the place as disturbingly totalizing, not all totality-talk took the form of a critique: I also heard celebrations about the possibilities afforded in Singapore due to the state’s total management. Here, totality became an imaginative launching-point for what philosopher Ernst Bloch calls a “concrete utopia” (1995[1954]): a real alternative to extant conditions that exists within, against, and beyond racial-capitalist histories and institutions.

Rather than over-emphasize totalization, I focus on the forms of desire and imagined possibility that the total utopia inspires; the projects and entailed (if not inevitable) ends toward which those desires and imaginaries are focused; and the processes by which they are enacted. I do not ignore the ways that exclusions are structured into racialized discourses of belonging;

rather, I reflect on these exclusions by examining the models for comparison involved in the racialized ordering of life in Singapore, and the images through which these models are reflected-on. As I consider it in this dissertation, the work of constructing and contesting the image of Singapore is the work of constructing and contesting the total utopia: a site that constrains present possibilities, yet also one that enables aspirations and desires that exceed totalizing projects. These projects are never total, even if they are felt as such by those who labor under and alongside them (Laclau and Mouffe 2014[1985]). In the next section, I turn explicitly to the ways in which these models for comparison—or scales—get variously articulated to perform the raciolinguistic politics of belonging in Singapore.

Scales of Raciolinguistic Belonging

As I have already alluded in the previous sections, in this dissertation, I follow what the linguistic anthropologist Jonathan Rosa and education scholar Nelson Flores call a *raciolinguistic perspective*: one that “interrogates the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race” (Rosa and Flores 2017, 622). This perspective requires attending to the ways that institutions construct links between language and race, between users of verbal and written signs and the group-based identities that they are taken to occupy. Put differently, drawing from the researcher and civil rights strategist Eric K. Ward, this is an investigation of how “power chooses [race] for you” (2017). Building on linguistic anthropologist Miyako Inoue’s (2006) analysis of the construction of schoolgirl speech in modernizing Japan, Rosa and Flores focus our attention away “from the communicative practices of racialized speaking subjects [and toward] the hearing practices of white listening subjects” (2017, 627): that is, toward the “racially hegemonic perceiving subjects” whose evaluations carry the weight of history by virtue of their institutionalizations (ibid, 627–8). In this view, racially

hegemonic perceiving subjects are not actually existing, biographical individuals in the first instance (indeed, Rosa and Flores explicitly acknowledge that racially hegemonic perception can take place through nonhuman entities like states, policies, or technologies; *ibid*, 628). Instead, they ought to be seen as a kind of authoritative, institutionalized role that can be occupied by anyone, however provisionally, regardless of whether they actually believe themselves (or are believed by others, or constructed by institutions) to be white (Coates 2015).

The raciolinguistic perspective is not a hard sell in Singapore. Quite the opposite: the co-naturalization of language and race (and the racial politics of culture that emanates from its authorizing institutional centers) are so well-known to the point of appearing trivial. When I share my work with Singaporean readers or present to predominantly Singaporean audiences, the raciolinguistic perspective is almost never rejected. Rather, the response is often more on the side of: “Yes of course...and?” This is because—as reflexively modernist, co-naturalized constructs—language and race have been deeply intertwined in Singapore from the British colonial period onward, with knowledge of race (the existence of which was evidenced, and rendered evident, through knowledge of language) treated as necessary for statecraft and governance from the 19th century onward. The Singaporean writer, lecturer, and 1986 Cultural Medallion winner Muhammad Ariff Ahmad succinctly articulated this ideological perspective: “culture balances language and language is the soul of a race. The three are interlinked” (Mokhtar 2014). Though stated specifically with reference to Singapore’s Malay community, I heard this kind of perspective articulated myriad times (in myriad ways, and to varying degrees of explicitness) during my fieldwork term by the image-makers I interviewed and observed. Moreover, this perspective has been variously institutionalized in Singapore, both in English-plus-“Mother Tongue” bilingual educational policy and beyond.

This is usually a far cry from the situation in the U.S. On the one hand, more than a century of work to disentangle race, language, and culture (see Boas 1911; Harrison 1998; Baker 2010) has generally shrouded “race” in a veneer of intellectual illegitimacy and conceptual invalidity, as something “less real” than class, ethnicity, gender, citizenship, etc. Whenever this happens, I am reminded of the now-famous observation by Toni Morrison: “[t]he function, the very serious function of racism is distraction” (address at Portland State University, 30 May 1975; cited in Rosa and Flores 2017, 622). In other words, putatively postracial denials of the salience of race often works in the service of systemic and interpersonal racism. On the other hand, “distinctiveness” approaches to the study of language tend to presume the racial basis of sociolinguistic variation (Lo and Reyes 2008); in the U.S., this often serves to naturalize white speakers as unmarked defaults from which Black and other nonwhite speakers’ speech departs, as Sharese King has argued (2021).

Official population demographics for the Southeast Asian island city-state of Singapore presently classify the population according to a standardized raciolinguistic model known as “CMIO,” recognizing four races—Chinese (as of 2019, 76.01% of the citizen population), Malay (15.00%), Indian (7.47%), and Other (1.53%)—each of which is assigned an official “Mother Tongue”: Mandarin for Chinese-Singaporeans, Malay (Bhasa Melayu) for Malay-Singaporeans, and Tamil⁵ for Indian-Singaporeans. From Singapore’s independence until the present, the group categorized as Chinese has maintained a demographic majority. This demographic majority status has been mobilized, politically, as an impetus for constructing Singapore as geopolitically and raciolinguistically embattled, a “‘Chinese’ nation in a ‘Malay Muslim’ [region]” (Chua

⁵ Five “non-Tamil Indian Languages” (Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Urdu) are also available due to early-2000s advocacy efforts (Cavallaro and Ng 2014, 40–41), but this is not widely known by non-speakers.

2017, 128). Despite being commonly framed as a mere statement of demographic fact, Chinese majority has driven racialized narratives of the city-state's perpetual state of threat from its Malay-Muslim neighbors (Rahim 2010, 60–62).

Such ethno-racialized geopolitical anxieties have historically been coupled to anxieties over language. On the one hand, this was voiced through assertions that English is at once necessary for maintaining racial harmony among Singaporeans—serving as a “neutral medium” that does not privilege the “Mother Tongue” of any “race”—and a means of connecting to the global economy (Kramer-Dahl 2003; L. Wee 2015; 2018). On the other hand, English is treated as a barrier to maintaining the “cultural roots” of the CMIO “races” (Tan 2017; see also Barr 2000), whose “Mother Tongues” are seen as necessary for conveying “Asian values” (Barr 2000; L. Wee 2002). While English is often positioned today as a mere byproduct of British colonialism, and Singlish as an inevitable outgrowth of multicultural–multiracialism, scholars have noted that English-use was not widespread until after Singapore's independence and the implementations of compulsory English-medium education and “Mother Tongue” acquisition-planning in the 1970s (Y.-Y. Tan 2017, 95; *ibid*, 97–98). As state language policies took hold, Singlish took on an outsized importance in the Singaporean nation-state agenda. For this reason, Singlish is an important—though not exclusive—object of focus in the chapters that follow.

Anyone familiar with Singapore—whether scholars or otherwise, whether Singaporeans or interlopers (like yours truly)—will note that CMIO has arrived very late in my Introduction. This is by design. In this project, I link a raciolinguistic perspective to what the poet, critic, and cultural theorist Fred Moten (2008) has called *comparative racialization*. This is necessary both because race-talk and racialization are empirical realities in Singapore, and because—as a condition of possibility for the former—the intertwining of language and race is a global

project that implicates my own study *a fortiori*. For Moten, comparative racialization entails the twinned work of abolition and reconstruction. Though emerging out of histories of U.S. settler colonialism and chattel slavery, for Moten, *abolition* names a broad rejection of the “modern nation-state as a carceral entity [that] extends histories of forced migration and stolen labor” (ibid, 1745), while *reconstruction* refers to the work of excavating “new aesthetic, political, and economic dispositions” (ibid). Following Saidiya Hartman (1997), for Moten, this requires expanding the scope of Blackness: “[e]veryone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness” (Moten 2008, 1746).

I recognize that for many readers—especially those who implicitly or explicitly equate race with its Euro-American histories qua North Atlantic universals, as Trouillot has critically labeled them (2002)—the invocation of “race” in the context of a Southeast Asian global city may seem inappropriate. Yet, as I will elaborate over the chapters that follow, race is incessantly—and explicitly—talked about in Singapore (often using the etymologically English lexical label), and implicitly structures action in a range of formal and informal interactional encounters and institutional sites. Yet more than this—more than the fact that “race” is made locally salient through talk—I also insist, following Moten, Rosa, Flores, and others, that the analysis of race cannot be restricted to the United States or other North Atlantic contexts, nor can a concern with anti-Blackness as a source of ongoing structural violence be equated to U.S. histories. In this way, I seek to build toward what education scholar Roseann Liu and anthropologist Savannah Shange have called “thick solidarity” in the service of abolition (2018): the work of building toward global coalitions (Reagon 1983) grounded in partial connections (Strathern 2004) across irreducibly particular experiences of racialized violence without

homogenizing experiences of racial violence or taking the modern carceral state (and its categories) as either a starting-point or endpoint.

This turns my attention to the importance of scale. Following recent work by anthropologists and other social scientists, I do not treat scale as a pre-given fact about the world or phenomena in it. That is, contrastive terms like individual versus collective, macro–meso–micro, local versus global, and the like constitute models for comparison that rest in turn on axes of differentiation (Gal 2012). These models serve as resources for engaging in scaling work: that is, it focuses attention on the fact that “scale is a practice and a process before it is a product” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 8–9; see also Tsing 2000). Returning to Singapore, we can think of Singapore’s CMIO racial proportions as a scaling project, which produces other scalar effects. As the sociologist Sharon Siddique has argued in a now-classic analysis, CMIO is used to reduce intra-national difference, rendering the polity into an orderly network of discrete, bounded racial categories (Siddique 1989). This standardized, institutional-bureaucratic apparatus serves as a model for comparison in its own right: the individual “races” indexed by the model are taken to have determinate content, yet CMIO rests on the comparative work of differentiating among racialized groups that exist as a function of their contrast with what they are not.

Further, as the diplomat and political scientist Chan Heng Chee has argued together with Sharon Siddique, the maintenance of a 76% Chinese-Singaporean majority (along with the percentages of other minorities) did not happen by accident (H. C. Chan and Siddique 2019, 41–44). These proportions have been maintained deliberately through immigration policy. Yet this produced other effects, as well. Since 2000, schemes that recruited skilled workers from China and India to live, work, and seek citizenship in Singapore in order to bolster declining fertility rates among these groups have also led to an increase in awareness of and anxiety over “foreign”

presence in Singapore. This has created tensions, for example, between Singapore-born and foreign-born Indian and Chinese populations (Ho and Foo 2020; Kathiravelu 2020b), indexing a model for comparison that projects and construes scalar differences between local and foreign.

These anxieties have raised new concerns over belonging, but it is important to note that belonging always rests on a dispensation: it is given as much as it is claimed (if not more so). Belonging in Singapore is about the degree to which one can be identified—whether individually or as a member of a group—with the image of Singapore. This is not about belonging to preexistent groups—whether a racialized identity category, a citizenship status, etc.—but about the ways that individuals and groups construct and contest totalizing images aimed at different audiences who, by virtue of their having been indexed (Rutherford 2012), are presupposed and entailed as evaluators who are by-degrees capable of offering dispensations of raciolinguistic (non-)belonging. I elaborate some of the processes and semiotic resources through which this ideological work unfolds across the chapters that follow.

The Chapters

This dissertation examines how the racial and linguistic ordering of life in Singapore is enacted through (and against) totalizing images. My dissertation draws on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork research from both a long-term, 20-month research term completed between late 2018 and mid 2020, and from shorter trips totaling four months between 2016–17. It takes the events of the 2019 Singapore Bicentennial commemoration as its anchoring point, but it extends analysis of official Bicentennial events by drawing on data from participant-observation and ethnographic interviews with literary, theater, and performance practitioners; from interviews with language professionals and participant-observation in language classrooms; and from mediatized representations in both corporatized media coverage and online interaction.

The dissertation’s analysis is situated in Singapore, yet the conceptual apparatus I seek to develop goes beyond it. This is, first, because Singapore cannot be taken in isolation from broader historical, geopolitical, and political-economic entanglements (Rahim 2010); it is also because—following theorists like Latour (e.g. 2005), as well as those working in the traditions of decolonial thinking and doing (Mignolo 2012; Mignolo and Walsh 2018), Black Marxism (Robinson 2000[1983]), and decolonial, queer, of-color feminisms (Lugones 2010; Maese-Cohen 2010)—the global is always located, and the local is always distributed. Race, while a global, eminently modern formation, is neither uniform, trans-historical, nor self-identical, even if many of its effects are produced through ideologies of its universality. As the linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs remind us, modernity was (and is) a crucially *linguistic* project (2003) in addition to being a network of political-, scientific-, technological-, and economic projects that co-legitimate and -sustain the extension of racial-capitalist logics and institutions, as Cedric Robinson has argued (2000[1983], 2).

The text that follows comprises two sections of three chapters each, which align to the two parts of my dissertation’s title. Section I, *Image and the Total Utopia*, focuses on the image of Singapore in discourses scaled at the level of the nation-state. At this scale, participants who align, or are aligned, with the category of the “local” orient toward “global” or “Western audiences,” to whom the image of Singapore must be explained or made palatable, or against whom the image of Singapore must be defended. Chapter 1, “Anticipatory Uptake, Audience, and Authority,” unpacks how a given phenomenon—ranging from the image of Singapore as a whole in the Bicentennial Launch to the pronunciation of a phoneme by a *Channel News Asia* reporter—is contextually scaled to encompass a totality that is (taken to be) Singapore. To do this, I conceptualize the work of indexing audiences through anticipatory uptake—through acts

of changing the signal form of one's message in anticipation of what an imagined onlooker will do in response. I track anticipatory uptake to trace out audiences' contrastive co-construction in interaction, rather than presuming already existing groups who later encounter one another.

Chapter 2, "(De)institutionalizing the Raciolanguage Community," tracks the production of a local category that I call the *raciolanguage community*. The raciolanguage community takes CMIO as its prototype, ideologically projecting forms of sub-national group-ness as a nexus of standardized linguistic varieties (the race's "Mother Tongue" plus English), heredity, places of geographic origin, and cultural- and religious stereotypes. It analyzes ethnographic data from language classrooms and online interactions alongside narratives surrounding Singapore's first all-South Asian contemporary art event series, *From Your Eyes to Ours*. More particularly, I focus on the 2019 exhibition that was part of the series, titled "Yes, I Speak Indian." Together, I use these examples to explicate the processes of differentiation by which group-based identities are constructed explicitly as a function of their gradient difference from racially hegemonic others via the image of the raciolanguage community.

Chapter 3, "Seeing (or Perceiving) Race in Multiracial Singapore," describes how race-talk in Singapore focuses on racial knowing, which is focused in turn on the interpretation of visual signs, a local interpretive practice I refer to as the *visual epistemology of race*. I intend this not as a generalizable analytic per se (though appeals to the visuality of raciolinguistic knowledge certainly occur elsewhere), but as an historically particular phenomenon that emerges out of Singapore's particular colonial and postcolonial encounters. These encounters raciolinguistically structure practices of *looking* as a proxy for multimodal practices of perceiving group-based difference generally. I consider a series of short videos released as part of the Bicentennial commemorations, "My Roots Are _____?," which cites the genre of the

“genetic-ancestry reveal” advertisement to structure the media artifacts’ entertainment value around a mismatch between what a viewer sees and what they later learn about the depicted individuals’ genetic ancestry. I augment this analysis in two ways: first, through a consideration of contestations that emerged in online commentary surrounding the videos, where the visual epistemology of race was repeatedly (re)articulated as a counter to the putative evidence of genetics or was sidelined through appeals to other axes of differentiation (like historical migration); and second, through offline ethnographic examples in which individuals narrate their surprise at learning (and thereby revising their previous presuppositions) that someone had unexpected “heritage,” though this does not, in the end, undermine the default status of the visual epistemology of race.

The three chapters in Section II, *Scaling Raciolinguistic Belonging*, focus on the production of the image of Singapore at the scale of individual or group-based (non-)belonging, in which visual appearance and language-use are framed as conflicting with one another. Chapter 4, “Postracial Policing, ‘Mother Tongue’ Sourcing, and Images of Standard,” considers contestations over who can legitimately claim custodianship over “Singlish,” a local variety of English contrasted with “Good English” in public-sphere discourses. In the wake of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM)—a two-decades-long effort at stigmatizing Singaporean Colloquial English, or Singlish (L. Wee 2018)—Singlish has come into its own as a, even *the most*, “uniquely Singaporean” phenomenon (Hiramoto 2019). However, even as Singlish has come to enjoy widespread celebration as the linguistic patrimony of all Singaporeans, members of minoritized raciolanguage communities increasingly contest the hegemony of the Chinese-Singaporean majority by drawing attention to what they claim to be errors—in spelling and pronunciation—indexed by lack of fidelity to the “Mother Tongue” source codes from which

Singlish items are drawn. In claiming and contesting Singlish as the linguistic patrimony of different groups, Singlish is itself rescaled: either as an emergent assemblage, or a disaggregable collection of individual items whose historical, raciolinguistic provenance matters more than their recombination. This rescaling work anticipates different audiences, whether in or outside Singapore, but the various positions that individuals take in interaction can be seen to rest on the ideological pooling (Park 2009; L. Wee 2011) of a totalizing image of standard that is used to authorize some speech as “correct,” even in the absence of overt standardizing projects.

Chapter 5, “Local Bodies, Foreign Language,” considers practices of linguistic gatekeeping through “Good English,” a target that “the Singaporean” is cast as forever failing to reach. The chapter begins by unpacking the ambivalent, even threatening status of the English language in Singapore, which, historically, has been ideologically represented as at once a necessity to access the global economy, and as a threat to the “cultural values” of the Asian populace (Y.-Y. Tan 2017). After revisiting the category of the raciolanguage community, I track the production of what I call a covert raciolanguage community—the “Caucasian” English-speaking subject—whose “native” command of English is positioned as an imagined contrast with the forever “nonnative” Singaporean English-speaker. I examine this, first, through a crowdsourced series published in *The Straits Times* under the aegis of the Speak Good English Movement, “English As It Is Broken.” In this series, readers submitted examples of English-language “errors”—whether their own or others’, real or imagined—for adjudication by a panel of experts. Second, I examine evidence from my own participation at a Singlish awareness class hosted by the Singapore British Council, which aimed to teach Singaporeans to “know the difference” between Standard English and Singlish. In this classroom setting, I found myself

personally recruited as a member of the “Caucasian” raciolanguage community and ostended as the standard against which my classmates’ “errors” were to be contrastively measured.

Chapter 6, “Foreign Bodies, Local Language,” examines events in which some individuals’ ability to “speak like” a Singaporean is felt to contradict their appearance, which is deemed “not Singaporean.” The chapter centers on two videos that were released during the August 2020 National Day Celebrations, respectively featuring Black-Zimbabwean Singaporeans and a group of mixed-race Singaporeans. Much like the case of “My Roots Are _____?” from Chapter 3, these videos’ entertainment value is constructed around a mismatch between how the depicted individuals sound (“sounding local” as a function of their Singlish and Mandarin-use) and what they look like (“looking foreign” as measured against the assumptive defaults of a visual epistemology of race). In response, online commentators both implicitly and explicitly construct the featured individuals’ semiotic markedness, even in instances where they are discursively incorporated into the national community qua image of Singapore. I further track how some commentators use the threads as an opportunity to construct contrasts between “good-” and “bad migrants,” and between “true-blue Singaporeans” and Singaporean personae deemed to be “less Singaporean than” others. Through these contestations, interactants co-construct a Chinese-Singaporean default as the measure of Singaporean nationalness (Ng and Skotnicki 2016) in and through their acts of contesting this default. Like the cases described in Chapter 3, the stakes of this extend beyond the media artifacts’ entertainment value to index the precarity of navigating and being positioned within (or outside) a Singaporean social topology.

I conclude by way of a coda, bringing the discussion and analysis back to more closely consider the ways that totalizing images of Singapore animate—and are animated by—the work of dispensational belonging. I consider the axes of raciolinguistic differentiation according to

which differently positioned social actors strive to occupy a racially hegemonic perceiving subject-position in authorizing, or contesting, others' claims to belonging. I examine more closely the question of who—that is, what social positions—are authorized to challenge others' raciolinguistic belonging. This often takes place not through overt differentiating work per se, but by a refusal to unsettle one's own assumptions about what is or is not expectable: about what one can or cannot expect a Singaporean to look like or sound like, about where a Singaporean can or cannot come from, and about the things that a Singaporean can or cannot be expected to think, say, or believe. I also consider groups whose non-belonging to the image of Singapore is persistent and marked, despite their constitutive role as the ideological “outside” to totalizing image-texts.

Through this dissertation, I aim to bring an attention to *totality* back to the fore of social-scientific and humanistic inquiry. Yet in doing so, I avoid an approach that falls prey to the pitfalls of prior analytic efforts—reifying totalities by ignoring processes, practices, and events, and presuming the totality as a stable, prior structure—and instead focus my attention on the movement between images of totality as a social fact, on the one hand, and the variety of contextual projects for social differentiation, on the other. As a concomitant of this, I am also mindful about the risk of presuming totalities in my own work, whether epistemologically, ontologically, or logico-analytically. Although I spent a substantial period of continuous time in Singapore conducting ethnographic fieldwork research, the approach that I take seeks not to capture some totality capable of representing the depth, breadth, and complexity of the activity that took place around me (and well beyond) during this time. Rather, I seek only to provide what John Jackson, Jr. has called *thin description*: a partial, positioned account that refuses any ethnographic fantasy about the ability to give a totalizing, final, authoritative account (Jackson

2013, 11–20). In my account, I do not seek to attain a position of authoritative, interpretive finality (ibid), but rather—following the call by anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla, I seek only to engage in the inescapably partial, positioned activity of co-theorization across convergent matters of concern, rather than beginning from a place of presumed structural difference between “me,” “us,” and “them” (Bonilla 2015, xviii). I thus seek to keep in view the desired alternatives and processes for pursuing them—in short, the utopian imaginaries—that are afforded as much as constrained by various actors’ projects of constructing, and contesting, totalizing images of and in Singapore.

Part I: Image and the Total Utopia

Chapter One: Anticipatory Uptake, Audience, and Authority

As its many commentators and spokespersons repeatedly framed it, the Singapore Bicentennial was not a “celebration” of British arrival 1819, but rather a “commemoration” that also looked beyond it (Chong 2020, 323). This was reiterated myriad times from January to December 2019 (the Bicentennial’s official duration) and even into the early months of 2020, through the various critiques, reframings, and defenses that later circulated. This point—about “commemoration” rather than “celebration”—was also repeated myriad times throughout the official telecast for the Bicentennial Launch (Mediacorp 2019). Broadcast by *Channel News Asia*, a subsidiary of Singapore’s state-linked corporate broadcaster Mediacorp, the station broadcasts beyond Singapore, throughout East and Southeast Asia. The six-hour mediatized launch event featured various recapitulations of the Bicentennial’s key talking points by in-studio anchors and reporters in the field; an interview with an archaeologist and historian at the National University of Singapore, whose archaeological excavations and archival research formed the backbone for narrations of Singapore’s 700-year history; and a real-time broadcast of the Launch speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In addition to officially launching the yearlong suite of Bicentennial programs, the Prime Minister’s speech also kicked off the annual Light to Night and iLight Singapore festivals, a pair of two-week-long nighttime festivals across Singapore’s Civic District, comprising light installations and multimedia projection on many of Singapore’s colonial-era building facades.

During the telecast’s first 10-minute-long segment, in-studio anchors and three field reporters described the significance of the launch’s location, listed the evening’s program of events, and (re)voiced key Bicentennial messages. Yet this first portion of the broadcast was rife with technical difficulties: long, awkward pauses in the transitions between anchors’ questions

and reporters' responses; pre-recorded interview clips being played at the wrong times; and numerous instances of overlapping talk between anchors and reporters. Some commentators expressed their discontent with the technical difficulties via online platforms' various live-commenting functions, through which online viewers were able to post their reactions to events as they unfolded. Many of these were irate, with comments such as: "Wah Lao¹ (Kathiravelu, 2017, pp. 160–161; D. P. S. Goh, 2014; Koh et al., 2020)so many technical difficulty ! Is this the professional standard we expect from our govt???" and "Please remember the world is watching @mediacorp." Yet what caught far more significant attention among many viewers—both sparking ire and drawing amusement—was a single instance of pronunciation by the last of three featured reporters-in-the-field. The reporter began describing an augmented-reality Bicentennial walking-tour app, BalikSG. Named after a Malay lexical item meaning 'to go back,' the app enabled users to overlay virtual graphics of historical events on live images viewed through their phone screens. For instance, users could walk to the Singapore River and use the app to see Temenggong Abdur Rahman sign the Singapore Treaty of 1819 with Sir Stamford Raffles, the agreement that allowed the British to set up a base in Singapore and, in return, promised that the British would back the claimant to the Johor Sultanate, Tengku Husain, and subsequently pay him annual rent of 5,000 Spanish Dollars (Rahim 2010, 20–22; Guan et al. 2019[2009]).

What followed might seem a very small thing—a thing, in fact, that I, personally, hardly noticed during the live broadcast itself. While describing the app, the reporter mentioned Raffles' lieutenant William Farquhar, pronouncing Farquhar's surname as three syllables: /fa'-ku-ha/. Immediately the live comment threads—which, prior to this pronunciation, had been filled with

¹ Often rendered orthographically as a single word, *walao*, this item is often claimed as a "Singlish word" and glossed as 'my god' (etymologically sourced from Hokkien, it literally means 'my father'), used to express surprise, dismay, or exasperation.

comments about where viewers were watching from (e.g. “Hello from Vietnam”), expressions of nationalist pride (e.g. “Proud to be Singaporean!”), and well-wishing (e.g. “Congratulations Singapore!”)—erupted with comments about the reporter’s language-use: “Did she say Fah Khoo Har? Is this a Chinese word?” and “Reporters should speak Good English!” In this moment, I took careful notice of these acts of taking notice. At the time, I did not know that this word represented a particularly common pitfall among speakers of various Singaporean Englishes. I learned this later, after asking several friends who informed me that the name is often realized as two syllables, often (but not always) with a glottal in the middle and a final open-mid central vowel /faʔ'-kə/, or close-mid back vowel /faʔ'-kɤ/ (though /fa'-kə/ and /fa'-kɤ/ are also common, without a glottal). When realized in any of these ways, however, the name risks sounding like profanity, yielding an endless source of mirth when “mispronounced” in various contexts, especially in the classroom or in political oratory (among others).

As I attended events and engaged in informal conversations and semi-formal interviews over the coming months, this incident involving the reporter-in-the-field came up numerous times, most commonly typified as an individual “failure” on the reporter’s part. Commentators offered various recurrent critiques: that this was an unnecessary “hypercorrection” (though without using this term); that this was a national embarrassment (“Why is she making Singapore look bad?”); that this was a sign of the reporter’s embarrassment of her own accent (“She should say it normally—what’s wrong with the Singaporean accent?”); or that this indexed her personal failure to invest sufficiently in “Good English” (e.g. “reporters should speak Good English”). Conversations about the incident faded in the coming weeks, and other incidents came and went in public awareness—though nearly five months later a poem was posted in a Singapore-based poetry group on Facebook. The poem mocked the “Reporter who still cannot say the name of

Raffles’s sidekick / That other Farquhar”; I saw this poem performed later at a poetry reading series, where the poet’s exaggerated pronunciation of /faʔ-kʌ/, with the second syllable drawn out, drew raucous laughter from attendees.

I do not draw on this example in order to merely characterize this as an instance of “hypercorrection,” or to analyze “hypercorrection” activity in Singapore more broadly. Rather, I begin from a different ethnographic concern: from my many observations of events in which interlocutors voiced a sense that, in Singapore, someone is always watching—and listening. I do not mean this in the sense of a “Big Brother”-esque surveillance state, though others have critically analyzed the state’s pervasive presence via its technological extensions (D. P. S. Goh 2014; Loong 2018). Rather, I focus here on the ways that my various interlocutors (whether copresent or virtual) consistently oriented, implicitly and explicitly, to the questions of: who is watching? Who is listening? How, and for what ends? Crucially, this could also be seen to guide subsequent action, driving the work of anticipating and (re)directing the potential response of the watcher-listener by changing what they later did (whether “hypercorrection” or otherwise).

In the unfolding interdiscursive chain surrounding the *CNA* Bicentennial broadcast, “the world” was watching, but so were Singaporeans—not “Singaporeans” as a monolith vis-à-vis “the world,” but differentiated to varying degrees of granularity along multiply scaled, multiply figured axes (Gal 2012). Though I began this chapter with the Bicentennial broadcast, the axes of differentiation materialized in this specific chain continued to appear across the various sites I encountered during my fieldwork, materialized in and as acts of careful planning, strategizing, and preparation in advance of a given performance of the self or of the nation, or in attributions of individual failure in (linguistic) performance that were subsequently rescaled as a moral failing on the global stage. It was materialized also in acts of mockery, satire, or critical

commentary by artists and others, as well as in various debates performed by members of groups that ranged from language professionals to online commentators. At myriad sites of reflexive attention, I saw evidence of the never-ending work of attempting to anticipate uptake: to know what a given audience will think, say, or do in response to a given message form, and adapt one's response accordingly.

In this chapter, I argue that *audience* can be understood as a local category for the iterative, multiply scaled ideological work (Gal and Irvine 2019; Carr and Lempert 2016) of public-formation in Singapore. Here, I analyze how instantiations of audience get mobilized in processes of *anticipatory uptake*: the strategic selection and deployment of signs in response to predictions of how another will interpret those signs based on their attributable subject-positions. This work is not exhaustively circumscribable in advance, even if interactants might act as if this is possible or verbalize their desire to totally anticipate and account for others' responses. The fact that audiences cannot be fully or exhaustively fixed in advance thus entails ongoing contestation and negotiation of audiences across myriad sites of ideological work.

The remainder of this chapter continues in five parts. First, I revisit classic anthropological and social-theoretical scholarship on public-formation in light of Danilyn Rutherford's reexamination of audiences as "the varied kinds of interlocutors that social actors identify with or react to as they go about the business of social life" (Rutherford 2012, 4). In this view, audiences are neither "transparently available [nor] exhaustively inhabit[able]," (ibid), but rather are indexed in and as actions that anticipate the subsequent action of determinate others (Carr 2009; 2011). The second section brings this discussion of audience together with a closer consideration of the *CNA* broadcast, elaborating the ambivalent entanglements of imagined audiences in dynamic social processes for constructing authority (Rutherford 2012; Gal and

Woolard 2001). The last three sections trace out how audience is differently scaled. The third traces out the competing audiences that are anticipatorily indexed in contested narratives about the “Singapore Story” and “brand Singapore.” The fourth section explores how artists and members of arts organizations index audiences by verbally constructing four contrastive axes: local–global divides; local–foreign divides (sometimes, but not always, distinguished from the former); racialized CMIO-internal axes of differentiation; and majoritarian–minoritization contrasts. Finally, I trace out the ways in which I was figured across interactions as a token of an anticipatable audience-type, together with the kinds of anticipatory uptake that ensued from the fact of my dialogic engagement with these artists. Despite the copresence of the interview, these engagements indexed places, times, and personae far beyond the interactional encounter as such.

Audience and Anticipatory Uptake

In her 2012 monograph, *Laughing at Leviathan*, Danilyn Rutherford undertakes a dynamic, wide-ranging engagement with textual interlocutors ranging from the British Imperial administrator J. S. Furnivall—best known for his critique of the “plural society” model of colonial statecraft and governance (Furnivall 1956[1948]; Lee 2009)—to the literary critic Michael Warner, from 20th century American Pragmatists to 21st century linguistic anthropologists and West Papuan activists. As the work’s subtitle (“Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua”) suggests, Rutherford’s theoretical aim is to articulate a conceptualization of *audience* in relation to West Papuan struggles for geopolitical sovereignty, but her resultant theorization is relevant to other contexts in which one finds a shifting, iterative, and multiply scaled—in short, dialogic—interplay (Rutherford 2012, 181–182) among perspectives in social life: the metaphorical “line[s] of sight” from which “aspects of the world are noticed, evaluated[,] and compared” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 219).

Rutherford reconsiders a classic distinction made by Michael Warner between the *public*—an abstract figure of non-private, non-state sociality grounded in genres of rational-critical debate on matters of collective concern through talk—and the *audience*: an embodied, co-present aggregate of individuals gathered in proximity both to one another and to a performance (Warner 2002, 71). While acknowledging the reasons for Warner’s differentiating the two, Rutherford crosscuts the distinction, instead focusing on the interplay of absence and presence through which spectators are conjured (Rutherford 2012, 21–22). Rutherford thus treats audiences as interactional achievements brought about through what George Herbert Mead calls the “conversation of gestures”: the “delicate dance of actions taken in anticipation of what others will think and do” (Rutherford, 4; Mead 1956[1934], 216–17). Crucially, the imagined interlocutor—the audience—stands as a composite onlooker, one whose mass “gaze” does not fit neatly into categories of “sender” or “addressee” posited in naïve theories of communication (though such views can powerfully motivate various actors’ appeals to various audiences; Rutherford 2012, 27), but rather gets materialized via evaluations of a performance.

In this way, Rutherford works to retain some of the commonsense understandings that audience holds as an assembled, copresent collective of onlookers, not just in West Papua, but as part of global, hierarchically organized regime of perspectives. In the case of sovereignty, audience always implies recognition, which both drives and troubles the ideologically mediated actions undertaken in its pursuit:

International recognition is a key component of successful assertions of political sovereignty, and yet this dependence on others undercuts the ‘supreme and absolute power’ to which a would-be sovereign, in the classic [Hobbesian] sense, lays claim. In the course of declaring independence, nationalists everywhere have found the force of imagined spectators impossible to evade. This is not to say that all imagined spectators hold equal weight. As Papuan activists know well, recognition from Vanuatu is one thing; recognition from the United States is another; recognition from Papuan friends and family for one’s accomplishments is something else still. The West Papuan people would

need the acknowledgement of powerful foreign allies to gain entry into the community of sovereign nation-states. Only some international actors have the economic and military muscle to act as binding arbiters in disputes (2012, 3–4).

This ambivalence at the heart of sovereignty is what makes the audience—or rather, the ever-proliferating multiplicity of audiences in the plural—both a source of collective empowerment and an existential threat to that empowerment.² The asymmetrical relationships among audiences (and actors’ reflections on them), Rutherford reminds us, should not be taken to imply static, unchanging structures. Rather, audiences are historical, contingent, time-bound, and durational—that is, poetic—achievements (ibid, 21) brought about through acts of anticipation that often turn out, retrospectively, to be infelicitous: “[i]ndexing an audience is not something we knowingly set out to do; it is only by assuming another’s viewpoint that we learn that this is what we will have done” (ibid, 18). Though audiences are anticipated conjecturally, success or failure is retrospective, and both are judged from some perspective, whether one’s own or another’s. This implies positioning, a metaphorical view from somewhere, through which projects aimed at anticipating audiences always include dimensions that relate to their conditions of production, whether understood as timeless or situationally specific (Gal and Irvine 2019, 218–220).

Both in Rutherford’s and others’ conceptualizations, audience rests on a dramaturgical prototype: the mass observers for whom a performance is staged. Yet even in prototypical cases of dramaturgy-as-stagecraft, audiences quickly multiply: not only assembled spectators, but also co-performers can be thought of as audiences for an actor’s performance turn (Goffman 1959, xi). Ultimately, Warner’s distinction between audience and public is still important for me, not

² The anthropologist Jack Siegel has also written about this (together with other scholars; Anderson 1998), both in the context of the modernization of the Indies, where the burgeoning Indonesian polity found itself addressed as interlocutors in a global conversation among citizens of nation-states (Siegel 1997); and in the context of the post-independent New Order, which refigured Suharto’s regime as the source of Indonesian citizens’ recognition (Siegel 1998).

because the physical co-presence of audiences can actually be disentangled from the abstract collectivity of the public, but rather because the experience of physically co-present audiences affords a powerful, experiential figure through which publics get imagined. Indeed, scholars like Warner still begin with co-present aggregates of individuals—and the affective experiences that ensue when a crowd “witness[es] itself in visible space” (Warner 2002, 66; see also Lévi-Strauss 1962; Mazzarella 2010, 2017)—even though the ultimate goal is to produce a conceptual partition. Rather than critique this as a failure to make an absolute distinction between the two, my point is that audiences mediate between crowds and publics, affording a basis for ideological projections that shift from mass to collectivity. The sense of being addressed as part of a co-present, ordered aggregate affords the image of distributed sociality among strangers.

Here, I extend Rutherford’s largely latent conceptualization of anticipation built into notions of audience by drawing from Summerson Carr’s work on *anticipatory interpellation*: for Carr, these are processes for inhabiting institutional subject-positions in response to how one expects to be addressed by institutional representatives based on prior socialization to institutionalized metadisourses. Carr describes this in the context of a U.S.-based outpatient addiction treatment program, but such anticipatory work is widespread (e.g. Parsons Dick 2018, 186–224):³ individuals in a range of settings not only perform roles “across institutional sites, but also call on powerful others to address them as such” (Carr 2009, 319; see also Carr 2011, 151–54). Crucially, as Carr describes it, anticipation points to the fact that one *acts in advance of being hailed*—or interpellated—to subjectivation, to draw on Althusser and Butler’s terms.

³ Dick 2018, for example, explores not only the anticipation of gendered, institutionalized roles performed by the Mexican women migrants who appear as ethnographic interlocutors, but also the anticipatory work necessitated of her as fieldworker in recognition of hegemonic, gendered scripts of white, American femininity.

My own conceptualization of *anticipatory uptake* attempts to extend the consideration of anticipation beyond subjectivation, and to connect what Rutherford calls indexing audiences to processes of public-formation that anticipate various acts of uptake likely to be performed by others. My move does not aim to contest or critique either Rutherford or Carr's formulation. Indeed, to anticipate the positions available to oneself and embody them accordingly is also, in a logical sense, to anticipate what positions are available to one's interlocutor. Instead, my focus on broader dynamics of uptake is driven ethnographically, and is meant merely to foreground the fact that, in the cases that concern me, the anticipation of audiences is not about interpellation—that is to say, it is not about being hailed through a process of subjectivation. Instead, the interlocutors I describe in this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, focalize subsequent actions as likely to be taken by audience-onlookers, and they alter the signal form of the messages they construct in order to bring about a desired response.

As I will elaborate across the next two sections, anticipatory uptake (which orients toward a given audience, or audiences) comes together with processes of public-formation in the production of authority—authority which, as Rutherford has already pointed out, indexes spectators whose evaluative gazes carry unequal weight (Rutherford 2012, 4). Beginning with Habermas' (1991[1962]) theorization of the “public sphere”—a domain of political participation, distinct from the state and market relations as such, where citizens can deliberate on common affairs (Fraser 1990, 57)—scholars drawing on this tradition have insisted that enactments of publics, and the public–private distinction on which the category rests (Gal 2002, 79), are always indexical: that is, publics are produced relative to some context of use (*ibid*), and exist as sociolinguistically- and historically afforded modes for the linguistic legitimation of authority (Gal and Woolard 2001, 4–5). Authority is thus indexical and processual: the authority to act,

and to compel action, derives in large part from the authoritativeness of the figures that animate a given directive, as well as the context-dependent, institutional positions they occupy, or are taken to occupy (Inoue 2006; Silverstein 2001; 2016; 2017; Woolard 2016b).

Of course, this is not determinable in advance: one always gives off signs in excess of the signs that one intentionally curates or gives (Goffman 1959, 2). This can happen, for instance, when one focalizes the wrong indexes, or when various signs taken as singular turn out to be multi-scalar and shifting (this is, of course, an affordance of all sign activity). From the spectacular—like declarations of independence (B. Lee 1997, 333–40*ff*; Derrida 1986)—to the banal—like demanding that a Singaporean reporter “speak Good English”—the dialogic perspectives that an interactant might turn out, retrospectively, to have needed to anticipate is inexhaustible, albeit finite. Yet despite of this, interlocutors often imagine that anticipation can be, even *must be*, totally accounted for—thus totally managed. The next section considers this by examining some among the myriad acts of anticipatory work—and retrospective anticipatory failures—that structured public address toward the Bicentennial’s imagined audiences, both in mediatized texts and in public political oratory.

Scaling Local–Global Audiences in (and around) the Bicentennial Launch

Numerous features of the *CNA* telecast (Mediacorp 2019) with which I opened this chapter can be seen to anticipate reflexively local audiences, most overtly in the reiteration of a statements by the Singapore Bicentennial Office that this was not a *celebration* of colonization or colonialism, but a *commemoration* of 1819 (the year of Raffles’ arrival) as a significant event in Singapore’s modern history. As I also noted earlier, this was apparent not only in the public talk and mediatized performances at the Bicentennial’s launch, but also in phenomena like the pronunciation of Farquhar’s name. Yet the responses to the reporter’s pronunciation—together

with explicit references to global onlookers made by the in-studio anchors and reporters-in-the-field—can be seen to index the fact that, for many of the commentators posting their real-time digital reactions, what mattered was the mass gaze of assembled global others.

The distinction between *celebration* and *commemoration* first began circulating publicly during 2017 as part of the framing of the impending 2019 Bicentennial. During a press conference on 27 December 2017, held outside the Singapore Bicentennial Office’s (SBO) bare-bones, three-room operation in the National Library, Singapore, SBO Executive Director Gene Tan of the National Library Board and National Archives of Singapore announced that, “rather than a celebration, the bicentennial is a time to reflect on the nation’s journey” (Channel News Asia 2017). This was reiterated over the coming months by SBO personnel, affiliates, and members of the press. During the 2019 *CNA* telecast of the Bicentennial Launch, for instance, the first of the three reporters in the field was introduced by one of the two anchors in the studio (Mediacorp 2019): “Now we turn to Elizabeth Neo at the Fullerton Hotel. So, Liz, why is Singapore, you know, **marking**⁴ this milestone in the country’s history?” The frame cut to the reporter. After a long pause, Neo began by first glossing the term “bicentennial” in a breathless, rapid pace: “Bicentennial means **two** hundred years so that is what we are uh **marking** here today. The Singapore Bicentennial Office has said it’s **not** a celebration, it’s a **commemoration** of this very important time in our history, and you can also look at it as a prequel to SG50.”⁵

⁴ **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis.

⁵ This phrase—“a prequel to SG50”—was reiterated numerous times throughout the broadcast and in Bicentennial promotional materials. Many individuals to whom I spoke outside the Bicentennial Office often expressed their puzzlement or derision at this formulation. SG50 was a highly elaborate and emotional year-long series of events celebrating 50 years of Singapore’s independent history, which took place across 2015 (and slightly beyond: celebrations kicked off in late 2014 and lingered into 2016). A friend semi-jokingly expressed their confusion to me in the days leading up to the launch, as we found ourselves walking past the Asian Civilisations Museum, where construction was underway on the stage where the Prime Minister would give

Like “commemoration” versus “celebration,” the Bicentennial’s description as a “prequel” was also repeated multiple times by anchors, reporters, and interviewees.

While the decision to label the year’s events a *commemoration* suggested an effort to sidestep questions about whether Singaporeans “should be celebrating a ‘founding’ by a British imperialist...[or] the fact that, from 1819 to 1963, Singapore was ruled as a colony” (T. Y. Tan 2020, 2)—as well as potentially sidestepping a more thoroughgoing reconsideration of the dominant “tabula rasa” periodization that marks 1819 as the start of Singapore’s history (Chong 2020, 325)—this strategy intersected with a common public discourse of “both-sides”-ism, of acknowledging the “bad” and the “good” as two sides of the same coin, and hence avoiding making moral judgments regarding outcomes. During the Bicentennial, a number of opinion editorials published in news-media outlets urged Singaporeans to “take a more nuanced view of colonialism and its place in history” (Cheang 2019). For commentators advocating “nuance” and “balance,” this meant that: “one should rightly acknowledge the faults and injustices of colonial rule in history, [but] one should also note the wide range of colonial experiences that vary from place to place, and some of the ways in which colonialism has also positively shaped the modern world we live in” (ibid). Here, the anticipated audiences were critics of colonialism and colonial legacies both in and outside Singapore, whose thoroughgoing critiques of colonial/imperial/modern designs by Western powers (and local collaborators; Hirschman 1986; López C. 2001) were dismissed a priori as lacking “nuance” and “balance.”

his speech launching the Bicentennial just days later: “In 2015 we celebrated SG50, now four years later got SG200? How is this a prequel?” A year later, this was articulated to me by the Director of the Bicentennial Office in terms that I, a *Star Wars* nerd, could understand: “We realized it’s a **prequel**, like how the original *Star Wars* Trilogy was Episodes 4, 5, and 6. **That’s** SG50. Now, we’re doing Episode 1.”

Apologists for colonial legacies advocating “nuance” and “balance” also had the advantage of being able to draw on hegemonic, and widespread expectations that one ought to avoid taking “strong” positions in public discourse. These expectations extend far beyond the Bicentennial proper. Through this strategy, individuals voicing a counter-critique can attempt to produce a desired act of uptake and subsequent action from their interlocutor, whether in face-to-face interaction or otherwise, by dismissing critiques as taking a position that is too strong without engaging the position substantively. Critics thus often work to anticipate such dismissal by performing their own acknowledgements of “both sides.” This could be seen in late 2019 when Members of Parliament who undertook public critiques of the pernicious present effects of colonialism—especially the ongoing racialization of “Malay problems” inaugurated by British colonial representations of the “lazy Malay native” (Alatas 1977)—by repeating ad nauseum that they were “acknowledging the good and the bad” (L. Lai 2019). The “good” parts of colonialism were presented as indisputable; the critique was not “extreme,” as it was just about the “bad.”

Reflexive anticipation of local audiences could also be seen in the phonological realization of Farquhar’s name. As noted earlier, pronunciations of Farquhar as /faʔ'-kə/ (or /faʔ'-kɹ/) and /fa'-kə/ (or /fa'-kɹ/) are often taken as a punchline, with or without overt comedic setup. Once when I attended the Bicentennial Experience (a high-budget, immersive, multimedia experience that served as the flagship program for the Bicentennial year) during what was serendipitously a fieldtrip for Primary 2–3 students (ages seven to nine), the appearance of a CGI-animated Lieutenant William Farquhar onscreen led to 20–25 children breaking out into a gleeful chorus of shouts and laughter: “fucker!” (This was despite the narrator’s relatively RP-adjacent phonetic realization as /fa'-kə/).

It is with respect to this default of both performance and interpretation that I suggest the *CNA* reporter's own phonetic realization ought to be interpreted. Given the broadly enregistered humor entailed not just by perceived mispronunciation, but also by relatively felicitous acts of pronunciation of William Farquhar's surname, the reporter's decision to realize the surname trisyllabically as /fa'-ku-ha/ could be taken as an effort to avoid a highly anticipatable—and decidedly negative—uptake. And yet, as indexed by the firestorm of live comments about the reporter's language-use, this effort at anticipating one form of uptake ended up producing other, equally undesirable forms. While comments like “Is this a Chinese word?” should be understood in relation to critiques of racialized majoritarian privilege, which I elaborate in Chapter 4, comments like “Reporters should speak Good English!” point toward persistent anxieties over the fact that “global audiences” were watching—and listening (which I discuss in Chapter 5).

Of course, it was not just online commentators who were concerned with “global audiences.” The first segment of the *CNA* broadcast concluded with the anchors voicing the fact that the Singapore Bicentennial was receiving “global attention.” As evidence, the anchors noted that Google had unveiled a new Doodle (a custom-designed homepage graphic): a watercolor rendering of Singapore's Marina Bay district and text that changed from “200” to “700” when a desktop user hovered a cursor over the image (Mediacorp 2019). Yet even here, the imagined gaze was not unidirectional, even if it was asymmetric. In narrating the fact that the world was watching, Singaporeans were watching and anticipating “global” others, too.

“The Singaporean” was not the only figure being performed in online commentaries. Commentators during the live telecast also took the opportunity to draw attention to various exclusions structuring the commemorations, such as indigenous dispossession through Singapore's land acquisition-, population resettlement-, and language policies (Loh 2013; Y.-Y.

Tan 2017); the relative marginalization of South Asian contributions to the “uniquely Singaporean DNA” narrated throughout the Bicentennial; and to the ongoing exploitation of low-paid, precarious laborers whose bodies and lives were rendered disposable in the present—especially migrant workers employed as cleaners, construction workers, and sex workers (Kathiravelu 2020a; V. Koh, Lim, and Tan 2020). Of course, this did not stop with the Bicentennial Launch or the live telecast: commentators, artists, intellectuals, activists, and advocates drew attention to these issues long before and after the Bicentennial. Though I will not elaborate here on the various nodes in this rapidly proliferating network of commentary and critique, my point is that anticipatory uptake is flexible and contextual, involving scaling projects of various kinds which deploy models for comparison among sites (Gal and Irvine 2019, 166; Gal 2016a), and through which objects and actors are recruited to participate in “feats of scalar magic” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 11). This could be seen during the lead-up to a single ritualized event for performing the nation to itself (the Bicentennial Launch), but it also occurs across the long-term, multi-sited construction of a version of Singapore’s history (the “Singapore Story”) and its commoditized image (“brand Singapore”). I turn to these in the next section.

Audiences of the “Singapore Story” and Passion Made Possible™

Widespread narratives about Singapore describe it as an unprecedented success existing at the confluence of global flows (J. C. Perry 2017). This narrative undergirds a recurrent myth about Singapore’s current geopolitical and socioeconomic status (Thum 2017; Holden 2017b). From the originary trauma of a forced separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1964—which cut the city-state off from key resources, like water (Newman and Thornley 2005, 247; Kaplan 2016)—Singapore is narrated as having nevertheless risen above the odds. This narrative of survival against long odds, of triumph in the face of adversity, and of socioeconomic and

geopolitical rise is referred to locally as the “Singapore Story.” A key component of civic-education pedagogies (Baildon and Afandi 2017) and ritualized state rhetoric, which respectively position future and current citizens as audiences, the “Singapore Story” is designed to instill in Singaporeans a sense of pride in the place’s meteoric, but “unlikely” rise (J. C. Perry 2017; M. Perry, Kong, and Yeoh 1997; Liow 2015) from “Third World to First,” as the title of a memoir by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew would have it (2012; see also Holden 2001; 2017). Needless to say, such narrative practice is not unique to Singapore per se: nationalist histories often rest of such narratives of exceptionalism and exception—existing beyond comparison, or existing as an outlier relative to a norm.

While both the Bicentennial and the Singapore Story co-participate in scaling (and promoting) the image of Singapore to inter- or intra-national audiences, the work of commoditizing and marketing the image of Singapore has also been claimed, historically, by a particular expert-professional community of practice: *place-branding practitioners*. Also called nation-branding professionals (Anholt 2007) or members of the transnational promotional class (Aronczyk 2013), this group has successfully institutionalized place-branding practice as a legitimate domain of expert-professional practice by getting governments to both buy, and *buy into* ideologies of place-branding (Mazzarella 2003). More broadly, this has resulted in the broad enregisterment of—that is, the production of a widely recognized equivalence between—place-branding as governance and statecraft, in which the ability to “brand like a state” (Woolard 2016b, 207; 2016a) is taken as the measure of a state’s “‘value’ and its legitimacy, its ability to ‘participate’ in the global economy and ‘develop’ itself” (Nakassis 2013a, 219). Statecraft and governance—at least in the case of modern nation-states—may always have rested on images of totality that naturalized links between state and nation, as in the Enlightenment trinity of society,

polity, and language community (Silverstein 2010). But the work of *branding* a totalizing representations of a place has further naturalized the reductive semiotic logics through which such representations are made, and rendered them as a basis for enforcement on a populace by calling on citizens (or anyone dwelling in a place) to live the brand—often coercively (Aronczyk 2008; Graan 2016).

This section begins by turning to 24 August 2017, at the tail end of my preliminary fieldwork research. On this date, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Economic Development Board (EDB) co-launched Singapore’s new integrated brand, *Passion Made Possible*TM. It replaced the previous *YourSingapore*TM brand, which had been in place for five years. Though Singapore’s branding had previously operated “holistically”—that is, as both a *destination brand*, or a brand through which a tourism- or travel-destination-image is marketed, and a *place brand*, a brand through which a broader place-image is managed and marketed—the fact that this was referred to as an “unified brand beyond tourism” (Singapore Tourism Board 2017) indicated a discursive shift in the state’s approach to making, managing, and marketing place in Singapore. Many of the approaches remained consistent with the previous *YourSingapore*TM: in particular, audience segments continued to be based on familiar, longstanding interest-based categories—foodies, outdoor enthusiasts, or shopping aficionados—but they were now referred to as “Passion Tribes” (ibid). Also new was the discourses about the brand image’s audiences as such. According to the STB, *Passion Made Possible*TM was oriented both outwardly, toward tourists and expats, and inwardly, toward the Singapore government (to “ensure consistency of messaging” across departments) and the Singapore populace (to “make every Singaporean into a brand ambassador”) (quoted in Tay 2017).

At the same time, claims that assert the brand's "newness" belie its formal and institutional continuities. The STB was long the brand manager for tourism-promotion campaigns, but these were also deployed by the EDB, whether the Instant Asia™ brand of the 1970s, offering Singapore as an "exotic...melting pot of Asian cultures" (Chang and Yeoh 1999, 104); the New Asia—Singapore™ brand of the 1990s, which promoted Singapore's "fusion between modernity and dynamism, on the one hand, and a traditional 'Asian soul' on the other" (ibid, 105); 2004's Uniquely Singapore™; or the YourSingapore™ brand of 2012–2017, the latter two of which both promoted Singapore as affording endlessly reconfigurable, individually customizable experiences. Perhaps paradoxically, the branding of multiplicity, diversity, and endlessly customizable experiences still rests on a totalizing image: the image of Singapore is presented as the sum of this multiplicity, diversity, and endless customizability, a totality that can be (and, for certain institutionally privileged personae, *is*) known in its entirety.

Despite its practical and institutional continuity with prior brands, the Passion Made Possible™ brand drew a great deal of criticism. For many—both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans—the choice of "passion" was confusing, even wrong. Of all the top-of-mind associations they could imagine when it came to Singapore, "passion" was not one of them, and was already heavily associated with other places. The greatest backlash, though, was directed toward the main image through which the brand was depicted. It featured a low-rise, nighttime cityscape overlaid by the Passion Made Possible™ logo in stylized red neon. For many commentators, this was, quite simply, "not Singapore." As one respondent rhetorically asked, "What is this? They're promoting Geylang is it?" (Geylang is Singapore's largest and best-known red-light district, renowned also for its late-night food and durian offerings).

Many commentators to whom I spoke at this time assumed that this was yet another case of a foreign firm being air-dropped into Singapore, attempting to hastily make sense of the place, and coming up with yet another in a long series of inaccurate, outsider-made representations. Yet the brand was developed by a local boutique firm, The Secret Little Agency (TSLA), and had been developed via a survey and feedback process involving 4,000 respondents from a range of professional sectors, personal backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. This is not to dismiss these critiques out of hand. Rather, it is to raise questions about what was at stake in the evaluation that this was “not Singapore,” that the brand image was “wrong.” By 2018, when I began my long-term fieldwork research, this commotion had largely subsided; the Passion Made Possible™ logo, tagline, and visual style remained, quietly emblazoned everything from street banners to festival signage to tourist welcome centers without inviting commentary.

As the poet and brand consultant Koh Buck Song has put it, “without nation branding, there would be no Singapore.” Koh literally wrote the book on the topic, first in *Brand Singapore: How Nation Branding Built Asia’s Leading Global City* (2011), later in the revised *Brand Singapore (Second Edition): Nation Branding After Lee Kuan Yew, in a Divisive World* (2017). Though Koh is invested in celebrating the “unique values” of the Singapore brand, other commentators are less positive, asking, for instance: does the brand image “portray Singapore in an accurate and honest manner” (Ooi 2008, 291)? In such encounters, both critics and defenders co-construct one another as oppositional positions at the same time as they co-construct the brand image as a coherent, legitimate object of focus, as something that *can be* “accurate and honest” even if—in critics’ assessments—it is not yet. Such concerns for “accurate” and “honest” portrayals highlight once again a reoriented relationship between states and governed populaces. Yet these concerns also suggest one site for the institutionalization of anticipatory

uptake: a “wrong” image is “wrong” not because of referential infidelity, but because it indexes wrong associations for audiences, whether in or outside Singapore.

This draws attention to an empirical observation that has been central to both my research and analysis, not only in contestations over the “Singapore Story” or “brand Singapore,” but also in interaction at non- or para-institutional, un-official sites. Though people in Singapore disagree on the content and compositional design of the image of Singapore, they nevertheless continue to act as if (whether through verbal or nonverbal behavior) there is some underlying totality that is, can be, and ought to be represented accurately. In the next section, I turn toward interpersonal interactions, tracking the shifting uses and contested referents of “audience(s)” as a lexical label.

Polyvalent “Audience(s)” In and Outside the Theatre

Though audiences can be scaled to the level of the nation-state—or even a world of nation-states (each possessing of their own brand images)—and indexed through long-term events and state-commemorative rituals, they can also be indexed through a single, semi-formal interview in which individuals reflect on the multi-scalar audiences that they variously anticipate. I turn toward the interview as a site in this section. While references to multi-scalar audiences were largely implicit in the Bicentennial Launch and its live telecast (references to “global” onlookers notwithstanding), among the arts professionals whom I interviewed—by virtue of the kind of work they do—often reflected explicitly and repeatedly on the audiences they engage, either through their own/their organizations’ creative works or through the structuring of the institutions in which they variously participate as directors, as theater-makers, as collaborators, as mentors, as members of raciolinguistic communities—or all of these. This section traces out some of the shifting uses of “audience” that emerged across two interviews with arts professionals to track the kinds of anticipatory work that were produced interactionally.

While I will attend to the specificities of the poetics of these interactions and the effects of the genre—for instance, the fact that this was an interview meant that it was focused heavily on reference (Briggs 1986)—I have also selected and presented excerpts of these interviews for two further reasons: first, because they took place at distinct moments in the beginning end of my fieldwork research, respectively, and thus reflect differing depths of relationship to the interviewee; and second, because these conversations reflect recurrent kinds of concerns over “audience” that emerged more broadly across my research. In this section, I track two among the polyvalent senses of “audience” that emerged during these conversations: first, as literal audiences, i.e. ticketholders or consumers of a performance work; and second, as raciolinguistic communities, whether within or beyond the standardized CMIO model.

Before I continue, I will offer a caveat and a few brief contextualizing notes about the interviewees. First, the caveat: although I focus on a face-to-face, interpersonal interaction, this does not mean that the salient scale is therefore “small.” Indeed, many of the themes and axes of differentiation are reflexively global and/or encompassing of entire groups, whether racialized groups, language communities, professional groups, etc. Second, a contextualizing-biographical notes: the two individuals voiced here are both well-established arts professionals who work (and in the past have worked) in a range of roles, as actors (both on stage and screen), playwrights, directors, producers, dramaturgs, artistic directors, mentors, and designers. One of the two interviewees works in a senior-managerial role for a well-established Malay theater company, while the second works full-time as an independent theater-maker and Tamil-language translator. Both of them work, or have worked, on what they called the “English stage” or in “bilingual productions” in addition to the “Tamil-” or “Malay stages.”

2.1 “Audiences” and/as Assembled Onlooker-Consumers. Because of their work in performing arts sectors, it is unsurprising that “audience” would index, at some moments, literal audiences for my interviewees, that is, aggregates of ticketholders or consumers. Describing post-1990s changes in performing arts infrastructures in Singapore, Faris, artistic director for Teater Ekamatra, Singapore’s oldest contemporary Malay theater company, further introduced what he saw as changes in expectations for the kinds of issues that could, or should, appear onstage. This was further linked, for Faris, to changing technological milieus and expectations surrounding what it meant to be “entertained”:

But again, you know, talking about audience expectation, [this] has also **changed** from a decade, or a **few** decades ago, you know? Like **then**, uh- One- Ok I’m talking about **Singapore**, ok? It’s **hard** to get, uh **people** to **come** out of their house to a theater space, theater **venue** to watch a show. They- they **rather** just [switch] **on** TV and just watch entertainment and that’s it, you know, they- they are very **comfortable**.⁶

Uh of **course** government [has] done a lot, like you know- like uh- **So**, that’s why uh they **built** a lot more infrastructure, they built a lot more uh **art** spaces, right? Like Esplanade, and uh **Drama** Center blah blah blah they uh **renovated** Victoria Theater and all that, and they **even** created uh an **art** precinct- You’re familiar with the art precinct? You know the- **Bugis** and all that. Uh and they **also** do outreach projects, you know, ‘**Ok** you don’t want to go out? I will come to you instead,’ you know, and all **that**. But it took a long while for **even** Malay audience to like, be able to come **out**, like, ‘Ok I **want** to watch, you know, theater and all that.’”

In this stretch of talk, Faris embedded two tokens of quasi-reported speech, first voicing “the government” speaking to potential theatergoers who do not want to leave their homes, and who are therefore accommodated through outreach (making the theater “come to you instead”), and second, voicing specifically Malay consumers. Surrounding these tokens, Faris narrated a number of temporal periods and personae. The scale of the comparison also shifted from the

⁶ **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis. Text followed by a dash (-) indicates truncated speech or a restart. Roman text inserted in [square brackets] has been added by the author for denotational clarity. *Italic text* inserted in [square brackets] preceded by the author’s initials (“jb”) are added to elaborate further context.

beginning of the segment to the end: Faris began by talking about Singapore as a whole, a country whose would-be theatergoing public was framed as having been cultivated only relatively recently, and ended by talking about Malay audiences, who were reluctant to leave their homes even to attend works by a specifically a *Malay* company.

Similar concerns over audiences as ticketholder-consumers occurred in a conversation with Faith, a self-described bilingual theater maker currently working full-time as a television actor for an English-language show by Mediacorp, as well as working as an independent director. After an extended critique of the ways that casting decisions often get made in Singapore, which lasted the better part of 30 minutes during the interview, Faith voiced her frustrations over a lack of “community” support among potential ticketholder-consumers:

In Singapore, it **is** a bit tough lah. It is, to be **very** very honest. Like I **said** it’s a **fight** for audience. **Because** one of the things when I started staging my own shows- because I was **staging** it in English, this is a- When I **did** my very first [English-language show] Uh I actually **thought** at the back of my head, I will have the **support** of my Indian community. [*Smiling*] I **really** thought because I’d been with them for **ten** over years, ‘Oh, **they** will come and watch it.’ And the **show** opened, I only had a total of **fifteen** Indians for my audience. The rest were all other **races**. And **I**:: was shocked. And **then** I was like, **why**- why- why is this happening? And the **same** thing happened for my subsequent shows, uh, the **next** English show that I did I only had about twenty to twenty-five? Thirty? It was **only** “Goddesses of Words” [*jb—a show about the lived experiences of Indian-Singaporean women, dramatizing the poetry of Indian/Indian-Singaporean women poets*] and **then** I had over a hundred plus. It was **increasing** the database. And I was like, **why** is it that they are **so** reluctant? Because you **see** [my] Indian- you **see** the Tamil work, you are familiar with it, **why** not come and support? Strange. **Totally** strange. And **I** was like- Yeah. There are **so** many things to tackle in this, how to **create** the audience, how to **get** the actors, how to **get** the artists over. You know?

As with the audience-related challenges narrated by Faris—where categories of raciolinguistic personhood were voiced as concrete, actually existing audiences—here Faith narrated audience in terms of countable (if in some cases approximate) numbers of attendees.

2.2 “Audiences” and/as Raciolinguistic Groups. Of course, as should already be clear, “audience” can also be seen to be operative in and as categories of raciolinguistic, group-based personhood linked to CMIO. This happened in the stretches of talk that I presented from Faris and Faith, where “audience” overlaps framings as both assembled onlooker-consumers and as raciolinguistic communities whose existence *as communities* was an effect both of orientations to a denotational code (Silverstein 2010) and of shared experiences of demographic and representational minoritization (Hastings and Manning 2004; Gal 2017). When articulated in this way, “audience” can be seen most proximally to index an imagined orientation to denotational code deployed as a performance medium, but in such events of narration, such appeals to denotational code additionally bore multiple, contested relationships to aesthetics, embodiment, and narrative genres.

After describing changes in audience expectations over time, both in Singapore generally and in the Malay community specifically, Faris went on to narrate changes he had observed over time in the expectations held by a Malay “audience” qua raciolinguistic community beyond their literal assembly in a theater space:

So, [*jb—since Singapore’s independence*] audience expectation has **changed**, you know? Uh **then** [*jb—before independence*] the **issues** that we talk about uh were **mostly** like **identity**, you know, uh **what** does it mean to be a Malay? **And-** and when we talk about **Malay** here it’s very interesting also because we are **part** of the larger archipela-**archipelago** right? You know there’s **Malaysia**, we’re **surrounded** by **Malay** archipelago and [*chuckles*] **that** can be seen as being dangerous. **So-** Are you familiar with that?... In the **military** uh there used to- there **used to not** be a lot of high-profile **officers**...there- there **wasn’t** a **fighter** pilot at **all** and certain like- **key** uh **key** personnel uh that- There are **no** Malays in that, in the **fear** that they- you know **because** they might **just** uh **betray**, they kind of like- Ok. Am **I** a Singaporean first or a **Malay** first? You know, like uh, if I’m a **Malay** first then **Indonesia** is also Malay- **Just** in case we ever like get to **war** with our neighboring countries, you know?...**Anyway**, so **talking** about **audience** uh audience expectations have **changed**, uh we used to talk about our **identity**, we used to talk about like, you know, “Oh how we are uh, we are **suppressed**, you know, we are **oppressed**, you know things like **that**, then **this** used to be a **Malay** land,” you

know?...But I **think** people are sick and **tired** of that, I think we- We kind of **understand** that, or **generations** after that uh **prefer** to talk about something else.

Faris here introduced a recurrent trope about Singapore as a raciolinguistically embattled non-Malay island in a Malay-Muslim region, a longstanding framing that was key to many foreign policy decisions since even before Singapore's full political independence (Rahim 2010; Chua 2017). Faris also introduced a point that I encountered repeatedly throughout my fieldwork research period and beyond (both before and since), which mobilized a racialized, national distrust of Malay-Singaporeans as an explanation for the dearth of high-profile officers in the Singapore military. Though not commenting on the possible veracity of this claim, Faris did note that, while concerns over Malay-Singaporean minoritization, suppression, oppression, and dispossession had once been widespread, recent generational, technological, and infrastructural shifts had moved the terms of the conversation for many audience members.

In later turns, however, Faris's narration of audience qua raciolinguistic-community expectations was reframed in overtly contrastive terms, as distinct raciolinguistic audiences were indexed through the ways their expectations differed across, rather than within, communities:

JB: I'm curious about diversity **within** the audience itself. Do you find that there are **different** audience expectations?

FJ: **It's- it's** interesting also, it's **interesting** because like uh- Uh, to **begin** with our **audience** has always been fifty **percent** Malays and **fifty** percent **non**-Malays, **so** people come with different expectations actually. **So** the- the- the- the- the **Malays** will **think** that, 'Oh, **now** you are- you are **not** being Malay enough in your- in your **work**,' whereas the **Chinese** will come and like, **wow** that's so Malay. And so, it's interesting to get these different **views** from people.

Faris went on to describe the ways that this played out in the context of Teater Ekamatra's latest show, an adaptation of "A Clockwork Orange." He narrated the difficult decisions that he and the rest of the show's team had to make during the production process: e.g. should the show be in Malay, in English, or something else? Should the show be about the whole of Singapore, or "just

the Malays”)? How explicitly should this be signaled? After years of work, what resulted, as Faris described it, was an uncanny, (linguistically) Malay-medium dystopian world onstage, one that was recognizable as bearing some relationship to Singapore—the world of narration—but did not rely on making the point overly explicit or didactic:

So, I think through the use of the **language**, **without** being very **clear** that like **oh**, this is **Singapore**, **oh**, it’s about the **Malays** or whatever, you know? Yeah. I think just by having **Malay** bodies- **Five** Malay bodies on- **six** Malay bodies onstage **doing** it is enough, you know? **Without** having to say, ‘**Oh, we are** the Malays, and **this** is how we-’ You know?...So, of **course** when we’re doing this kind of difficult show, there will be resistance from the Malays, you know? But of course, the **non**-Malays will be ok.

In this turn at talk, Faris overtly linked the fractional resolution of divergent “audience” expectations to the raciolinguistic embodiment of the performers. The use of the Malay language, animated by Malay bodies onstage, was enough to signal the intended creative-artistic intervention: yes, this was “about” Singapore, at some level. Yet in this segment, Faris also scaled the partial resolution of divergent audience expectations across abstracted raciolinguistic groups of onlookers, voicing his relative lack of worry over the “resistance from the Malays” together with the fact that, for non-Malays, there was no perceived problem at all.

During our interview, Faith also framed divergent group-based expectations contrastively according to raciolinguistic audiences at different scales. After she offered an extended reflection on the state of Tamil-language theater and performance in Singapore broadly, I followed up to ask what she thought accounted for the current state of Tamil-language theater and its audiences’ expectations. She replied:

I **think** it’s a chicken and egg thing, because **we**- We **created** the audience, and we created- We **gave** them a certain idea of **what** is theater. And if the audience themselves don’t go and explore and see what **else** is available, they will think this **is** theater. And I think that is **where** they are at the moment. And **most** of the Tamil audience, I have noticed, they like **eye** candy. They are **very** used to eye candy or slapstick, that’s it. So, if you are **giving** them extreme classic play in Tamil- Tamil language they **love** it. But **is** there theatrical value in the way they presented it? They don’t care. But [so long as] the

language is good, they will **love** it. **Same** thing goes for slapstick. **Slapstick** is also a language first thing...I've **questioned** them a lot on that, because they call themselves Tamil theater **makers**. But I tell them- I keep **asking** them what's **so** Tamil about the **way** you make theater? It's just a **language** you are using. That's **it**. It's just a language...But then, after **questioning** them I was **also** thinking: is the **Chinese** theater, **Malay** theater, and the **English** theater, is it just a **language**? Is there something **beyond** language they are **bringing** into what they are doing? Because in the Tamil **history** side of theater, there are actually so many **forms** they can **incorporate** and bring in. If they look at it, the traditional forms, there's kalari payat you know the **traditional** forms, they can bring **elements** of it into their performances, but they **don't**.

Faith's response can be seen to articulate a tension between denotational code—the Tamil language—and a broader Tamil-ness reflexively located in performance aesthetics sourced from “traditional forms.” Again, this was framed contrastively with reference to Chinese-, Malay-, and English-*medium* theater, but the narrow focus on language was also framed as a semi-open question. Articulated via a negative parallelism, for Faith, Tamil-language theater was “just about language.” In the narration, this was presented as being unlike the other raciolinguistic group-based theater being produced in Singapore, and yet this was not transparently attributed to what audiences desired. Rather, Faith acknowledged the existence of a socialization feedback loop, as prior works set audience expectations that then took on a normative life of their own.

Anticipating the Ethnographer-as-Audience

One further node needs to be further accounted for before I conclude this chapter, namely, myself as a co-participant in these interviews. In this final section, I work to trace out the kinds of figures that I was taken to be. This was not just about who I was variously taken to be as an individual interlocutor, but about who I was variously taken to be as a token of a type of mass addressee whose uptake could be—and, in the interview, *was*—anticipated. This section teases out some of the ways that this was materialized in interaction, both in terms of the way that my interlocutors worked to manage their own performance, and in the breaks of frame that

occurred at various moments in the interviews, during moments in which interviewees overtly sought to intervene in their words' potential future circulations beyond the moment of encounter.

My conversation with Faris took place in the first six months of my fieldwork, after he had been introduced to me by a mutual theater-practitioner friend, Ethan, who had been crucial in helping me make connections throughout artist and activist circles since 2014. Ethan was also a noted institution-builder in Anglophone theater and beyond: since the 1980s, he had founded a series of festivals, mentoring programs, networks of formal pedagogy, and personal connections that remain influential to this day. The fact that Faris was willing to talk to me—a foreign stranger—was no doubt due to the fact of Ethan's reputation and its resultant social- and cultural capital. Given of my status as a foreign stranger—also a non-artist, non-performer, non-theater worker, etc.—together with the institutional positions Faris occupied, the interview was extremely measured and careful, filled with hedges, caveats, restarts, and concessions. His critiques were not at all forthcoming—especially when it came to other theater practitioners and art-makers—and his “balanced” performance was very much in keeping with the norms of avoiding extreme pronouncements in public talk, which I described earlier in this chapter.

Speaking to Faith nearly a year later, meanwhile, the ambiance was very different. On the one hand, Faith did not need to position herself as someone who was expected to speak either on behalf of an important arts institution or on behalf of an entire raciolinguistic community. Further, I had met Faith through a close friend I have known since 2016. This friend remains an active participant in a playwriting group Faith runs, and some of the works that my friend developed through this group have even gone on to be staged in venues throughout Singapore. My first meetings with Faith took place long before I formally interviewed her. Between our first meeting and the interview, I also continued to see Faith at festivals, symposia, roundtables, and

performances—some of them presenting her work, some of them events at which she was also a ticketholder-consumer, though she was more often on a VIP guestlist than I was. My interview with her was not our first extended conversation, either: we had both attended a theater year-in-review event a few months prior, which ended in an informal cocktail reception where we chatted about the arts in Singapore, my Ph.D. experience, and performance works that we had both attended. The fact of Faith’s self-positioning as an industry “outsider”—as someone who did not currently hold an artistic directorship or writer-in-residence position—was also an important part of the performance of self that she curated during the interview. Because of these prior engagements, even though I was asking questions, the interview remained more freewheeling than Faris’s. (I do not mean this as a criticism, just an observation that Faith was not inhabiting an institutional position vis-à-vis a complete stranger).

And yet, there were still moments that stood out to me during Faith’s interview, moments where a break in frame signaled her reflexive awareness of the fact that this was an interaction between a researcher and a research participant. Especially when a line of critique became too barbed (particularly after voicing a critique of a named biographical individual or arts organization), Faith would interject—laughing, yet still slightly more than half serious—to add: “Don’t quote me on that.” Or, following an unqualified statement, she would add a series of caveats: “This is just **my** perspective, think about how you want to say that based on other things you have heard, ok?” In moments like these, the effect of anticipatory uptake became especially palpable. In moments like these, it became clear that the fact that I was researcher—and thus someone whose written and verbal products might be circulated beyond the immediate scene of the interaction, even if they are not particularly influential—was one among many anticipatable, and anticipated, features of the interaction.

Writing from my vantage point months after both interviews had taken place, with the ability to replay the recordings over and over again, I have further noticed things that I did not particularly notice in the moment of encounter. In particular, I noticed that my conversation with Faris was filled with his acts of semantic glossing—with explanations, elaborations, and definitions—that were far less present in my conversation with Faith. Again, I attribute the relative absence of these features during my interview with Faith to the fact that we had encountered (and spoken to) one another numerous times before, so it was no doubt relatively clear to her by the time of our interview that she could expect me to know specific organizations, local acronyms, historical events, institutional dynamics, and more. Of course, the profusion of explanations, elaborations, and definitions during my interview with Faris was also a function of the interview genre: I was coming to him (as to Faith) to elicit information. And yet, I suggest that it also had to do with my being as a token of a generic, reflexively foreign audience-type, to whom the image of Singapore needed to be explained, familiarized, or demystified.

Of course, all of this unfolded relatively non-explicitly via retrospective judgments indexed only as subsequent action. This is to say, I am not suggesting that these were my interviewees' interior, mental operations to which I somehow managed to gain access. Rather, my point is that, during encounters such as these, my interlocutors engaged not just via replies and responses to signs given across the unfolding poetics of interaction, but also shifted their footing to anticipate forms of uptake from me, a member of typifiable audiences. Though this unfolded in ways that differ from the forms of anticipatory uptake that structure attempts to guide audiences' responses to multi-scalar phenomena—like the launch of a major state commemoration or pronunciation of a single lexical item—I have attempted in this final section to trace out some among the myriad ways that I was personally recruited to social positions as

identifiable tokens of available audience-types through the interpretable—and attributable—facts of my own embodied raciolinguistic personhood.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced out some of the ways in which the category of “audience” mediates processes for the enactment of and reflection on publics. To return to Rutherford’s term once again, when indexing audiences, individuals engage in a process that I have here called anticipatory uptake, which labels acts that attempt to guide others’ interpretations and subsequent action away from an undesired end. As I have sought to show, this can take place via a range of scaling projects (Carr and Lempert 2016, 10–11) across media whose reflexive framing ranges from mass to intimate. This is often shaped by normative institutional expectations, whether due to the institutional positions one occupies themselves, or due to the more general ways in which individuals are socialized to predict—and work to avoid—others’ responses. And, as I have further sought to show across these examples, anticipatory uptake often fails.

The variously deployed axes of differentiation that I have considered here—operative across constructed as local–global, local–foreign, and CMIO-internal divides (among others)—will continue to reappear across the dissertation. Through further elaboration across subsequent chapters, I aim to complicate the admittedly superficial view of each of these axes I have offered here, as I work to further home in on different aspects of the contextually shifting, contestable, and contested deployments of audience-oriented projects. What I hope to have shown here, however, is a broad—if shallow—overview of some of the recurrent ways through which a concern over audience shapes the form of a given action or message.

And yet, as the situations I have considered in this chapter should make clear, the ability to anticipate uptake is never total. Frequently, anticipation turns out to have focused on the

wrong thing(s) vis-à-vis a given uptake: a television reporter-in-the-field's efforts at not being taken up as having said "fucker" (a possibility that at least one poet identified and later mocked) invited other responses, too: a feeling of disappointment among members of "local" audiences; accusations of tarnishing the image of Singapore for "foreign" audiences; the reporter's being targeted by the derisive laughter of "locals" who knew better than to fall into such a trap, etc. These possibilities, though regular in their effects (at least retrospectively), are never determinable in advance. The next chapter focuses on the multiple institutionalizations of raciolinguistic personhood in Singapore as a particular, if ubiquitous kind of audience focalized in and through anticipatory uptake. In doing so, I aim to articulate some of the terms according to which the plenitude—if not infinitude—of (potential) audiences gets institutionalized as a function of readily identifiable, nameable, raciolinguistic group-based entities.

Chapter Two: (De)institutionalizing the Raciolanguage Community

In late 2019, I attended the launch for an event titled *From Your Eyes to Ours*, Singapore's first all-South Asian contemporary art event. The inclusion of "contemporary" in front of "art" was an important caveat: while there had been events and other series centered on South Asian creative-aesthetic genres before—from music to dance to performance to visual arts—this was the first time that a group of all-South Asian art-makers had been brought together to present works that reflected on their present-day lived realities as South Asian people and artists in Singapore rather than to embody or exhibit "traditional" forms. The lineup included a film screening, performances, and a visual art exhibition, titled "Yes, I Speak Indian."

A few months after the event and exhibition had formally concluded, I was able to arrange an interview with Chand Chandramohan, Seelan Palay, and Divaagar (who goes by "Diva"), the three artists who had planned and organized *From Your Eyes to Ours*. The trio elaborated on their counter-hegemonic approach to selecting and presenting participants in the series; the ways the event drew theoretical inspiration from bell hooks' concept of the "oppositional gaze"; their decision to label this an all-*South Asian* event rather than all-*Indian* event; and the event's uptake by media institutions in Singapore, among other topics. About halfway through the one-and-a-half-hour conversation, I asked about both titles—*From Your Eyes to Ours* and "Yes, I Speak Indian." After first detailing the relationship between bell hooks and the overall series title, Chand noted with a laugh that the exhibition title, "Yes, I Speak Indian" had started as a joke. Diva concurred, before elaborating:

Diva (D): It **is**¹ a joke! Or, it is a **response** to an ignorant question- I think that's a question we get a lot, "Do you speak Indian?" and we're like, "Yes, I speak Indian."

Chand (C): [Chuckle]

¹ **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis.

D: And I think it's just like, a bit more of a "fuck you." [Laughter]

C: Yeah. It has to be a "Yes, I speak Indian."

As the narrative continued to unfold, the trio further elaborated how, although "Indian" is one of Singapore's four official "races," questions like this reflect a broader condition of racialized majoritarian privilege in Singapore organized around a Chinese-Singaporean default—a default that the contemporary art event and exhibition had explicitly sought to critique.

As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, Singapore is often upheld as a global model of multicultural-racial-harmony. As Singaporean critical commentators have argued, this often gets pointed to by taking the relative absence of overt, inter-group violence as the sign of a "uniquely Singaporean" success in managing essential, racialized, group-based "faultlines" (Kathiravelu 2017; D. P. S. Goh 2010). And yet, particularly among members of Singapore's minoritized groups, such reflexively public discourses about the image of Singapore as an image of "harmony" belies multiple sites of erasure and exclusion: ongoing anti-Indian housing discrimination by landlords and property agents²; Tamil-language errors in public signage³; the

² A journalistic exposé in 2017 found that many Singaporean landlords preferred to leave a property vacant rather than rent to a member of the "wrong" racialized group (Chandran and Loh 2017). There are numerous private Facebook groups dedicated to sharing stories and screenshots of landlords and property agents who refuse to rent to Indian, Malay, or mainland-Chinese tenants. I have also personally encountered such housing ads or received messages to this effect when house-hunting in Singapore.

³ This happened as recently as 2019, when door hangers distributed by the People's Action Party—a Singapore's dominant political party since 1959—in the Kaki Bukit GRC made waves for its "nonsense" Tamil (Ting 2019). This occurred again during the 2020 National Day, when the text on LED screens forming the stage backdrop also contained "gibberish" (Jennevieve 2020). Though PAP representatives apologized in both these (and other) cases, their defense largely rested on claims about software errors or, in some cases, the fact that they did not have a Tamil-speaker on staff to proofread. Individuals with whom I spoke during my research period, both Tamil speakers and otherwise, cited these (and similar) incidents to point out the irony manifested by the relative lack of infrastructure for accurate Tamil translation, a sort of failure of inclusion in spite of the formal inclusion of Tamil-Singaporeans qua "Indians" in CMIO.

invisibilization of Eurasian-Singaporeans in public-sphere discourses⁴; and recurrent public-to-private acts of black- or brownface, i.e. acts in which members of the racialized majority darken their skin to caricature members of minoritized, racialized groups (Pak forthcoming).⁵

During the decades since Singapore's independence, but increasingly since 2000, a great deal of the overt critique of standardized racialization has focused on CMIO as such. These critiques have been voiced as three kinds of claims, none of them mutually exclusive: first, claims about the model's artificiality, emphasizing its origins as oversimplified racial-linguistic-cultural constructs (Siddique 1989) inherited from the British (D. P. S. Goh and Holden 2009). Second, its uncommonness vis-à-vis other global locales, emphasizing the fact that (most) other countries do not publicly formalize or institutionalize their raciolinguistic demographic categories. Third, its lack of descriptive validity, especially, it is often claimed, in light of inter-group marriage, which critics claim have "blurred" or "crossed" previously clear-cut boundaries. The default response to each of these—especially from individuals voicing the state—is often a more-or-less elaborate dismissal: don't take CMIO so seriously and your problem goes away.

⁴ Though the Eurasian community has long had a presence in present-day Singapore, the group's micro-minority status—comprising approximately 0.4% of Singapore's total population—and the fact that it is often lumped into "Other" in the CMIO model, have been significant contributors to the fact that there is low public awareness of and talk about Singapore Eurasians today (Wong 2019, 47–8).

⁵ In July and August 2019, a government-sponsored advertisement for E-Pay, a new electronic payment system, generated backlash for featuring a Chinese-Singaporean actor, Dennis Chew, dressed as four characters representing the four CMIO "races" of Singapore. Among the four characters, he appeared as an Indian man in a business suit, with darkened skin and a nametag, "K. Muthusamy." A local musician-entertainer duo responded with a satirical rap video just days later, also titled "K. Muthusamy," set to the tune of Iggy Azalea's 2019 "Fuck It Up." The siblings were subjected to a month-long police investigation and eventually issued a conditional warning: that is, if they were investigated and found guilty in the future, they would face penalties for both past *and* current offenses. The creators of the E-Pay ad, however, were found to have acted "in poor taste," but not against the law. Needless to say, such rearticulations of antiracism as racism (Pak forthcoming) have occurred before (Velayutham 2009).

My aim in this chapter is not to adjudicate on these matters, or to attribute blame, judge the moral goodness or badness of a given policy, etc. Rather, my aim is to tease out the raciolinguistic-conceptual models that are historically and institutionally structured and interactionally enacted. This chapter describes how CMIO affords a local model according to which racialized difference gets structured in Singapore beyond CMIO as such, a model I call the *raciolanguage community*. By centering their critique on CMIO as such, critics of the raciolanguage community model still often end up reinscribing it, constructing what the anthropologist David Scott has called a problem-space: a co-constituting nexus of questions and their entailed answers (Scott 1997) that shapes what is asked about a given phenomenon—here, about “race” in Singapore. The construction of this problem-space further enables disavowals and dismissals of CMIO, a disavowal that is used in turn to uphold racialized majoritarian privilege in Singapore.

As should be clear, this model prominently entails co-naturalizations of language and race (Rosa and Flores 2017, 622). As I noted in the Introduction (when citing Singaporean Cultural Medallion winner Muhammad Ariff Ahmad), and as I will further elaborate later in this chapter, to “be” a “race” is seen as requiring that one “possess” a “Mother Tongue language,” and vice versa—at least ideally. In this way, the raciolanguage community takes CMIO as its prototype, ideologically projecting forms of sub-national group-ness as a nexus of standardized linguistic varieties (the race’s “Mother Tongue” plus English), bodily difference, places of geographic origin, and cultural- and religious stereotypes. I argue that the model of the raciolanguage community undergirds the social processes of differentiation by which individuals occupying racially hegemonic social positions work to figure their own group-based identities—grounded in an ideological presumption of sameness—as a function of minoritized difference.

Much of this chapter is historical in its focus, taking up the call from Rosa and Flores (2017) to attend to the historically specific emergence of institutions and interactional habits through which language and race are locally co-naturalized, while at the same time maintaining a focus on racialization as a global, globalizing project. Across three background subsections, this chapter draws on work by Singaporean critical theorists and -historians to explicate, first, the emergence of Singapore's current system of raciolinguistic management (and its ongoing social lives) from the British colonial model of the "plural society"; second, the transition from colonial plural society to an "indigenized" independent nation-state (Wee 1993); and third, the historical racialization of intersecting ethnolinguistic and religious identities, which culminated both in overt eugenicist discourses about the "Malay problem" in post-independent Singapore, and in the multiple institutionalizations of the CMIO "races" in the growing state apparatus. Next, I draw on material from ethnographic observations, mediatized texts, and online commentaries focused on these mediatized texts. I explore how different social positions work to avoid recognition of their topologically asymmetrical links to social structure as such, while others are systematically blocked from being able to do so. The final analytic section turns to narrations of minoritized alterity together with counter-critiques that attempt to invalidate claims of minority erasure or harm. This section draws primarily on interviews with the organizers of *From Your Eyes to Ours*. I conclude the chapter by focusing further on hegemonic counter-critiques, through which individuals demand that others not take CMIO so seriously, thereby attempting to block semiotic attention to systemic, racialized marginalization and exclusion.

Toward Singaporean Raciolinguistic-Ideological Assemblages

2.1 British Colonialism and Raciolinguistic "Community" Governance. As the historians Husain Haikal and Atiku Garba Yahaya have argued, "[m]odern Singapore owes its foundation

to colonialism” (1997, 83). In dominant narratives of the place, Singapore is presented as having been a “tiny fishing village” (Collins 2000, 134) prior to British arrival. Referred to by both critics and celebrants as the “Singapore Story” (Lee 2012[2000]; Holden 2001; 2017), the narrative construction of “modern Singapore” as having been inaugurated in 1819 (Yeoh 1996, 215) has enabled the erasure centuries of Singapore’s location in the Malay world through trade networks, political organizations, and religious institutions (Rahim 2010).

As I also noted in the Introduction, language and race have been deeply intertwined in Singapore since the British colonial period. Like elsewhere in the British Empire, colonial knowledge of race—gotten at through populations’ “Mother Tongues,” places of origin, and occupations—was treated as necessary for statecraft and governance in the region. As the historian and sociologist Nirmala PuruShotam has argued, the technology of the census was crucial to this project in British Malaya broadly and Singapore specifically. This censusing work revealed more about colonial anxieties and raciolinguistic ideologies than anything else (Heller and McElhinny 2017, 102–6; Anderson 2006, Chapter 10). Singapore’s early censuses included more than 40 “racial” groups, some of them linked to placenames, others to group-based ethnonyms, still others to names for denotational codes. By 1921 this number had reached 56 (PuruShotam 1998, 64). Colonial administrators blamed the categorial efflorescence on natives’ insufficiently discriminating minds: as the superintendent of the 1931 census C.A. Vlieland lamented, “Oriental peoples have themselves no clear conception of race” (ibid, 66).

Such results stemmed from the generally fluid ways in which individuals might identify, only some of which were useful for empire: the 1949 census administrator noted that census-takers should expect to be “annoyed” that a respondent might answer, for instance, that they were a “Brahmin” rather than a “Tamil” (del Tufo 1949, 74, 71, cited in PuruShotam 1998,

65)—a status that was no doubt salient to the respondent, but relatively useless for purposes of counting members of Singapore’s “race”-groups. To bypass this fluidity, census administrators relied on a tiered complex of distinctions, beginning with geographic place, followed by language, and finally “essential characters,” as determined primarily by employment.⁶

The presumed isomorphism of place, language, culture, and personality in British censusing can be seen in large part as enacting what Michael Silverstein has called a “culture of monoglot standardization” (Silverstein 1996), an ideology that grounds many Enlightenment assumptions about modern nation-states as founded on primordially monoglot cultural–political entities (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Bonfiglio 2010) as the unity of society–polity–language community constructs (Silverstein 2010). The absence of a single, primordially monoglot “nation” was used to justify the British strategy—common across British Burma and Southeast Asia—of governing Singapore as a “plural society,” in which many “racial” communities qua “nations” inhabited the same state (Furnivall 1956; Lee 2009; see also Kelly and Kaplan 2001), but were only imagined to associate “naturally” in the marketplace (Clammer 1998; Chua and Kwok 2001; D. P. S. Goh 2008, Pieris 2009). This had important implications for strategies of statecraft and governance developed post-independence, which I explore in the next subsection.

2.2 Biologizing “Races” in the “Indigenized” Postcolonial Nation-State. Responding to a now-classic theorization by Eric Hobsbawm, the sociolinguist Lionel Wee has written about the experienced contradiction that Singapore faced post-independence as a “transnational formation using the organizational form of the nation-state” (1993, 716), but existing as what Akhil Gupta has called a “state that is not a nation” (A. Gupta 1992, 73). As Wee has argued, while the

⁶ For instance, the fact that migrants from Tamil Nadu worked in large numbers on rubber estates was seen as evidence of their being naturally suited to this sort of labor, rather than an effect of migration patterns or employers’ biases; Purushotam 1998, 75–81).

organizational form of the postcolonial nation-state has historically taken recourse to discourses of “primordialism” to construct of a chronotopic teleology from shared national past to future national destiny as a self-determining state, Singapore’s “recourse to primordial national identity [was] hamstrung because it possesse[d] several groups of people” (Wee 1993, 716).

The fact that statespersons in independent Singapore had inherited a plural society from their colonizers was long used to frame and justify the state’s efforts to preserve multicultural-racial-harmony as an existential necessity. According to Wee, the People’s Action Party (PAP), Singapore’s dominant political party since 1959, acted under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew—Singapore’s founding prime minister and a figure almost coterminous with the island city-state’s post-independence politics state (Barr 2016)—to ensure that:

[t]he modern European model of the nation-state...[could] be *indigenized* for the PAP’s own purposes. Since there was no one racial identity—and thus no Single “nation”—upon which to safely erect a national identity, Lee and his colleagues aimed to make industrial modernity the metanarrative which would frame Singapore’s national identity, and to create a remarkable “Global City” which, because of its trading links, would escape the restraints placed upon it by history and geography. The “national” as a category was not to be jettisoned but to be renovated so that Singapore’s racial and cultural difference could be contained and to some extent homogenized for the leap into modernity (Wee 1993, 716–717).

As Wee and others have argued, this narrative construction of the triumphant overcoming of the inherited colonial plural society has served to animate a number of other myths (Loh, Thum, and Chia 2017): first, to legitimate the authority and legitimacy of the PAP (as an avatar for the Singapore state writ large) as having solely “author[ed]... nationalism and national identities in Singapore” (Chong 2010, 505, emphasis removed) by bringing Singaporeans together as “one united people” across divides of race, language, and religion; second, to position “public racial harmony” as existing “with a foreboding sense of imminent collapse into...conflict” (D. P. S. Goh 2010, 562); and third, to claim an exceptional Singaporean-ness, in which “[t]raditional and

modern, Asian and Western...[were] blended into something new and...unprecedented in world history” (Wee 1993, 728). In these (and other) ways, versions of the Singapore Story thus oriented toward a Singaporean public figured as both inchoate and internally fractured.

The third myth in particular has important implications for the political-ideological construction of Singapore as what the sociologist Chua Beng Huat calls a state of “disavowed liberalism,” through which individuals reject liberal multiculturalism (equated to a rampant, American-style “individualism”) on the one hand, while selectively deploying key features of liberal governmentality—such as the privileging of markets and market mechanisms—on the other (Chua 2017, 16–17). The narrative construction of Singapore as the unity of traditional–modern/East–West axes of differentiation also has important implications for the positioning of colonialism in the present. Unlike other postcolonial contexts, where political independence is positioned triumphally as the start of a new era of national self-determination, Singapore’s independence is framed as a moment of anguish, in which Prime Minister Lee wept on television while announcing Singapore’s expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia just one year after a tumultuous battle for merger (Holden 2016). This has coincided with broader strategies for constructing Singapore as a nation-state under perpetual threat (Babcock 2020), which persistently draw links back toward independence as a moment of national pain and trauma.

As previous scholars have observed, following a traumatic independence, CMIO was maintained by the People’s Action Party (PAP) as an imagined bulwark against the region’s racialized sociopolitical dynamics. This meant that institutionalizations of CMIO in post-independent Singapore were ideologically linked to racialized, group-based asymmetries. Lee Kuan Yew famously voiced environmental-determinist explanations for racialized differences of

group-based “success” (as measured by socioeconomic status). In a 1968 speech on “Singapore’s Malay Dilemma,” delivered three years after Singapore’s independence, Lee asserted:

There are deep and abiding differences between groups. And whatever we do, we must remember that in Singapore, the Malays feel they are being asked to compete unfairly, that they are not ready for the competition against the Chinese and the Indians and the Eurasians. They will not admit or they cannot admit to themselves that, as a result of their history, they are a different gene pool and they do not have the qualities that can enable them to [compete]” (cited in Han, Fernandez, and Tan 2015,[1998] 184).

In public oratory and published memoirs produced across his career, Lee repeatedly framed such “deep and abiding differences between groups” as being an effect of “breeding,” which led to different biological and cultural-evolutionary outcomes that reflected the characteristics of various, racialized “gene pool[s].” Whereas, according to Lee, the Chinese “community” was a “people with a very intense culture, with a belief in high performance, in sustained effort, in thrift” on account of their being “a product of a civilisation which has gone through all its ups and downs, floods and famine and pestilence,” the Malay “community” was bred “with warm sunshine and bananas and coconuts, and therefore not with the same need to strive so hard” (Ashbolt and Lee 1965).

Though I do not transparently ascribe efficacy to Prime Minister Lee’s assertions, as if they account for everything that has followed in the wake of this speech, the importance of Lee’s views for present institutional forms and interactional routines cannot be overstated: his views, and those of his advisors and party members, drove the formation of a state apparatus whose “culturally hegemonic vision of ‘nation’ was accomplished and accomplishable by mandating race-based discourses...[oriented] toward a particular kind of attention to [l]anguage” and “the family” as foundational societal units (PuruShotam 2000, 208; see also Haila 2016). Each CMIO community was constructed as being responsible for its own “community problems.” And yet, the Malay community continued to be cast as simultaneously possessing “Malay problems,” and

as a *national* problem. The terms Lee articulated—of Malay-Singaporeans as a “dilemma” whose solution required cultural-assimilationist interventions—continue to this day in public sphere discourses about “Malay problems,” from obesity to poverty (Mutalib 2011; 2012). In this way, the image of the nation was also fractured, with intra-national, racialized groups recast as audiences as evaluating onlookers for one another whose habits of looking were shaped—that is, enregistered—through these (and other) racializing processes, institutionalized or otherwise.

2.3 CMIO and the Raciolanguage Community. The number of raciolinguistic groups identified in early 20th century British censuses was slowly reduced in response to changing global-geopolitical orders, global decolonization, and mounting local pressures toward greater parsimony in administrative technologies. In the late 1950s, in the wake of WWII and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, the previous fine-grained geographic and ethnolinguistic distinctions of the Singapore Census of Population were consolidated into what later became CMIO (PuruShotam 2000, 32–33; 1997). Though fluctuating marginally from year to year, the overall the proportions of CMIO “races” noted in the 2019 census enumerations have remained constant since independence in 1965. As I mentioned in the dissertation’s Introduction, this was not by accident: state immigration policy explicitly maintains these historic proportions, which policymakers have argued are necessary for preserving racial harmony into the future (H. C. Chan and Siddique 2019, 41–44). Toward this end, since 2000, skilled workers from China and India have been recruited to work in Singapore with a fast-track to (but not guarantee of) citizenship in order to bolster declining fertility rates, particularly among Chinese Singaporeans.⁷

⁷ After nearly a decade spent circulating as rumor, this policy was explicitly confirmed during a 2013 Parliamentary debate. A minister responded to concerns that the Malay-Singaporean proportion of the population might decline, asserting that immigration from the People’s Republic of China was being prioritized in order to help to maintain the Malay population at 15% of the population (Singapore Prime Minister’s Office and Fu 2013). Critics were quick to

Over time, immigration policies like these have created tensions between Singapore-born and foreign-born Indian and Chinese groups (E. L.-E. Ho and Foo 2020; Kathiravelu 2020b) and led to considerable inter-group resentment, as well as to reorientations in discourses about what it means to be Singaporean (which I discuss in Chapter 6) together with changes in the linguistic indexes by which Singaporean-ness is judged (Starr and Balasubramaniam 2019, 633).

Critical discourses in Singapore, both academic and nonacademic, have long pointed to the hegemonic racialized status enjoyed by Chinese Singaporeans. This was given a name in 2015, when the activist Sangeetha Thanapal coined the term “Chinese Privilege” (Thanapal 2015; A. Koh and Dierkes-Thrun 2015). Though the label was new, the concept was not. Thanapal’s act of labeling recirculated verbatim a Facebook post by playwright and Singaporean enfant terrible Alfian Sa’at, in which Sa’at constructed an overt link between White Privilege in the U.S. and racial privilege in Singapore.⁸ Though incidents of “everyday racism” (Velayutham 2009) were well-documented before—from a Chinese Singaporean elected official making jokes

point out, however, that this was a clever evasion of the fact that due to birth rates, the Malay-Singaporean demographic proportion would *grow*, not shrink, in the absence of this immigration. This policy rests on several presumptions: that racialized groups are bounded and prototypically endogamous, notwithstanding evidence to the contrary (that is, interethnic marriages are very common, but racial classification is assigned patrilineally); that race predominates over other axes of differentiation, like nationality (that is, that new migrants from China would see themselves as belonging to the same group as Chinese-Singaporeans); and that Singaporean identity is capacious and flexible enough to absorb and neutralize all other forms of difference.

⁸ Thanapal used “Chinese Privilege” in the title of a post on her blog, but other than changing the title to include “Chinese Privilege,” the blog post was a verbatim citation of a Facebook post by Alfian Sa’at. His original 18 May 2014 post, which has garnered 69 comments and 210 shares to date, began with the question, “Still unsure about what racial privilege is?” and presented a list of 12 statements that one was to check against their own lived experience. By tallying up the number of statements that apply, one can calculate their racial privilege score from 0–12. Sa’at cited his list as adapted from “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989) by American feminist and activist Peggy McIntosh. The list’s items range from “I can turn on the television or open up the newspapers and see people of my race widely represented” to “When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that mostly people of my color made it what it is.”

about Indians' skin color in Parliament (ibid, 255) to noise complaints filed against Malay outdoor weddings (A. E. Lai and Mathews 2016, 30–31) to the aforementioned “black-” and “brownface” incidents—Thanapal’s neologism has nevertheless inaugurated a vast and growing interdiscursive chain of challenges to such incidents and their apologists (Zainal and Abdullah 2019; D. P. S. Goh and Chong 2020).

Further, both historical and present emphases on ethno-racial personhood in immigration policy (and expressions of resentment thereof) have been closely coupled with anxieties over language—especially English. Though public commentators are often quick to assert that English is necessary for maintaining racial harmony among Singaporeans—serving as a “neutral medium” that does not privilege the “Mother Tongue” of any “race”—and a means of connecting Singapore to the global economy (Kramer-Dahl 2003; L. Wee 2015; 2018), this also coincides with anxieties over English as a threat to the “cultural roots” of the CMIO “races” (Tan 2017; see also Barr 2000).

The model that I call the *raciolanguage community* has emerged out of these histories. In the first instance, my construction of the label cites the concept of the *language community*—a group oriented to “functionally differentiated norm[s] for using...‘language’ denotationally...the inclusive range of which the best language users are believed to have mastered in the appropriate way” (Silverstein 1996, 285). My citation of this concept here is not to re-prioritize the language community over the speech community (which has been extensively, and rightly, critiqued by myriad scholars), but rather to describe how racialized orientations to denotational code are imagined coextensively with images of racial community as a basis for constructing group membership in Singapore. Projected out of institutionalized histories of CMIO and “Mother Tongue” (plus English), the *raciolanguage community* is made imaginable as a group of people

constituted by their shared use of a denotational code and their collective being in-and-as a racial-cultural assemblage. It is to this image of raciolanguage community—and its multiple institutionalizations—that I draw analytic and ethnographic attention in this chapter.

Of course, the presumed isomorphism of language–race–culture is differentially distributed across each of the recognized CMIO “races.” The isomorphism is treated as tidiest in the construction of the image of the Malay raciolanguage community. Perhaps paradoxically, this is clearest in cases where individuals or groups have “changed” their race to join the Malay community. Such cases have occurred among Muslim Tamil-Singaporeans, who learned Malay and were gradually assimilated into the official “M” category by virtue of their Islamic practices (Tschascher 2006, 229–230). This was the subject of a great deal of recent public controversy when none other than the President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob, who was classified as Indian by birth, was elected in 2017 to a presidential post reserved for a Malay candidate by virtue of the fact that she was nevertheless raciolinguistically categorizable as Malay.⁹

This isomorphism is presumed less rigidly in the case of Chinese-Singaporeans, and lesser still in the case of Indian-Singaporeans, many of whom report in surveys that they primarily speak English at home (Cavallaro and Ng 2014, 37). Though Tamil Singaporeans are a slim majority of Indian Singaporeans, critics often point to the five non-Tamil Indian languages, or to other South Asian languages reported in surveys (*ibid*, 40), as evidence for the multiplicity

⁹ Yacob ran unopposed in 2017 after a newly introduced “Reserved Presidency” policy—designed to create opportunities for non-Chinese presidential officeholders—rendered other candidates ineligible. In part, the controversy was generated by a snafu: after announcing that the next president must be Malay and making it clear that the Yacob was intended for the position, it was revealed that Yacob’s father was Indian; by law, this meant that she was Indian. However, despite the ensuing outcry from a range of social positions (Osman and Waikar 2019, 391–6), she was allowed to run due to the facts that Yacob’s officially Malay mother raised her in a single-parent household after her father’s death and that Yacob was “generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community” (Jayakumar 2018, 300).

of Indian-ness. Yet in spite of this, as the title “Yes, I Speak Indian” has already pointed out, Indian Singaporeans are still habitually asked if they “speak Indian,” a further index of the generalized presumption of an isomorphism between a named group, a language, and a race. Eurasians, an “Other” group, have meanwhile struggled to (re)claim a “Mother Tongue,” whether through prior failed efforts to claim English (Wee 2002; Tan 2014), or through the vibrant and growing revitalization of Kristang, a variety historically spoken by Portuguese-descended Eurasians (Wong 2019). All this to say, despite a lack of racial–linguistic–cultural isomorphism for any group, the image of the raciolanguage community still holds a great deal of social power and authority.

And yet, even as CMIO institutionally permeates life in Singapore, its significance is often dismissed—particularly by those voicing the state—as a mere bureaucratic convenience which people should not take so seriously. As one version of this, it is also commonly asserted that CMIO is naturally falling away due to the rise in mixed-race marriages in Singapore (H. C. Chan and Siddique 2019, 40–41; Reddy 2016, 66–67)—which, needless to say, does not undo CMIO, but ideologically reinscribes the coherence of the discrete groups that are later “mixed” (Palmié 2013). I do not intend to wade into the morass of these debates or claims as such. My argument is not about CMIO or the putative reality of “race” that underlies it; rather, my argument is that, as a broadly recognizable, institutionalized model for race, CMIO animates a group-based metaphysics of raciolinguistic presence (Nakassis 2017) via which speakers are constructed as tokens of always-already existing raciolanguage communities.

“Singaporeans Are Not Truly Bilingual...They’ve Lost a Part of Who They Are”

Particularly in educational settings, I often observed race being explicitly focused on through metadiscursive attention to language. I encountered this explicitly, and repeatedly,

among language pedagogy professionals. This is in many ways unsurprising, given this group's professionalized concern with gatekeeping standardized linguistic registers and assessing students' proficiency. However, it was not just recognized experts for whom this was a frequent matter concern. Though their position was often most explicitly and elaborately detailed (both through talk and through published works), the kinds of laments voiced by these experts were also voiced by others in a range of reflexively public and private settings. Such laments link "Mother Tongue" language shift to a "loss" of culture—thereby of to a "loss" of raciolinguistic selfhood. Such discourses appeared not only in community-internal gatekeeping (i.e. Malay-Singaporeans chastising other Malay-Singaporeans for "not valuing their Mother Tongue"), but also in Chinese-Singaporean gatekeeping toward minoritized communities' language use. In this section, I draw on a range of ethnographic materials in which I observed acts of raciolanguage community gatekeeping, ranging from language classrooms and interviews with "Mother Tongue" teacher-trainers to mediatized, online commentaries.

A few months into my fieldwork, I had a chance to speak to Lee, the head teacher-trainer for Mandarin Mother Tongue instruction at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's only teacher-education institute. Born in mainland China, Lee had been living in Singapore for nearly two decades, first as a researcher employed to evaluate Singapore's Mandarin instructional materials, and later as a trainer for teachers employed by Ministry of Education (MOE) schools. After discussing changes in instructional methods over time and changing teacher demographics, they said: "You know, Singaporeans aren't really bilingual. The Chinese [*jb—Chinese Singaporeans*], most of them lack the ability to speak well enough to do business in China. So, our job is very hard. We must maintain a high standard of English, and also help them connect to their culture. So, this is what multiracialism is all about." I take the use

of “our” and “we” here to index a shift in focus, away from Singapore proper and toward NIE trainers: the challenges they face in response to changes in state policy, in schools, in society, and in parents’—and educators’—expectations.

Though Lee began by reflecting on the challenges of educating Chinese-Singaporean students—for whom, historically, Mandarin was held out as a solution to problems of market access and a risk of the loss of so-called “cultural roots” (Gungwu 1989)—the final pronouncement about “multiracialism” shifted the scale again, focusing on the broader challenges of pursuing the vision of a “multiracial” society. When I asked whether Lee thought this effort was successful, he sighed heavily, breaking into Mandarin: “新加坡人啊，他们不要讲华语。真是，他们不是双语的。Xīnjiāpō rén a, tāmen bù yào jiǎng huáyǔ. Zhēnshi, tāmen bùshì shuāngyǔ de. ‘Singaporeans ah [modal particle expressing affirmation or drawing attention], they don’t like to speak Mandarin. Really, they are not bilingual.’” Here he shifted back to English: “You understand or not? Singaporeans, they are not truly bilingual, they cannot speak proper Mandarin, they’ve lost a part of who they are.” Lee posited a denotational equivalence between being Singaporean and speaking Mandarin—which only Chinese-Singaporeans are expected to be able to do—thereby eliding the existence of other raciolanguage communities in Singapore’s CMIO model in the first instance. Yet he also indexed this equivalence through his use of code-choice, talking about Singaporeans writ large in a language only those categorized as Chinese would generally be presumed to know while also performing the fact that he, as a “truly bilingual” Mandarin speaker, has *not* “lost” a part of who he is.

I heard this kind of lament qua critique voiced frequently in sites ranging from language classrooms to public events. Such critiques index a longstanding historical concern over the impact of English use on Singaporeans’ “Asian Values”—earlier called “Confucian Values”

(Barr 2000)—which proponents argued can only be conferred through one’s ethno-racially appropriate “Mother Tongue.”¹⁰ Yet Lee’s critique also pointed to anxieties that have been particularly pronounced with respect to Chinese-Singaporeans. While in general, post-independence nation-building efforts were framed via public anxieties about the threat posed by CMIO “races” having ties to “homelands” elsewhere (Velayutham 2007, 25), this was also seen as a valuable resource when diasporic links were deemed expedient to fostering a “bigger,” Chinese-Singaporean racialized identity (Chong 2010, 510–513). As the sociologist Terence Chong has argued, though public advocacy for “Asian Values” were voiced as a concern over “Westernization”—which ostensibly affected all racial groups in Singapore—the main effort was to halt the “eroding... cultural roots of the Chinese majority[. I]nterestingly, the Malay or Indian minorities were not deemed to be affected” to the same extent (ibid, 508), and hence were not targeted by the same intensity of cultural-preservation interventions. For instance, Malay- and Indian Singaporeans to this day can opt to study Mandarin instead of their official “Mother Tongue,” but Chinese Singaporeans are barred from exercising this option (Rahim 2010, 39).

Throughout my fieldwork term, I noted the relatively high frequency of public critiques over Chinese-Singaporeans’ Mandarin ability in settings where Chinese raciolinguistic personhood was a focus of ideological attention, even if Mandarin was not. During a Hokkien (福建话/*Fújiàn huà*) class for heritage speakers, which I attended during early 2019, the instructor openly berated the three youngest members of the class of 12 students—all of them in their early 20s (the rest of the attendees were in their early to mid 30s)—for their perceived

¹⁰ Members of the Singaporean Eurasian community, historically the largest officially recognized “Other” group, attempted unsuccessfully in the early 2000s to assign English as the Eurasian “Mother Tongue”; this was rejected on the grounds that, in Asia, a “Mother Tongue” needed to be an “Asian language” for conveying “Asian values” (L. Wee 2002; Y.-Y. Tan 2014).

disfluency in Mandarin. Indeed, though the class was focused on a totally different Southern Min variety, most of the class time overall was spent correcting attendees' Mandarin. The instructor most commonly talked about students' Mandarin ability by questioning their raciolinguistic identity, provocatively posed as questions and directives: “你是华人！是不是？你要提高自己的华语。 *Nǐ shì huárén! Shì bùshì? Nǐ yào tígāo zìjǐ de huáyǔ.* ‘You are [a] Chinese [person]! Right [Is it or isn't it the case]? You have to improve your Mandarin!’

For other teacher-trainers and professionals working in Malay and Tamil, similar links often got drawn between attributed ethno-racial embodiment and “Mother Tongue” ability. When speaking to Mukhlis, the lead teacher-trainer for Malay “Mother Tongue” instructors (like Lee, also employed by NIE), much of the conversation focused on the potential threat to both a Malay raciolinguistic self and a Malay raciolanguage community due to language shift: “As Malays, the Malay **language** is in our blood. We have to keep up the language, or else we will lose our community.” He later sent me a chapter he had published in a book on language planning for the Singaporean Malay community, which reiterated this admonition numerous times throughout its pages, i.e. warning that a loss of “Mother Tongue” would lead to an erosion of community. A similar kind of link was drawn between individual embodiment and the normative expectations of a raciolanguage community by Tamil-speaking language professionals and artists—like Faith, the bilingual Tamil–English actor, playwright, and director who appeared in the previous chapter: “**When** you see the brown skin, doesn't matter if they are speaking Tamil, Hindi, anything, the level of the language must be very high, the **community** will expect it.” Such claims were also repeated by the Tamil teacher-trainer to whom I spoke at NIE, and the Tamil-language instructors and -writers I encountered throughout my fieldwork, as well as by language professionals and artists who identified with other South Asian codes.

As an effect of these dynamics, I encountered recurrent expressions of both intra-group and inter-group anxieties over the potential loss of “Mother Tongue” languages, which, it was claimed, would also threaten individuals’ embodied raciolanguage community membership. In a series of online comments posted in August 2020 in response to an article about mixed-race Singaporeans (titled “The Class of 2050: Imagining a More Diverse and Inclusive Singapore,” which reappears in Chapter 6; Liotta 2020), one commentator with an etymologically Sinitic surname posted a comment that drew a parallel between Singaporeans’ ability to speak Singlish and Indian Singaporeans’ ability to speak their “Mother Tongue”:

T. T.: As Singaporean Singlish is in our blood. If you cannot speak it, then it is so sad.. Like if an Indian don’t speak Tamil..

S. D. reply to T. T.: Not all Indian speak Tamil. You should really know this. Put aside your Chinese privilege and educate yourself.

T. T. reply to S. D.: Why should we know this?? It’s up to minority to educate others about your community. stop complaining and blaming others for your problem (All comments from 9 August 2020).

I suggest that the fact T. T. drew an analogy between Singaporeans’ use of Singlish and (Tamil-)Indian-Singaporeans’ use of Tamil is significant: it parallels myriad instances of talk I encountered during my fieldwork about Chinese-Singaporeans’ imputed deficiency in their “Mother Tongue” relative to Malay- and Indian-Singaporeans, who are often seen as more proficient. More particularly, I see this as linked to the fact that, while many Singaporeans—especially from older generations—have at least ambient knowledge of basic Malay, non-Tamil Singaporeans generally possess little to no knowledge of Tamil, and hence are unable to evaluate Tamil-speakers’ language-use; as a result, non-Tamil speakers often assume that Tamil speakers possess high degrees of “fluency”—higher than speakers themselves are likely to attribute to their own speech. S. D.’s reply, meanwhile, challenged T. T.’s link between Indian-ness and

Tamil-ness, reframing the presumption as a sign of “Chinese privilege.” T. T.’s subsequent rebuttal reframed this yet again, reasserting majoritarian status as a justification for expecting individuals like S. D. to “educate” others with racialized majoritarian privilege, rather than occasioning T.T.’s reflection on their own ignorance as itself potentially an index of privilege.

“From Your Eyes to Ours,” the Oppositional Gaze, and Thick Solidarity

The previous section sought to make clear the stakes and intersubjective effects of the raciolanguage community; this section focuses on projects aimed at refusing this model. *From Your Eyes to Ours* and “Yes, I Speak Indian” were two among a growing number of high-profile public events organized during my fieldwork research (and before) by artists and creative professionals from racially minoritized groups in Singapore. Building on growing public debates over racialized majoritarian privilege qua Chinese privilege, these events used contemporary artistic media to challenge widespread raciolinguistic stereotyping. These included an exhibition of photography, installation, and video works, titled “MAT,” on view from August to September 2019 at the Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film. Curated by Zulkhairi Zulkiflee, the exhibition explored and contested a range of Malay stereotypes: drug use, delinquency, joblessness, conservative cultural “backwardness,” etc. The “Mat” of the title indexed a nickname often given to men named “Mohammad”—itself a further index of the close link between Malay and Muslim identities, for whom this is a common name—but its use has become largely pejorative, pointing toward a masculine Malay persona associated with illegal or nonproductive activity. The exhibition’s themes further responded to ongoing critiques of Malay-Singaporeans’ frequently unacknowledged or disparaged indigenous status (Benjamin 2017).¹¹

¹¹ Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution recognizes Malays as Singapore’s “indigenous people”; the Malay language further has a special “national language” status.

In this section, I focus on *From Your Eyes to Ours*, presenting segments of an interview with Chand Chandramohan, Seelan Palay, and Divaagar “Diva,” who in 2019 convened, curated, produced, designed, and organized this contemporary art event. I engage with this collective’s work here not only because of the way it analyzes the experiences of being South Asian in Singapore—and more particularly, experiences of being a South Asian *artist*—but also because of the way it engaged with bell hooks’ “oppositional gaze” to theorize varieties of South Asian-Singaporean experience. I consider the ways in which, via hooks’ work, the artist collective co-theorized and co-constructed the event and exhibition as an instance of what Roseanne Liu and Savannah Shange, writing in the context of U.S.-based social justice movements, have called *thick solidarity* (Liu and Shange 2018): the making of coalitions (Reagon 1983) based on partial connections (Strathern 2004) across irreducibly particular experiences of racialized violence. Put differently, the collective who created *From Your Eyes to Ours* did not draw on bell hooks to insist that South Asian experiences in Singapore are a monolith, or that these experiences are identical to experiences of being Black or having Asian heritage in America. Rather, they imagined relationships within and beyond Singapore without homogenizing experiences of marginalization, violence, and oppression across historical, systemic, and individual difference (Liu and Shange 2018, 190).

In the paragraphs that follow, I first provide some brief background and overview of the exhibition, written by Chandramohan. Next, I introduce selections from the group interview I conducted, and conclude by describing the artists’ narrations of media responses to the exhibition. Ultimately, the exhibition can be seen to work both within and against the raciolanguage community model, as members of Singapore’s news-media establishment attempted, through their reportage, to reassert a hegemonic gaze by reportively assimilating the

exhibition to expectations of “traditional Indian” art, thereby also demonstrating its success *as opposition* due to its unintelligibility to a hegemonic gaze. The three artists anticipated media professionals’ responses, but rather than changing the event’s design to bring about a different, desired response in this audience (a dynamic that I described in Chapter 1), the collective opted to simply acknowledge, yet ignore, this uptake.

Before I continue, a note about my own political stakes and aims in presenting these interviews. Though I continue to indicate verbal emphasis, false starts, restarts, and the like in the transcripts that follows, I do not do so to the extent that I otherwise would for a linguistic anthropological analysis of the interactional poetics and real-time semiotic processes out of which the conversation precipitated. I have intentionally foregone these conventions here to grant (if in an admittedly limited way) this trio’s competency as co-theorizers, following the calls by Yarimar Bonilla (2015) and Michel-Rolf Trouillot (2003). Much in the same way that interviews with white men scholars get edited for so-called clarity and content, but otherwise presented in ways that prioritize denotation, I here present the interview for its denotational content. Of course, both of these choices—to diagram a more naturalistic, real-time text-in-process versus to prioritize reference-and-predication—are ideological projections. My note is merely an effort at making my own aims explicit with respect to the form of what follows.

Writing for the Southeast Asian publishing platform *Art & Market*, Chandramohan described the event as follows, in a piece titled “Returning Gazes: Strategies and Foundations”:

‘From Your Eyes to Ours’ is running from 6 to 20 December 2019 at Coda Culture featuring Singapore’s first contemporary art event with an all-South Asian line-up. The event comprises of a visual arts exhibition entitled ‘Yes, I Speak Indian’, a film screening of ‘Between Pudukkottai and Singapore – Poems by N. Rengarajan’ directed by Vishal Daryanomel and produced by Shameen/Sifar, a performance art piece ‘7.35%’ featuring artists Div, Chand Chandramohan, Priyageetha Dia, and Shameen/Sifar, as well as a workshop titled ‘Wokeshop: Strategies for Creating and Maintaining Space’.

Since independence, Singapore's demographics has been categorised by the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) system. As of 2018, 76.2% of the population is Chinese. Reflecting these numbers, many of Singapore's art spaces feature mostly Chinese artists. In recent years, artists and curators have made efforts to create events and exhibitions focused on minority identities. However, South Asian artists have so far not been part of this increased visibility, and this is what I, along with my co-organisers Seelan Palay and Divaagar, sought to address with 'From Your Eyes to Ours' (Chandramohan 2019).

As described here, this notion of "increased visibility" drew its inspiration from bell hooks. In the particular passage that Chandramohan cited later, bell hooks builds on Stuart Hall's theorizations of Black cinematic spectatorship and Franz Fanon's theorizations of "the gaze" as both "fixing" and recruiting the Black subject to its ambivalent forms of desire. Here hooks cites the famous passage of *Black Skin, White Masks* where Fanon describes this "fixation" through the metaphor of a chemical solution fixing a dye), expanding the concept of "the gaze" beyond a visual phallogocentrism (Jay 1993; Fleetwood 2011):

Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist (hooks 1992, 116).

For hooks, the oppositional gaze describes the power of attention not only to create reality—which is the function of a repressive white gaze—but also, in its oppositional form, to change it.

Speaking to Diva (labeled D in the transcript,¹² below), Chand (C), and Seelan (S) in early 2020, they described the ways in which this kind of desire to "look a certain way in order to resist" was embodied both in the event as a whole, and in the various event titles:

¹² **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis. Text followed by colons (::) indicates a lengthened sound. Text followed by a dash (-) indicates truncated speech or a restart. Roman text inserted in [square brackets] has been added for denotational clarity. *Italic text* inserted in [square brackets] preceded by the author's initials ("jb") are added to elaborate further context.

D: So, the initial title was *From Our Eyes to Yours*. So, she [C] was the one who suggested to switch the title around.

C: Yeah, because we always have this thing- That title was first proposed to me by Seelan, and before when I was inviting him [D] to join us also, I was telling him, like, “this was the working title,” and we were both like uh::: it’s a bit weird. And you [D] mentioned like, it means that we have something to show, or we want the audience...

D: To see something.

C: Yeah. [It seems like we] just want the audience to see something. So, I mean, considering the power dynamics of this exhibition, we didn’t feel like it was the right title to go with. So, we decided to invert it and subvert it, and this idea of subversion came about, and it kind of coincided with my reading of bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” so that’s kind of why we went with *From Your Eyes to Ours*, so that we actually retained the agency.

D: What was the other one? [*jb—the other question*]

J: Oh- and then within that there was “Yes, I Speak Indian”...

D: Right! So, [smiling] that actually started out as, um...

C: A joke. [laughter]

D: It is a joke! Or, it is a **response** to an ignorant question- I think that’s a question we get a lot, “Do you speak Indian?” and we’re like, “Yes, I speak Indian.”

C: [Chuckle]

D: And I think it’s just like, a bit more of a “fuck you.” [Laughter]

C: Yeah. It has to be a “**Yes**, I speak Indian.”

D: Yeah, because we don’t really care to find out if, you know-

C: Because every time that question is asked, we don’t care to educate people, and say there’s actually fifteen Indian languages. [Laughter]

D: I think there are actually two-hundred and twenty-two...

C: Oh, really?

D: Official languages...

C: Yes.

D: So, yeah, you know, um- [*jb—pause, Googling on their smartphone*] Sorry, two-hundred seventeen. [...]

C: So, considering like- It was just a joke. It was like, to- It started out as a joke, because when we were talking about it, and the more we thought and we thought and we thought about it, it was like, there are so many- not so many, but there's the emergence of like, all-Malay exhibitions featuring all-Malay **artists**, and like, narratives. Then we were like, "Oh, there isn't **one** for Indian people." And then, you know, considering the fact that we are Indian artists, I guess it's up to us to do that. [Laughter]

D: Yeah.

C: And not wait for anyone else to like, suggest this or anything. So, when V and Diva were meeting, it was like- V was like, "Oh, can we title it like, 'I Speak Indian'?" Then he [D] was like, it has to be "Yes, I Speak Indian." [Laughter]

I made a mental note of this back-and-forth during the conversation itself, noting in particular the performed emphasis on official, enumerable languages in the present-day nation-state of the Republic of India as emblematic of Indian diversity in the diaspora, which was a trope I frequently observed in other conversations and encounters. It was only while replaying and transcribing the interview, however, that I noticed the emblematically dialogic structure that was attributed to the exhibition title in particular. That is, the title was framed as a response to a generic, ignorant interlocutor. Chand twice insisted in this segment, with strong verbal emphasis both times, that the "Yes" of the title was emblematic of its status as a response.

As the conversation unfolded from here, the collective emphasized that—as they had organized, produced, and designed it—the event also included a principled refusal of practices dominant within arts institutions. As Chand and Diva described, the individuals who manage most gallery spaces give artists very specific briefs on what the institution is looking for. In *From Our Eyes to Yours*, by contrast, the selection process was open to anyone who identified as South Asian, whether or not they identified as artists, and participants were given free rein to select whichever of their works they wished to display. As they further elaborated, this approach

was what led to the collaboration in the first place and yielded its multidisciplinary composition.

I learned more about this about asking how the program of events had come together:

C: It initially came about when Seelan approached me to do this...thing. Considering the fact that he originally invited me to curate the exhibition, but then like, Diva and V. had already like, kind of approached him to do an exhibition that was a similar theme to this.

And then I was thinking, you know what? Since this is going to be the first time **Indian** narratives or **Indian** aesthetics are going to be like, at the forefront, why not make the most of it as possible? Like, have film screenings, have performances. Because a lot of us also are very multidisciplinary, like, we don't just exhibit like, artworks in a gallery space, but we also- Most of us actually are performance artists, and I was also thinking about Vishal and Nina with their film, and it was a very integral part of the Singaporean South Asian experience, because how can we actually talk about Singaporean South Asian experience without, like- the labor of migrant workers mainly comes from South Asia, and they are the ones who contribute the most in terms of infrastructure and everything that Singapore aims to have, and their stories are basically erased? So like- And there is a film out there, which Vishal and Nina already directed and produced the film, so I wanted to invite them also to exhibit the film once again in this context.

Then the performance [titled "7.35%"] came about because Priya and I, when we were talking like, more in-depth about the Singaporean, South Asian, dark-skinned woman experience, we realized there's a lot of similarities in terms of sexual violence that we experience. [...] And we kept talking about how if we were just like, South Asian men, or if we were Chinese women, we would have never gotten that kind of- We would never have experienced that kind of vicious, vile treatment from the outside world. And not just like, the outside world, but also like, the art world. Because a lot of- There's a lot of discrimination. [Chuckles] There's a lot of discriminatory practices in terms of invalidating our works that comes from the art world.

This point about "invalidation" was also recurrent throughout the conversation, used in various ways to refer to the workings of the repressive, hegemonic gaze, which individuals voiced in attempts to dismiss or appropriate the labor of those who occupy oppositional racialized-minoritized positions. And yet, in a claim that parallels the call made by Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang (2014), the aim was not to put a suffering South Asian subject on display. Rather, *From Your Eyes to Ours* was an opportunity to center joy and humor:

C: I think a lot of us were like- A lot of us already created works that respond to our experiences, I think mostly it worked because we do have the same experience of like, being South Asian in the arts scene that kind of erases us and doesn't let us have any kind

of space. So it's this idea of like, how do you deal with trauma on your own? Most of the time our artwork is the space that we can actually deal with our trauma in various ways [...].

And the good thing about this experience- Exhibition was that- How it actually gave agency to the artists to really deal with it in their own ways in their works. So like, considering that like, a lot of the works- most of the works actually had to do with trauma, of being a South Asian person living in Singapore, you would expect it to be kind of angry? But it was not actually, there was a lot of joy, and there was also a lot of humor, and there were also a lot of funny moments, like humor that comes with it. So um, yeah like, maybe we really look at how- It allowed us to look at how like, looking at trauma or basing our works on trauma doesn't have to be like, an angry thing, like we can actually be like, as funny as we want in your work. [Laughter]

In the final 20 minutes of our conversation, the topic shifted to the response from news-media institutions. As the collectives' members pointed out, on the one hand, the fact that this was the first all-South Asian visual art event and exhibition made it newsworthy, which meant that journalists and editors had to pay attention. On the other hand, it was clear that many of the individuals embedded in these institutions were unwilling to unthink the repressive, hegemonic gaze that they were recruited to embody by their institutions:

C: A lot of the time we thought- We just felt that the media response was- It went through two experiences. Either like, invalidating that this actually comes from a place of pain, or sensationalizing. Yeah.

S: Yeah, like it's a curiosity and then...

C: Yeah, it's a curiosity. So it was like, it **is** media, so we weren't too offended.

S: Yeah, in essence like, the show- When we say we didn't care about the press, the show was more for **us** to actually just get together in a space and, like I say many times, it's just like a group hug.

C: Yeah.

S: And then just to know that we are all kind of going through similar things and we're also making art and trying to make sense of that...

C: Yeah.

S: Rather than- We **knew** the media is going to get it wrong, or they're going to sensationalize...

C: Yeah, they would get it wrong, like- Even if it's like my writing, they were going to heavily edit it.

S: And they keep using one of the artists' works, Div's...

C: Yeah.

S: Because it's a painting of like, a Tamil woman, an Indian woman, behind these like, sarees...

C: Sarees- It looked the most Indian, so they kept...

S: Yeah, they kept using that! And two articles, why do you choose the **same** image? We post it online, it looks like we are reposting the same thing.

C: Yeah, exactly!

S: And it was just like, they think they're representing it, but I think like, society as a whole...

C: Yeah, I think it comes from media bias also, that goes with like, race relations, where it's like, even when we're talking about something really important, like this is the first time we're really talking about it, you still like- You basically like, make it into just like, a saree work. It's like, it was a show about much more than just like, Indian aesthetics... but then like, for example, why we chose to do "South Asian" instead of "Indian," or why- They basically base it on, oh this artwork, this is what the show is about. It's about sarees or some shit. [Laughter]

In Chand's published curatorial statement, the first featured image was artist Priyageetha Dia's 2019 "Untitled (The brown body is a black body)," a text work comprising black digital ink on black paper. The trio's own online promotions for the exhibition, "Yes, I Speak Indian," featured a work by Divaagar, "Why this கோழி கறி di?" (2019, aroma diffuser and curry). A pun on the wildly popular 2011 song, "Why This Kolaveri Di," the work substituted "Kōḷi kaṟi" 'chicken curry' for the "Kolaveri" 'murderous rage' of the original song. Located at the entrance to the space, the diffuser exuded the scent of chicken curry throughout the gallery space (and beyond).

In this way, Diva enacted a subtle, yet direct, critique, addressing acts of covert racism that target “curry” as a proxy for anti-Indian sentiments.¹³

Chand’s mention of a “saree work,” meanwhile, referenced the artist Div’s twinned works, “Artist/Angrygirl/கோபப்பொண்ணு,” (2019a, mixed media on watercolour paper), which was displayed behind a piece titled “Ritual Labour,” (2019b, saree cloth, embroidery thread, scrap fabric). Chand’s curator statement described the work in the following terms: “The weight of tradition was an important voice that needed to be shown within the context of the show, and Div’s ‘Ritual Labour’, which utilises saree fabrics passed down generationally and cut and sewn them together into a soft sculpture resembling sand bags, represents this well” (Chandramohan 2019). As members of the collective insisted, they had been—and remained—excited to have Div’s work in the exhibition. The issue, as they described it, was not with the work as such, but with the fact that this was *the only* image circulated by mediatizing institutions, a move that facilitated the exhibition’s ready assimilation back to hegemonic assumptions that to do “Indian art” (again indexing the erasure of the broader South Asian frame, intentionally chosen by the organizers to include Singapore’s thousands of South Asian migrant laborers) is to do work “about sarees or some shit,” and not to work with conceptual- or contemporary art aesthetics.

While *From Your Eyes to Ours* and “Yes, I Speak Indian” represented a series of principled refusals to engage with the stereotypic projections by racially hegemonic perceiving subjects, I will of course concede that it is not always possible for individuals to ignore (or fail to

¹³ A now widely known, relatively spectacular example of this occurred in 2011: now known as the “Curry Dispute,” a Chinese family (from Mainland China) complained repeatedly about the smell of curry coming from their Indian-Singaporean neighbors’ home. After arbitration by a Community Mediation Center, the Singaporean-Indian family agreed to stop cooking curry on days when the Chinese family would be home (Kathiravelu 2017, 159; Quek 2011). Meanwhile, the Chinese family would agree to “try curry” at least once. Housing ads often require “light cooking only” or “no curry” as a proxy for excluding South Asian or Malay tenants.

anticipate) such hegemonic raciolinguistic positions. Though language was a relatively minor focus of metadiscursive attention in the event series and my conversation about it with the members of the artist collective, this still highlights the shifty character and mutual co-naturalization among language, race, and culture. This shifty co-naturalization can also be reproduced through disavowals from racially hegemonic listening subjects toward racially minoritized audiences. I turn to this in the concluding section.

Conclusion: “Don’t Take It So Seriously”

As media artifacts like the aforementioned “Class of 2050” article suggest (which I revisit in Chapter 6), the growing incidence of mixed-race and multinational marriages are frequently commented-on and focalized in reflexively public talk as evidence that “faultlines” among raciolanguage communities are slowly disappearing, and by extension, that CMIO will soon disappear through assimilation and/or miscegenation. Yet as I will elaborate in the next chapter, in spite of this, there remains a powerful, broadly enregistered focus on the four CMIO raciolanguage communities in discussions about “race” and “language” in Singapore. Via these four categories, racialized difference gets ideologically reframed as a mere fact of perception: of simply looking at and seeing which of the four “races” someone is, and of looking at and hearing who does *not* belong to the nation (I discuss this in Chapter 6). As I have tried to show, public critiques and commentaries often focus on CMIO, taking the (literally) nominal recognition of M, I, and O “minority races” as evidence of these groups’ inclusion in the “indigenized” Singaporean nation-state. However, these claims of inclusion rest on a social topology, which emblemizes a spatialized distribution of groups and individuals across social positions and assigns each individual to a position in that topology—a dynamic that can only be ignored by those who situationally occupy racially hegemonic positions. In other words, occupying racially

hegemonic perceiving subject-positions does not mean that one is incapable of seeing one's own position. Rather, it means that one has the gradient ability to disavow the fact of positionality.

While there are growing critiques of CMIO and racialized majoritarian privilege in Singapore, there also exist an abundance of readily available discourse strategies for rejecting these critiques—among them, as I noted before, the invective to “just don't take it so seriously.” For instance, at the launch of an arts festival focused on “lesser-known histories and narratives” of the Singapore Bicentennial, a high-ranking minister invited as guest of honor broke from his prepared remarks to assert, “So often, I hear young people saying, ‘Oh, CMIO doesn't make sense, it doesn't make sense anymore.’ And to that I always say, why are you taking it so seriously and making it hard on yourself?” Similar to the rejection of racialized majoritarian privilege in the online exchange with which I closed this chapter's third section, here the minister's substantive critique was reformulated as a problem of individual hang-ups and oversensitivities. This strategy can be seen to recur across situations where the raciolanguage community comes to serve as both a resource for figuring individuals as tokens of raciolanguage-community types and, from there, as audiences whose existence is taken to precede acts of address.

Chapter Three: Seeing (or Perceiving) Race in Multiracial Singapore



Figure 1: “Only in Singapore,” Mid-Autumn Festival Post on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s Facebook Page (screenshot by the author).

On 13 September 2019, the Facebook page for Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong posted a message commemorating the Mid-Autumn Festival (Figure 1).¹ The post—in English and Mandarin—featured a nighttime photo of a lantern display at Jurong Lake Gardens in the west of Singapore. The display comprised four humanoid cartoon figures surrounding the Toa Payoh Dragon Playground, a highly recognizable piece of 1970s modernist landscape architecture. The cartoon figures held mooncakes and lanterns in their hands. The dragon slide was flanked by trees, and behind it was a photorealistic (if flattened) view of The Pinnacle @ Duxton, Singapore’s tallest public-housing building. The image bore the caption: “Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated by Chinese all over the world, but only in Singapore will you find this lantern display with a distinctly local twist – children of different races carrying lanterns around a well-loved icon, with HDB flats in the distance!” (H. L. Lee 2019).

¹ The festival, 中秋节 (*Zhōngqiū jié*), is also known as the Moon Festival or Mooncake Festival.

Around the same time, the Singapore Bicentennial Office began releasing short videos in a series titled “My Roots Are _____?” Modeled on popular 23andMe™ “DNA ancestry reveal” advertisements, the series featured six Singaporeans learning previously unknown facts about their ancestry. Unlike the genre of the “DNA ancestry reveal” in North American contexts, these videos were not about the featured individuals’ genetic self-discovery or dispossessive claims—for example, to indigenous status (Kolopenuk 2018, 334; see also Palmié 2007; Reardon and TallBear 2012; TallBear 2013). Rather, as part of the Singapore Bicentennial commemoration, these videos were part of a broader interdiscursive network constructing a long-durée Singapore history. Framed as a sort of guessing game, the videos implicitly relied on the viewer’s ability to recognize a mismatch between the revealed DNA evidence and other features taken as indexing individuals’ identity-categories—especially appearance, but also names and articles of clothing.

As introduced in the previous chapters, dominant discourses on race in Singapore presume a standardized model—CMIO—which divides the population into four racialized communities: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other. This is the case not only for its proponents and apologists, but also for its critics, who often continue to mobilize CMIO as a prototype for constructing group-based difference via the model of the raciolanguage community, as I elaborated in Chapter 2 (see also Goh 2010; Chua and Kwok 2001; Barr and Low 2005). PM Lee’s invocation of “children of different races” here indexed a familiar version of the myths enabled by the construct of race in Singapore, in which the assembled members of the “races” index an image of Singapore as a racially-harmonious place, a harmony rendered visible in-and-through the fact of their coming-together. Meanwhile, taking recourse to genetic ancestry is uncommon when talking about identity or belonging in Singapore. While the Singapore Bicentennial did use references to “DNA” metaphorically, as a shorthand for referring to the

emergence of a national identity (a “uniquely Singaporean DNA”), during my fieldwork term and beyond, I have only encountered references to Singaporean DNA/genetics as a metaphor. The DNA-reveal videos therefore presented viewers with a case of ambiguous interpretive framework. Viewers contested the models—or normative prototypes (Gal and Irvine 2019, 200)—for interpreting them, while also contesting their putative raciolinguistic content.

This chapter begins with a longstanding linguistic-anthropological insight: that the performance of identities requires *voicing*: contrastive performances of perceivable signs in language and other media, linked in turn to recognizable social personae (Rosa 2016, 163–4; Agha 2005; Silverstein 2010). Yet I attempt to take this in a new direction. The performance of identities also requires *looking*: contrastive interpretations of perceivable signs in graphic-visual channels, also linked to recognizable social personae. Much like scholars advancing a raciolinguistic perspective in research and analysis, who invert the analytic perspective away from the ostensibly distinctive speech practices associated with various groups (whether racialized, gendered, classed, linked to sexual identities, or various intersectional configurations of all these and more; Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1996; Alim 2005; Bucholtz 2007; Lo and Reyes 2008), I focus my analysis on the hearing practices of white listening subjects (Rosa and Flores 2017, 627). I also decenter attention away from the ostensibly distinctive visual features of the individuals and groups. Instead, I extend the call from Rosa and Flores (*ibid*, 627–8) to examine the *looking* practices of racially hegemonic perceiving subjects. To be sure, this is a particular effect of a more generalized aesthetic textuality and the image-texts that cohere as their precipitates (Nakassis 2019). For me, however, this also becomes a starting point for interrogating how vision gets positioned as a privileged, default modality through which images of racialized personhood get constructed and naturalized, as mere effects of looking at the “race”

that was always-already there. As I elaborate in the next section, this does not require any concrete act of visual perception in a given event of looking, but it does require that someone, somewhere can and does look.

This chapter analyzes how strategies for voicing race and language in Singapore privilege vision as the default modality through which images of racial personhood are made perceivable. In performing Singaporean-ness—which is always racialized Singaporean-ness—individuals produce and construe images of racial(ized) personhood that anchor specific racial categories, but also the category of race as such. In these processes, visual signs are made to act as shibboleths—distinguishing indexes—in the ideologically mediated construction of race. This chapter gives an overview of the visual culture of racial difference in Singapore, which I argue is mediated via a *visual epistemology of race*: an ideology according to which nonvisible phenomena are rendered knowable in and as visually perceivable signs (Drucker 2014, vi). However, my goal is neither a theory of vision, nor a theory of race, but rather to propose a pragmatics of looking as an ideological activity located in events, according to which perception itself is regimented via raciolinguistic assemblages.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds in five parts. First, I present background and overview of the ideological focalization and naturalization of vision in a range of disciplinary and locational settings. Second, I examine ways that raciolanguage communities get constructed in Singapore as a by-default visual phenomenon, even as the racialized groups imagined as visually knowable entail the embodiment of signs in a range of modalities—importantly language, but also names and sartorial indices. Third, I give an overview of the “My Roots Are _____?” series, analyzing two videos in-depth to show the construction of characters’ “roots.” Fourth, I analyze online comments posted in response to videos in the “My Roots

Are _____?” series to describe competing frameworks for interpreting individuals’ genetic “roots” as evidence of Singapore history (or not). Finally, I expand my focus to offline discourses where raciolinguistic identities and dispensations of group-based belonging get variously projected and construed. Though the videos, online commentary, and offline talk are oriented around instances in which individuals are surprised at learning—due to nonvisible phenomena—that someone has unexpected “heritage,” in the end, such media and events of interaction do not undermine the default status of the visual epistemology of race.

Visible Identities, from Discrimination to Discrimination

As stated in the dissertation’s Introduction and Chapter 2, “race” is a ubiquitous category of reference in Singapore, not only in state bureaucratic institutions and scholarly accounts, but also in everyday talk at a range of sites and scales. As I noted in the previous section, overt reflection on racialized group-ness focuses on vision as a privileged perceptual modality through which race is knowable and known. This is not abstractly unique to Singapore: color, especially skin color, is a common form of visual shorthand reference for race. This point has been powerfully articulated by Franz Fanon as the “fact of Blackness,” the “epidermalization” of Black sub-humanity as the constitutive foil to superhuman whiteness (Fanon 1986[1952], 11; Prosser 2001, 55–56). I take further inspiration here from Jennifer Roth-Gordon’s writing on the performance of race in urban Brazil, where “visible phenotypic features, knowledge of ancestry, and embodied practice thought to ‘display’ ...inner racial capacities...are read together” in interpreting a given performance of the self (Roth-Gordon 2017, 27), whether these are signs one “gives” or “gives off,” to invoke Goffman (1959, 2). Roth-Gordon incisively articulates the dynamics by which signs in various modalities become the focus of race-talk through evaluations

that disavow race as an overt focus in making judgments about individuals' respectability, hence their belonging to the nation.

Much like the Brazilian situation of “comfortable racial contradiction” (Roth-Gordon 2017, 4), race-talk in Singapore is carefully managed via the frame of “racial harmony.” As described by its advocates and apologists, this is both an already-achieved objective condition, and a pre- and proscriptive model for race-talk in public, backed by the force of law and the police power of the state (Pak forthcoming). That is, as Singaporean social scientists have critically analyzed, each “race” must be publicly presented under the hyphenated formula of *race-plus-Singaporean* (Chua 1998). Otherwise, communalism—and its attendant threats linked to racialized “faultlines” (Goh 2010; Kathiravelu 2017)—rears its head. Here, however, I attempt to inquire after what is specifically *visual* about seeing race. Put differently, under what conditions do acts taken to be the mere discrimination of particulars in a visual field (to voice an Enlightenment-modern discourse register for talking about visual perception) come to serve as the ground for acts of discrimination in a hierarchizing, prejudicial sense linked to race?

I take inspiration in this chapter from the argument made by Jonathan Rosa about the particular historical and institutional constructions of Latinx identities in U.S. bilingual education, whereby speakers are enregistered as “looking like a language, sounding like a race” (2019). I invert Rosa’s formulation, not as a substitute for, but rather as a compliment to it: *sounding like a language, looking like a race*. My formulation likely does not strike a reader—whether in the U.S., Singapore, or elsewhere—as particularly insightful. As the legal scholar and bioethicist Osagie K. Obasogie has argued, in its prevailing Enlightenment conceptualization, race is taken as a self-evident, and self-evidently visual, feature of bodies and persons. Obasogie refers to this dominant formulation as “*‘race’ ipsa loquitur*”: the idea that “race speaks for itself”

as visually apparent bodily difference (Obasogie 2014, 2, emphasis in original). Obasogie's highly original research was the first of its kind to investigate how blind Americans organize their ideas about race in and through talk. As it turns out, non-seeing people referred to visual tropes of racialized difference as often as do seeing people. Yet as should be clear, Obasogie's own analysis—like the ideologically self-evident visual quality of race that he defines—involves cross-modal representational moves. That is, Obasogie's definition of the self-evident *visual* quality of race takes recourse to a *verbum dicendi*, a verb of speaking: race *speaks for* itself. This indexes a tension at the heart of my argument: *seeing* race is not a metaphor; it requires actual acts of perception in a visual modality or channel, by someone, somewhere, at some time. And yet, as the art historian Nicole Fleetwood has argued, seeing race is also a metaphor (2011): race does not speak for itself, but requires others to speak on its behalf, to speak through (or as) it, and to speak through the structured qualia that are made to serve as its shibboleths. In short, it requires voicing in and through situated events of performance where race is made salient.

In many ways, my focus on vision is not novel. Vision's dominant status as a problem or vehicle for Western Enlightenment epistemologies has long been acknowledged in the philosophy of perception, whether noted in passing as a curiosity inaugurated by the skeptical tradition (Searle 2015), excavated as a longstanding problem for philosophy (Jay 1993), or explored genealogically as at first a source of, and later a threat to shifting conceptions of modern-scientific "objectivity" (Daston and Galison 2007). Numerous scholars have examined the uses of visual artifacts, genres, and media in the production of a racialized Other:² famously, Edward Said (1994[1978]) noted the influence of paintings and sculpture on an emergent Orientalism, but technologies like ethnological atlases (Mak 2020; Vermeulen 2015), world

² This list is meant only to be suggestive, not exhaustive.

exhibitions (Mitchell 1989), maps (Turnbull 1993; Wright 2014; Ingold 2015; Rankin 2016), and film (Kittler 1999[1986]; Fleetwood 2011) have also played an important role.

John Locke’s project of making language and making it safe for science and society—described by Bauman and Briggs’ (2003) linguistic-anthropological account of the historical emergence of modernist discourse registers and figures of personhood—found its application in efforts at policing modern vision, as well. As described by historian of science Michael Rossi, the problem of visual perception, especially color perception—linked to the problem of language (specifically nomenclature)—drove efforts at establishing modern “scientific vision” as the measure of “good vision,” as something that could, and should be performed irrespective of cultural difference. Researchers in North America, for instance, used the presence (or absence) of Native American color terms as evidence for the insufficiently discriminating savage mind (Rossi 2019, 121–126, 132–136), but concern with “good vision” did not just stop at the analysis of racialized others’ vision by proxy (i.e. through color terminology):³ it also drove eugenicists’ efforts at fixing group variations in skin color⁴ as a rigid measure for degrees of racial mixing—thereby, of reproductive rights and political rights generally (Rossi 2019, 228–229).⁵

As I develop it here, the visual epistemology of race in Singapore ought to be understood as a language ideology in the first instance: it mediates situated performances of race-talk and the

³ The pathbreaking color-terminology research of Berlin and Kay (1991[1969]) finds its (un?)comfortable place in a direct lineage with such 19th- and 20th-century studies.

⁴ Conceptualized in this way, skin color was thought by eugenicists as a genetically fixed, invariant index of race, not as something that can change due to, say, sun exposure, diet, etc.

⁵ Though perhaps less insidious in its overt aims, Franz Boas also undertook a large-scale biometric research project on Native American skin color as part of his work for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The data (from 17,000 research participants in 200 tribes across the U.S. and Canada, gathered by 70 research assistants) proved useless in establishing a Native American “pure racial type” based on any biometric data, let alone skin color, it took Boas another 15 years to fully come to terms with and repudiate the idea of biological race (Hodes 2018, 188–202).

social structures that sustain, and are sustained by, racializing projects. Such performances selectively focus on visible signs as shibboleths of racial knowing. This local emphasis on *knowing* leads me to refer to this ideology as a *visual epistemology*. (I could just as well have referred to this as a visual-epistemological language ideology of race, but the formulation strikes me as exceptionally obtuse). Again, the notion of *race* underlying any given event of racialized perception in Singapore draws on the model of the raciolanguage community, which focalizes CMIO as the source and model for what a race “is” and can be. This emerges out of local histories, institutional arrangements, and socialized interactional habits inflected by migration trajectories, colonial–postcolonial dynamics, shifting inter-group relations, and—most importantly—reflexive awareness of and reflection on all of these. Yet the emphasis on vision, I argue, serves as an important site for naturalizing racialized difference at the level of perception, linking perceptions of qualia—embodied abstract qualities (Chumley 2017; Harkness 2015)—to the textualized instantiations of (an) image (Ball 2014; Nakassis 2019) at which one looks.

Visualizing Identities, Institutionalizing Multi-Race, Voicing Harmony

As the dissertation’s Introduction and previous chapters have noted, virtually every description of Singapore begins with its multiple “multi”-ness: multiracialism, multilingualism, multireligiosity, multiculturalism. As I also noted before, the ubiquity of race is accomplished, in part, through its multiple institutionalization: CMIO racial classifications are listed on individuals’ identification cards and are a condition of access to housing (Haila 2016) and social security benefits (Yeoh 2004, 2437–8; L. Y. C. Lim 1989). For Malay Singaporeans, racial classification extends to matters of governance as well: the group is managed separately under a state Islamic organization—a present legacy of the colonial “plural society” strategy (Barr and Low 2005, 164; Siddique 2001). Importantly, as the previous chapter described, CMIO is not just

a fact of bureaucratic life. Rather, Singaporeans habitually introduce themselves in a range of contexts by commenting on their race, or by asking about an interlocutors' race. Scholars of and in Singapore have noted the ubiquity of the question—"What are you?"—and its variations as a way that interlocutors attempt to locate each other, ethno-racially, in interaction (N. PuruShotam 1998, 54). This situation contrasts with race talk in other global contexts, where race is deemed impolite, invoked primarily via discourse strategies of avoidance—often by elites or those occupying positions of racialized majoritarian privilege, whiteness, or proximity to it.⁶

As previous scholars have also noted, graphic design—materialized through banners, posters, advertisements, and other graphic-visual forms—has long served as a key site at which “information about socio-cultural identity in...Singapore is commodified and mediated for consumption as public knowledge about [race] and national consciousness” (L. K. Chan 2011, 63). In other words, the institutionalization of racialized looking practices is also achieved through *visualization*: making forms of information that would otherwise exist in a non-graphic-visual channel visually perceivable (Drucker 2014; Chan 2011). These visualization practices have historically been common in public contexts, like annual National Day Parades:

Pictorial depictions, even effigies...further hammer home the message that the population of Singapore comprises four “racial” types. Standard elements in pictorial depictions are noteworthy for the[ir] stereotyping...[T]he Chinese are represented in yellow-ochre skin tones, with just a touch of pink that gives them a pleasant rosiness. The man will be dressed in trousers and a shirt, but the woman will be clothed in a cheongsam; her children have some varying items that are commonly identified as Chinese, such as...a black Chinese skullcap with red tassels, and a false pigtail to boot. The Malays are always warmly browned, and dressed up in appropriate clothes, namely, in *baju kurong*, with *kain sampang* around the waist and *songkok* on the heads of the males, and *slendang* hanging down one shoulder of the [women]. The Indians are given a richer, darker brown

⁶ This has been documented extensively in the contexts of Brazil (Roth-Gordon 2007, 248–249; Htun 2004) and France (Constant 2009). In the U.S., where discourses of “race blindness” creates “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva 2018[2003]), euphemistic references—“inner-city,” “urban,” “ethnic,” “criminal,” “low(er) class,” etc.—are an important part of covert- and institutionalized racist practice (Parsons Dick and Wirtz 2011; Gaudio 2011; Muhammad 2010).

(closer to milk chocolate), with the woman invariably in a *sari* and with a *bindhi* between her eyebrows, the man quite often in a Sikh turban, and the girl child in a long silk skirt and the boy child in a *salwar khameez*. “Others” are one or two shades pinker than the Chinese, and...[wear] formal Western dress (N. PuruShotam 1998, 51–52).

Though effigies of CMIO racial types have largely disappeared, such conventionalized, racialized images appear today in genres like advertisements for the annual Racial Harmony Day (Media Literacy Council 2018; Figure 2, next page), or in the Mid-Autumn Festival lights display that opened this chapter.

However, despite extensive references to these kinds of visualizations, the status of visuality as such and the structuring of visual perception have received relatively little attention. The art historian Johanna Drucker’s magisterial 2014 work on data visualization and visual epistemology offers an important contribution to the “study of the visual production of knowledge” and serves as an inspiration for my own analysis of the visual epistemology of race; Drucker’s work crucially points to the ideological structuring of perception itself, and to the erasures by which particular signs come to seem as features of reality, rather than arguments about it (Drucker 2014; Alcoff 2006). However, because Drucker’s work is focused on the affordances of technologies of visualization for human perception writ large, the work does not explore in-depth how *particular* visual signs get taken up as features of particular realities, nor does it explore how ideologies of visual perception have motivated technological change (Jay 1993; Daston and Galison 2007; Halpern 2014). Further, though Drucker presents historical examples of media that participated in the historical construction of race (like racial atlases), visual knowledge about race is not analyzed in the work. To be clear, visualization does not stand as the “active” counterpart to “passive” looking. Both are always active, irreducibly cultural processes of *production* (Causey 2017; Reynolds and Niedt 2021), not of mere passive



Figure 2: Singapore Media Literacy Council, 2018 Racial Harmony Day Advertisement (screenshot by the author).

interpretation or consumption of visual stimuli among whose properties are their ability to make us see them as just what they are (Searle 2015).

Needless to say, racialized perception in Singapore is often treated as relatively transparent outside the arenas where it gets subjected to close, critical scrutiny. I have been both the addressee and overhearer (ratified and unratified) of questions about race. Following a June 2019 interview with a guide for a heritage-tourism company, the interviewee abruptly asked (on the heels of a bit of informal small-talk): “I’m just curious, what are you?” At this point, almost a year into my fieldwork, I had begun to feign puzzlement when this question was asked of me.

“What **am** I?” I asked, furrowing my brow and tilting my head slightly. My interlocutor was visibly uncomfortable,⁷ responding:

“Sorry ah, what is your **race**?”

“Oh:: Ok, my mother is Chinese and my father is English and Native American.” While I offered this list, it was my interviewee’s turn to furrow their brow—that is, until I reached the final item in the list: “Native American.” Here, their expression and posture relaxed, and they leaned back with a grin. “Ah:: ok ok, that is the one that is unfamiliar. I can see the Chinese [they gestured at their own jawline, running a finger from left to right] and the English [gesturing toward their nose], but I knew there is something else. Ok ok, **Native American** [nodding].”

Similarly, during a participatory performance-art experience held at a gallery a month later, I was one of six attendees grouped together, randomly, for the duration of the three-hour experience. Two of the group’s members were sisters attending the event with a third, their childhood friend. Two other attendees had attended together, while I and the final attendee were the only solo participants in our group. I had begun to notice that the sixth member of the group, who had earlier identified themselves as “Indian,” was not speaking much. After an hour or so, the sixth member initiated their first interactional turn, turning to the sisters, again, relatively abruptly: “What is your race? Chindian, right?”⁸

The addressees broke out in a smile. “Yes! How did you know?”

⁷ At the time, I suspected that this discomfort stemmed from the topic under discussion—race—but I have since realized that the discomfort was most likely caused by the fact that my interlocutor had not been understood. Public-sphere discourses of “Good English” often assign moral failure Singaporeans who are not understood or who “confuse foreigners” (see Chapter 5).

⁸ “Chindian” is a portmanteau of “Chinese” and “Indian,” one of a small number of “mixed-race” groups whose existence is broadly known in Singapore. They are officially classified as “Other,” but depending on parents’ wishes or accidents of history (i.e. if they were born before 2010, when individuals began to be allowed to index two racial classifications), they would more likely be categorized only as “Chinese” or “Indian.”

“Your features, your skin color is ve::ry Chindian, Chinese eyes, Indian nose, mouth.”

[Laughing] “Yes, our surname is Yuen-Ramamurti.”⁹

These two vignettes together give a sense of what I mean by the visual epistemology of race as a language ideology operative in Singapore. It mediates verbal conduct, not only at the level of lexical labeling, but also in the interactional routines through which footing is established between or among interlocutors. In the first event, involving me and the tour guide, our mutual coordination centered around the question of what I “was,” reframed in later turns as a question of familiar versus unfamiliar physiognomic signs of “race.” My interlocutor confidently voiced their own facility at recognizing Chinese and English features (which, by virtue of Singapore’s colonial history, may likely be warranted), but had been stumped by something that, in their reanalysis, they could *see*, but not identify. Unlike the justifications given for their ostensive acts of visual discrimination, they did not gesture toward specific parts of their face upon learning that “Native American” “explained” the remainder of my features. In similar ways, the second vignette draws attention to two common discursive dynamics: first, even though the stakes of getting someone’s race wrong—that is, of misinterpreting visible signs—are frequently very high, up to and including the result that one can be publicly decried as a “racist,” individuals commonly guess at others’ races in this sort of overt way. They also do so through code choice, which can similarly backfire.¹⁰ Second, I want to draw attention to the form taken

⁹ This is a pseudonym.

¹⁰ This became particularly fraught following the outbreak of COVID-19, as mask-wearing became mandatory. I observed numerous encounters, some becoming news headlines, where individuals were decried for misinterpreting a mask-wearing interlocutor’s race incorrectly, thus speaking the wrong language: e.g. an individual mistakenly addressing a non-Chinese-Singaporean in Mandarin was interpreted as “racist.” This is due in part to the constructed link between “Mother Tongues” and ethno-racialized groups together with the contrast between “Mother Tongues” as racialized media and English as “neutral” (see Chapters 4–5).

by the ratification: the sister voiced affirmation of the visual evaluation by providing their surname, whose hyphenated form provided lexicalized evidence for the fact of their Chindian-ness. These dynamics—presuming one’s own ability to visually guess at others’ races despite the high stakes of getting it wrong, together with the invocation of surname as a privileged index within multimodal channels for self- and other-identifications—are important in the enactment of the visual epistemology of race, and will recur in later sections.

In Singapore (as elsewhere), the enregistered shibboleths of race are often presented as self-evident phenomena, without discussion of the structures and histories according to which people come to perceive signs as racial signs, though exceptions can be found. In a classic Southeast Asian example and departure from this tendency, the sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) analyzed the historical colonial construction of the image of Malays, focusing on the voicing strategies by which these images were constructed in a range of genres, from popular writing to colonial reports to academic history. As Alatas demonstrates, the signification, emanation, and circulation (Silverstein 2013) of these images—not *visual* images, but the regimentation of aesthetic qualities in-and-as text (Nakassis 2019)—was built through discourse strategies for voicing Malay-ness as “laziness,” “backwardness,” and the like. While premodern Malay identities had been constructed along feudal lines as mutual obligations of allegiance between rulers and ruled (Fernandez 1999), this changed under conditions of colonial governance—which, of course, was not solely imposed from above, but integrally involved local collaborators, even if the collaboration was asymmetric (Haikal and Yahaya 1997; Hirschman 1986). In the colonial encounter, Malay-ness was regularized as a *racialized* identity, a category of the kind that sociologist Everett Hughes (Hughes 1963) calls a “master status”: a highly presumable status taken, in ideological perspective, to inhere across all contexts, and to explain

all observable variations. In this way, strategies for voicing racialized identities also structure habits of visual perception, imagined as a conduit for racial knowing.

To quote Mikhail Bakhtin, when we speak, our words are never “neutral and impersonal” (1981, 294). Rather, they are always drawn from the mouths of others, from “other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (ibid). To speak is to engage in acts of voicing, to act not as an individuated, phonosonic voice, but to speak *through* and *as* others, to align “socially identifiable perspectives [to] semiotic phenomena by which persons and groups situate themselves in worlds of significance” (Harkness 2014, 12). To extend the parallel, looking does not consist of taking in visual impressions and stimuli through a putatively pre-social, -cultural, or -semiotic visual apparatus, but rather involves looking through the eyes of others: to see through “socially identifiable perspectives” and their entailed “worlds of significance” (ibid). Crucially for this chapter, this involves looking at—and as—group-based structures of raciolinguistic personhood and their possibilities for belonging. I elaborate this over the next three sections by tracing out structures of looking across the video series, online comments, and spontaneous interactions.

Revealing “Roots,” Presuming Race

The six videos in the “My Roots Are _____?” series were released weekly on the Singapore Bicentennial’s Facebook page and YouTube channel between 12 September and 17 October 2019. In each of the videos, a character discovers previously unknown details of their “roots” through genetic ancestry test results. Both individually and as an interdiscursive series, the videos diagram a trajectory that was materialized across the Singapore Bicentennial commemorations generally: that is, the video series positioned the depicted individuals as emblematic of the Bicentennial’s broader message, as tokens of a 700-year pattern of in-

migration from outside Singapore that culminated in-and-as a Singaporean national identity in the present. At the same time, this in-migration also culminated in-and-as Singapore's raciolanguage communities, which bore variously contrastive, if not outright troubling, relationships to the national community. Each of the 45-second-long videos featured a different character appearing as themselves, i.e., they are not actors performing a separate character within the diegetic world of the videos. I analyze here how the videos' design orients a structure of looking in which viewers were prompted to ask questions about strangers based on their appearance, with additional—limited, and often ambiguous—support from nonvisual signs, like names. This constructs the videos' entertainment value in a way that positions vision at the top of a hierarchy of perception modalities, even as vision requires evidence from other modalities—which potentially undermines vision's primacy in a video and its local uptake.

Each of the videos follow a regular structure of eight segments, illustrated in Figure 3 (Singapore Bicentennial 2019a, next page). I refer to these segments as follows: (1) Opening Title, (2) Contestant Selection, (3) Introduction, (4) Question, (5) Answer, (6) Roots, (7) Historical Note, and (8) Closing Title. After (1) the Opening Title, viewers are shown (2) a tiled view of all six participants arrayed in a two-by-three grid, each with a different colored background. A white-stroke outline moves rapidly from tile to tile, accompanied by the ringing of a small bell; gradually, the outline's movement slows and settles on a single tile, at which point it blinks to indicate that the tile has been “selected.” (3) The selected participant's name is shown in title text at the bottom of the screen, followed by (4) a question about the individual's “roots.” The question either takes the form of a true–false question, or a two-option, multiple-choice question. A countdown timer in the upper right counts down for five seconds, after which (5) the correct answer is revealed. Next, (6) a series of four categories and percentages appear,

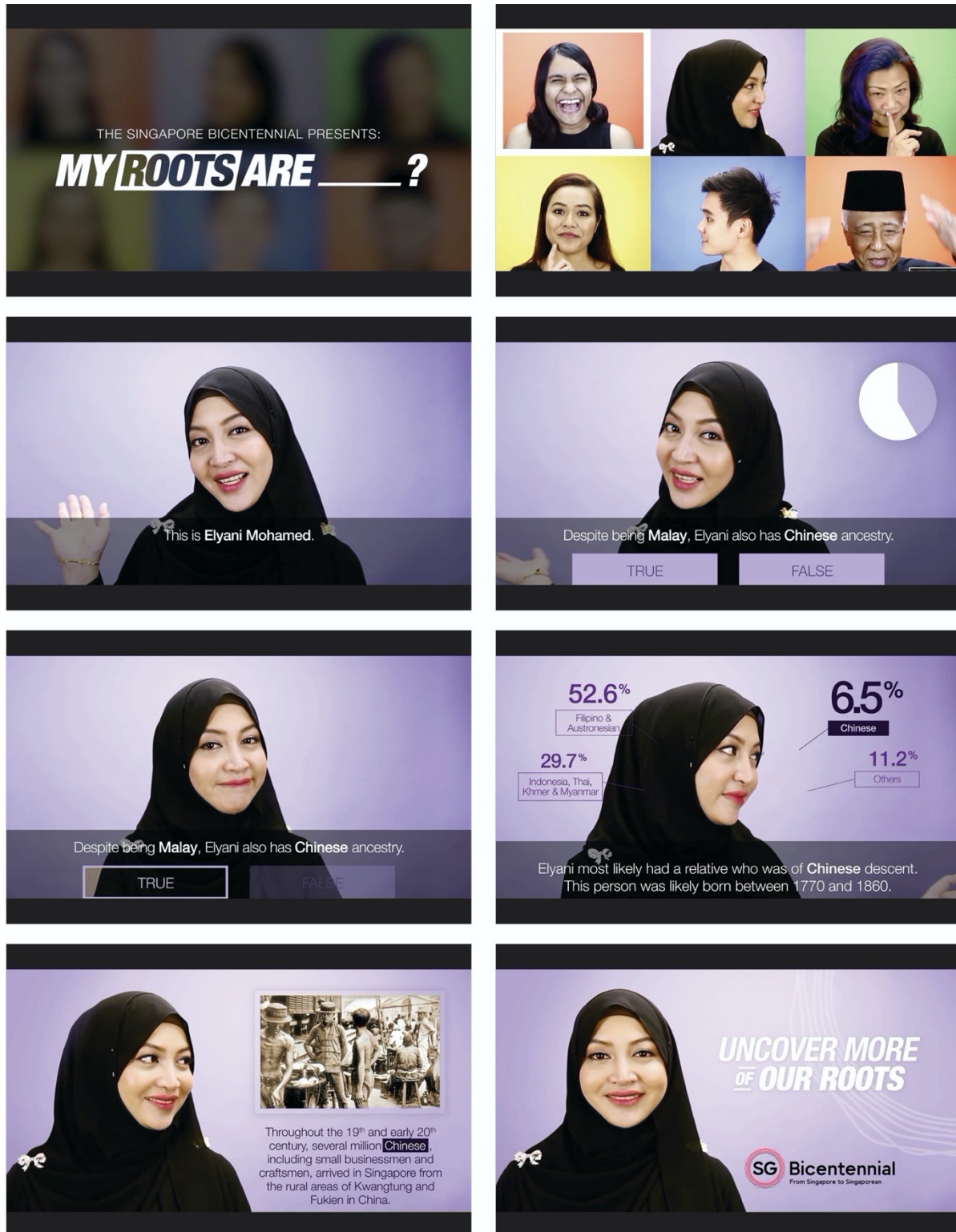


Figure 3: “My Roots Are ____?” (Singapore Bicentennial Office) Episode 2: Elyani Mohamed, 19 September 2019. Segments 1–8 of the videos’ structures are listed from top to bottom, left to right (screenshots by the author).

detailing the component elements of the individual’s “roots.” At the bottom of the screen, title text presents a speculative guess on the time-period in which a given ancestral “root” was established. Videos then (7) offer an historical note regarding the geographical origins or notable historical personages associated with the featured ancestral “root,” before (8) ending with a closing title containing the text, “Uncover more of our roots,” and the SG Bicentennial logo.

I focus my analysis on Episodes 2 and 4, which respectively feature two characters, Elyani Mohamed and Lorna O’Toole. Released on 19 September 2019, Elyani Mohamed appears in Episode 2 wearing a black tudung/hijab. Elyani’s gaze shifts from left to right throughout the video, as the following segments unfold (boldface in original titling):

- Segment 3—Introduction:* This is **Elyani Mohamed**
- Segment 4—Question:* Despite being **Malay**, Elyani also has **Chinese** ancestry. [True] [False]
- Segment 5—Answer:* [True]
- Segment 6—Roots:* [Background graphics]
29.7% Indonesia , Thai, Khmer & Myanmar
52.6% Filipino & Austronesian
6.5% Chinese
11.2% Others
- Elyani most likely had a relative who was of **Chinese** descent. This person was likely born between 1770 and 1860.

(Singapore Bicentennial 2019a)

The Question in Segment 4 is important for two reasons: first, in the opening construction, “[d]espite being Malay,” Elyani’s Malay-ness is presented as self-evident. A number of co-occurrent signs contribute to this framing, particularly her name—presented in the video title and in the Introduction—and her sartorial accompaniment. The photographer, researcher, and educator Nurul Rashid has analyzed the ways in which the tudung/hijab-wearing woman

(presumed Malay) is displayed in Singapore to project visible alterity, materialized via the tudung/hijab as a naturalized sartorial index of racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic difference. As Rashid has articulated in the photography series *Hijab/Her I–III*, despite the range of meanings that are embodied in the decision to don the hijab, the materiality of the hijab often subsumes the body of its wearer, rendering her invisible, a threat, powerless, and/or a voiceless token of a monolithic racial type (Rashid 2012; 2013; 2014; see also Abu-Lughod 2016).

In addition to treating Malay-ness as a self-evident characterization, the Question segment also constructs Elyani’s potential Chinese “roots” as surprising. This is not a point about uptake per se: what matters is not that anyone does or does not find this surprising, but rather the defaults of the construction. The presence of “Chinese roots” (although revealed, in the end, to be only 6.5%)¹¹ is presented as a question a viewer might doubt. This is further represented in the grammatical construction of the Question: “Malay” is what she *is*, “Chinese ancestry” is what she *has*. These formulations index a schema of cultural knowledge, where axes of differentiation of group-based (non)identity get projected across taxonomic (classificatory) and partonomic (hierarchized part–whole) relations: Elyani *is* Singaporean, in contrast with other nation-state citizenship statuses; she *is* Malay, contrast to other raciolanguage communities; finally, she *has* “roots” that extend beyond her determinate position as an “M” within CMIO without changing what is presented as her racialized being.

¹¹ This should not be taken to suggest that Elyani “has” 6.5% “Chinese genes.” On the one hand, this is because there is virtually no possibility of a valid genetic distinction between, for example, “Chinese-” and “Vietnamese DNA” (Smart et al. 2012), though this has not stopped companies from circulating such claims, nor has it slowed the circulation of representations of genetic difference that proceed deductively from existing groups and nation-state territories, rather than inductively (Schramm et al. 2012, 9–10). Genetic ancestry can thus be seen as a liberal technologies for playful self-making (S. S.-J. Lee 2013; Kolopenuk 2018, 334), as well as for settler-colonial dispossession on the basis of purported genetic evidence (Reardon and TallBear 2012; TallBear 2013; Kent, Santos, and Wade 2014; Nash 2015).

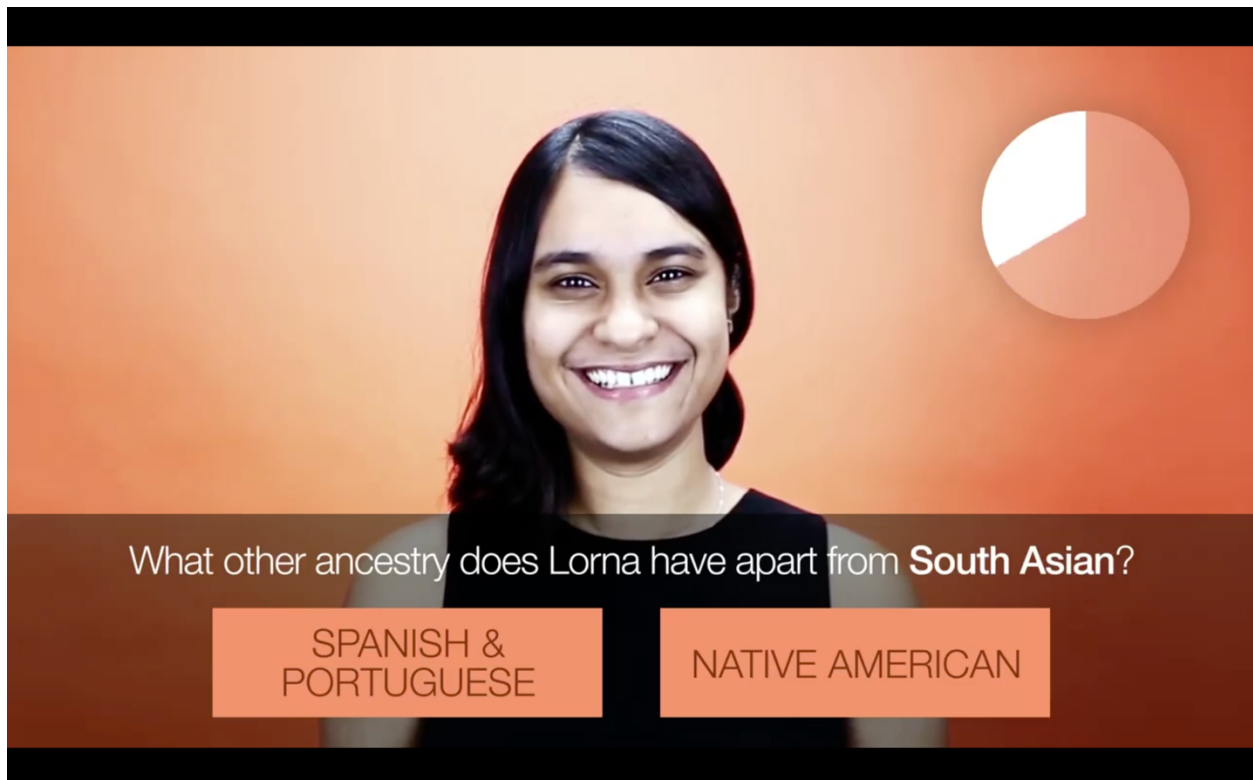


Figure 4: “My Roots Are _____?” (Singapore Bicentennial Office) Episode 4, “What other ancestry does Lorna have apart from South Asian?” (screenshot by the author).

Similar constructions are found in Episode 4: Lorna O’Hara (Singapore Bicentennial 2019b; Figure 4), released on 3 October 2019. Here, name- and sartorial signs are less overdetermined in their interpretive defaults, highlighting the videos’ visual-racial structuring. In the Question segment, Episode 4 asks: “What other ancestry does Lorna have apart from **South Asian?** [Spanish & Portuguese] [Native American].” After revealing the answer (Spanish & Portuguese), Lorna’s “roots” are listed: “4.0% British & Irish; 49.9% South Asian; 1.0% Spanish & Portuguese; 45.5% Others.” Despite the fact that nearly half (45.5%) of Lorna’s putative genetic ancestry is neither “South Asian” nor “Spanish & Portuguese,” only these two categories are highlighted; the remaining results are amalgamated into an undifferentiated “Others.” It is also noteworthy that, despite her name—defaults of which might point, for some interpreters, to Irish ancestry—Lorna is described only as “South Asian” rather than, e.g. British/Irish and South

Asian. This has the effect of making her name into an unacknowledged sign. The two categories of “roots” in the Question are also not common in Singapore, though (chiefly Western) media representations of Native Americans are widespread enough that this could be a familiar category for some.

As part of the Singapore Bicentennial commemorations, these videos were presented as indices of actually existent pasts (Parmentier 1987, 11) that signal the migration trajectories that have contributed to the making of present Singapore. This reproduces a familiar strategy for voicing Singapore as a “migrant society” whose communities overcame ties to “homelands” elsewhere (Velayutham 2007, 25) and “contributed” to the nation (N. PuruShotam 1998, 84–87), thereby earning their societal belonging.¹² Genetic ancestry is relatively incidental to the videos, serving primarily to reinforce existing frameworks while also indexing the broader Bicentennial labeling of the image of Singapore as a “uniquely Singaporean DNA.” Though this section has focused primarily on two videos, all six videos in the “My Roots Are _____?” series similarly highlight some facts of racial personhood as self-evident, and others as claims to be questioned. Crucially, though various forms of evidence *could* exist as a possible basis for evaluating the claims, the formal features of the videos present the viewer’s intended interpretation—thereby constructing their entertainment value—as grounded in individuals’ appearance, with names as a potential further piece of evidence. The next section tracks how such evidence was taken up, challenged, and transformed in viewer comments.

¹² The discourse of the “migrant society” has been deployed in the past with the explicit aim of curtailing political claims by those who might argue for racial political and social privileges on the basis of indigeneity or tenure, but this also produces the effect of erasing Singapore’s historical links to the Malay world (Rahim 2010). The emphasis on “contribution” also frames Malay Singaporeans as a problem group whose “underdevelopment” is proof of their lack of contribution (Mutalib 2012).

Commentator Perspectives on Harmony, History, and Appearance-versus-Genetics

While the videos do not include the lexical labels “race,” “genetic (ancestry),” or their equivalents, viewer comments do so extensively. The fact that commentators did so is not in itself surprising, since terms like “Chinese” and “Malay” are treated in Singapore (and beyond) as racialized terms (less directly so for terms like “Austronesian” or “Spanish & Portuguese,” though these, too are often racialized when they are deployed); “roots” might also seem a relatively overdetermined reference to genetic ancestry. I point this out, however, because the absence of the terms “race” and “genetics” as such was repeatedly referenced in online comments as evidence that other commentators were projecting things that were not there, a claim animated by an ideology of literalist denotation.

Of 319 comments on Facebook, 138 comments deploy the lexical items “race,” “multiracialism,” or “racial harmony”; 60 comments refer to DNA or genetics, whether to contest DNA/genetics as evidence, or assert its primacy over other forms of evidence. Many of the comments that referred to race did so through the categories of multiracialism or racial harmony. Most of the online discourse I analyzed took predictable forms: most comments were written as polemics, and few were constructed as direct replies to previous posts, even when using the inbuilt “threading” feature. And of course, the media ideologies (Gershon 2010) mediating online discourse privileged certain voices, and disprivileged or discouraged others: comments were written almost exclusively in English, though occasionally they also included stretches of Malay and Mandarin, and comments almost always comprised one-off posts.

Take, for instance, the following comment on Episode 2: Elyani Mohamed: “We are Singaporeans. I’m $\frac{1}{4}$ Indian and $\frac{3}{4}$ Chinese and know many friends who are mixed with Indian, Malay and Chinese ethnicities in different combinations. We are thus a unique mix of different

racess and cultures but are distinctly and uniquely Singaporean” (comment by C. Y., 19 September 2019). Here, the fact of “mixed”-ness, projected at the level of biographical individuals, was recharacterized as emblematic of Singapore and Singaporean-ness. At the same time, it is important to note that the previously “pure” categories presented here as being mixed were drawn from CMIO: “Indian, Malay and Chinese.” Multiracial harmony was thus diagrammed at both the scales of individual bodies and the “indigenized” nation-state (C. J. W.-L. Wee 1993). As commentator C. Y.’s comment further made clear, “race”—figured through multi-race and -culture as “distinctly and uniquely Singaporean” phenomena—was the frame through which the video’s character was interpreted.

Sometimes, commentary about race turned explicitly toward the rejection of race as a relevant category for public discussion, as in the following thread from 19 September 2019:

M. J. : Paternal grandfather, Malay from Muar.
Paternal grandmother, adopted Chinese girl raised by Arabs.
Maternal grandfather, Malay/Indian from Penang.
Maternal grandmother, Javanese.

I am as Singaporean as it can get and yearn for the day we don’t have to indicate RACE on the NRIC [*jb—state-issued identification cards*]. We are all Singaporeans. Leave the sentiment and affiliation to one’s roots personal, please.

S. T. : @M. J. but being Singaporeans are our nationalities not race!

N. A. : I guess he is saying that ethnicity should not even be mentioned. It is not necessary and is not common in many countries.

Comments like M. J.’s voice a refrain that was common throughout the thread, but was also recurrent across a number of other domains, including the structure of cultural knowledge presumed in the Elyani Mohamed video (and others), which I discussed above. As I noted in this chapter’s introduction, to emphasize “roots” or raciolanguage community membership in a reflexively public setting without utilizing the hyphenated formula of *race-plus-Singaporean*

(Chua 1998) indexed a dominant script about the threat of racialized “faultlines” (D. P. S. Goh 2010; Kathiravelu 2017). Further, the comment’s final sentence—asserting that “sentiment and affiliation to one’s roots” should be strictly “personal”—also voiced an anxiety common during the early years of Singapore’s independence, when the attribution of ties to Singapore’s diasporic “homelands” elsewhere (Velayutham 2007, 25) was seen as a threat to the new nation’s cohesion. Hence, “sentiment and affiliation to one’s roots” were reframed as inappropriate for public talk. In N. A.’s reply, in addition to clarifying M. J.’s initial post, the reason “ethnicity should not even be mentioned” was indexed to an exogenous standard: Singapore was compared to “many countries” where listing race on identification cards “is not common.”

Across the online comments, commentators policed Chinese-ness and Malay-ness more stringently than other racial categories. In these online discussions—like offline discussions in a range of media (Benjamin 2017)—Malay-ness was debated as a matter of “indigeneity” versus “migrant” status. Many of the comments posited Malay-ness as a function of geographic origin, language, and phenotype. This was apparent, for example, in comments like the following, posted by M. I. in response to Episode 6: Haji Mohd Seain Bin Madson on 17 October 2019 (Singapore Bicentennial 2019c; Figure 5, next page): “If Singapore was formally [sic—*most likely formerly*] a Malaysian island, then it makes perfect Sense that the indigenious are Malay. And Filipinos are ethnic Malays too. It doesn’t take science to tell you that. A little bit of geography revision [*jb—review*] will do you a world of good.” Though M. I.’s comment was not a direct response to a previous commentator, the comment appeared in an ongoing discussion about whether or not there are any “indigenous” people in Singapore. M. I.’s assertion appealed to “geography” and rejected genetic ancestry; it also rejected the division of Haji Mohd Seain’s “roots” into the two categories, “Filipino & Austronesian” on the one hand, and “Indonesian,

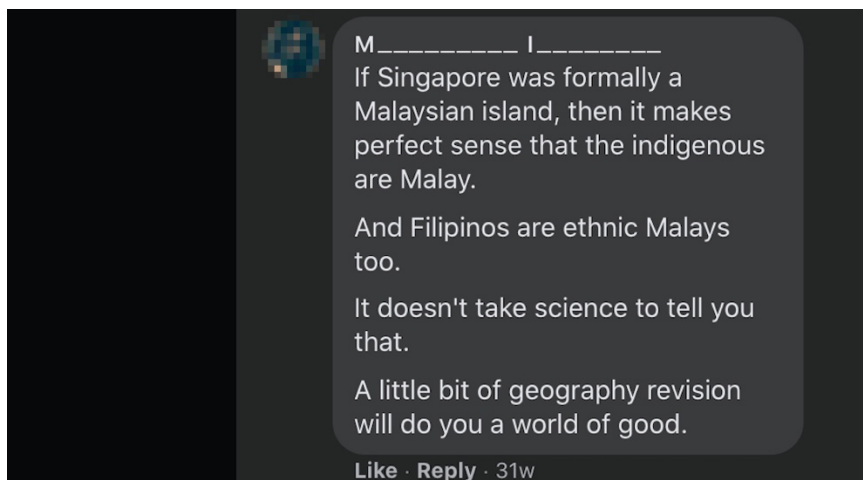


Figure 5: Comment on “My Roots Are _____?” Episode 6: “It doesn’t take science to tell you that” (screenshot by the author).

Thai, Khmer, Myanmar” on the other. Unlike the framing in the video’s genetic ancestry results, M. I. asserted these are all “ethnic Malays.” Yet M. I.’s comment also reintroduces the category “Malay” into the discussion, treating it as a more encompassing category.

In the 85 comments posted to Episode 6’s comment thread, 51 participated in an “indigeneity”–“migrant” debate; yet many of the comments asserted the primacy of visual appearance as a dismissal—frequently explicit—of other interpretive frameworks. In Figure 6 (next page), A. H. makes the following assertion of a kind common in these debates: “U can say what you want but the feature said it all.” A. H.’s reference to features—i.e. phenotype—contested the kinds of evidence being presented by other commenters. Such references to characters’ appearance occurred in response to all six videos, often acting as a sort of rhetorical “last word” in a comment thread (whether or not they were actually final).

“Look at the Color of My Skin! Speak English”

Talk about race as a visible quality—albeit one whose interpretation might be revised upon encountering subsequent signs—did not occur only in online discourse or in state-produced or -supported media. It also occurred in informal talk in face-to-face interactions. This

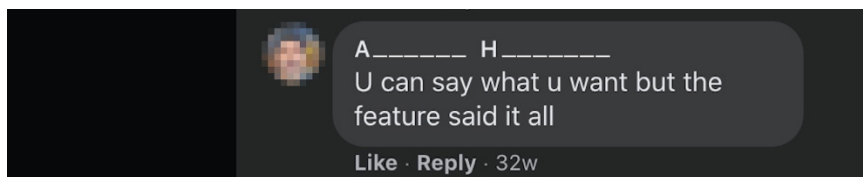


Figure 6: Comment on “My Roots Are _____?” Episode 6: “The feature said it all” (screenshot by the author).

was common when talk focused on identities in general, but became particularly apparent during cases of mistaken identity, or reports about cases of mistaken identity. This section begins with informal interactions at a Singapore-based language class for heritage learners of Kristang—a critically endangered minority variety associated with a group known as Portuguese-Eurasians (Wong 2019, 38), descendants of 16th century intermarriages between Malay residents and Portuguese colonizers and in Melaka (Pereira 2006)¹³—and ends by presenting informal interactions involving contestations over claims to Chinese identity. Unlike the previous two sections, I here present narratives produced among participants as a kind of entertainment, but the events that they narrate are not centered on entertainment in the same way: rather, the narratives draw attention to the ideological work of inhabiting, navigating, and being topologically located within a Singaporean social universe, whether as a member of it or not. In these interactions, overt references to enregistered visual shibboleths of racialized identity—skin color, phenotype, clothing, etc.—are linked to normative models for linguistic performance, whether choice of denotational code, or named registers within a particular variety.

¹³ Though the Eurasian community has long had a presence in present-day Singapore, the group’s micro-minority status—comprising approximately 0.4% of Singapore’s total population—and the fact that it is often lumped into “Other” in the CMIO model, have been significant contributors to the fact that there is low public awareness of and talk about Singapore Eurasians today (Wong 2019, 47–8). Kristang was historically spoken only by Portuguese-Eurasians who migrated to Singapore from Melaka, not English-, Dutch-, or other Eurasians. Heritage Kristang speakers have been estimated as comprising one-third of Eurasian-identifying people in Singapore (Davenport 2004, cited in Wong 2019, 47).

The Kristang class in question was held at one of Singapore’s community clubs¹⁴; the session in which this interaction occurred comprised approximately 15 participants. The class atmosphere was relaxed, and many of the participants arrived early. During the class, I sat at a medium-size modular table with five older women aged 40–55. While we waited for the class to begin, they chatted with one another about their work, children, and churches (one attendee had brought Catholic Patron Saint Prayer Cards, which they distributed to others at the table who had requested them during a prior meeting). They also took the opportunity to inquire about my presence, the nature of my research, and, of course, my race:

A: “You look Eurasian a bit. Your parents are what?”

J: “My mother is Chinese, my father is English, but born in the U.S.” [Participants nodded knowingly]

A: “You’re a **modern** Eurasian. All of us? [gesturing around the table] We’re historical Eurasian.”

B: [laughing] “‘Historical Eurasians’? Means what ah?”

After a brief round of laughter and an explanation from participant A about how the Singapore Eurasian Association expanded its definition of Eurasian in the 1980s or 90s to grow the Association’s membership while still differentiating “modern” Eurasians (anyone of Asian and European/Western ancestry) from “ethnic” Eurasians (anyone with an officially Eurasian father), the conversation shifted to the topic of linguistic practices in Singapore:

¹⁴ Community Clubs (CC) are run by the Singapore People’s Association (PA), founded in pre-independent Singapore with the explicit mission of building “racial harmony” as a key tenet of nation-building (Hill and Lian 2000, 177). The PA mission statement describes CCs as “common spaces for people of all races to come together, build friendships and promote social bonding. CCs also connect residents and the Government by providing relevant information and gathering feedback on national concerns and policies. Each CC serves about 15,000 households or an average of 50,000 people” (People’s Association 2018, accessed 1 July 2020 from <https://www.pa.gov.sg/our-network/community-clubs>).

A: “Singaporeans, when talking to each other, will confirm speak Singlish. But what they do is look at you, and decide, do you speak proper English? Then, they will speak proper English.”

C: “When people speak Mandarin to me, I scold them. ‘Hello? Look at the color of my skin! Speak English!’”

B: “[I] go to the meat shop, they always tell me, ‘Auntie, this one got pork ah!’ I say, ‘Ok lah, I Malay eat pork one.’ I give them a shock.”

Asserting that I look “Eurasian a bit” in the first interactional turn above indicated that the speaker possessed a high degree of certainty regarding the presumed answer, though the follow-up—about “what” my parents are—still remained open-ended so as to avoid an erroneous ascription of identity. In the subsequent turns, involving semi-fictionalized reported speech, the act of speaking Mandarin was taken to index the reported speaker’s assumption that their addressee is not just a Mandarin *speaker*, but a Chinese *person*. This is because the interactional default for people of unknown racialized identity is to use English; any deviation from this is marked in various ways (as an intentional exclusion, as a racist act, etc.). Here, however, the report framed the incident as a case of mistaken identity—of looking like a race, thereby being presumed to understand a language. The assumption was contested (and derided) through an appeal to appearance: “Look at the color of my skin!” In the final interactional turn, the speaker similarly reports on the assumptions of a meat shop proprietor, where assumptions about identity are voiced as a warning about pork. This points to the speaker’s assumptions about religion (Islam), which reflects in turn an assumption about race (Malay). Here, however, participant B does not contest or challenge the speaker’s choice of linguistic variety, but rather turns it into a semi-playful opportunity at subverting the speaker’s assumptions.

Interactions that focalize participants’ ethno-racial identifications also occur in encounters between strangers. Many such incidents of stranger-sociality that were reported to me

or which I observed during my fieldwork period tended to involve taxi- or rideshare drivers. However, I also observed these kinds of incidents in other settings, such as the following, which involves strangers' contestations over a Chinese-Malaysian friend's identity (this friend had been living in Singapore for many years) during a neighborhood walking tour we both attended. Unlike the previous interactions—involving acts of overtly pushing back against or confronting an interlocutor about their mistaken assumptions or having a laugh at an interlocutor's expense—encounters between strangers often result in feelings of intimidation, insult, or belittlement, and those who are the object of mistaken identification often do not push back directly. This happened in the walking tour. After an hour spent walking as part of a large group, we were divided into small groups of four to five. As we began a round of self-introductions, one of the two other participants in our small group—both of whom were young Chinese-Singaporean women (participants A2 and C2, below)—turned to my friend (B2) and asked:

A2: "Where are you from?"

B2: "Malaysia."

C2: "Ah you are Malay is it?"

B2: "No, I'm Chinese"

C2: "Really? [aside to A2] 但这么黑 (*dàn zhème hēi* 'but [he is] so [lit.] black', i.e. 'dark') ...[back to B2] What is your surname?"

After having had his Chinese-ness called into question in this way, my friend kept quiet for the rest of the event, but later messaged me to express exhaustion with such questioning: "I thought this wouldn't happen in Singapore. It's because I am so dark. Here people see my skin color and assume I am not Chinese." The linguistic form of the aside spoken from C2 to A2 at the end of the transcript above can be further seen to reinforce the indeterminacy of the attributed raciolinguistic personhood: that is, "但这么黑" (*dàn zhème hēi* 'but [he is] so [lit.] black', i.e.

‘dark’) did not yet concede a racialized identity to B2. Together with C2’s assumption that the Mandarin utterance would not be understood—and, as a corollary, that my friend was not really Chinese—the demand that my friend furnish a stranger with their surname shows a hierarchy of modalities at work in regimenting racialized signs. The fact that my friend did, in fact, supply the name—which was followed by a dispensation, as A2 and C2 verbally accepted it as a “Teochew name”—also shows asymmetries in the capacity to challenge another’s identity-claims.

As with the “My Roots Are _____?” series, names play an important role in cuing racialized interpretations of individuals’ subjectivities.¹⁵ Beyond the case of names, the enregisterment of skin-color hierarchies also shape assumptions about ethno-racial identity categories more generally, and authorizes some (but not other) individuals to ask questions, while also shaping the expectation that one must meet one’s interlocutor’s doubts regarding the answers given. I chose this case in which a non-Singaporean person of Chinese ancestry was questioned because it shows how presumptions about links between skin color and race can produce hierarchies of dispensational authorization even among members of a racialized majority (people of Chinese ancestry comprise 76% of Singapore’s population). Under these conditions, cases of color preference, colorist discrimination, and overt racism are widespread for individuals who identify, or are identified as, South Asian or Malay. The skepticism voiced by the two Chinese-Singaporean interlocutors enacts a kind of skepticism that is commonly voiced in cases where a person’s given response does not match an addressee’s expectations. It does not, I suggest, reflect a widespread incidence of racial passing, or of individuals falsifying

¹⁵ The founder and director of the Kristang revitalization effort described at the beginning of this section was even themselves accused of appropriation in founding the Kristang class: responding to the founder’s surname, a publication authored by a Portuguese-Eurasian cultural gatekeeper in Melaka assumed that the class was founded by a community “outsider.”

their racialized identities (though the anxiety over such possibilities is widespread). Rather, I argue that it points to a visual epistemology of race that structures the possibilities for racial knowing via a projective desire for race to be transparently interpretable from visual cues, supplemented by other broadly enregistered sign-types that ideally map onto one another without excess—and, crucially, which ought to serve as a guide for linguistic performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to show how a visual epistemology of race functions to link visual-perceptual signs to nonvisible structures for projecting and construing racialized difference. This is not to suggest that the construction of race in Singapore is exclusively visual, nor that visual signs are the only ones that matter for interpreters. Further, a visual epistemology of race is not abstractly unique to the Singapore context; acts of looking at race are localized in Singapore, even as they participate in—and thereby generate—globally distributed structures. The visual epistemology of race works to naturalize visual shibboleths taken to index race, privileging them as uniquely capable of revealing racialized group-based essences; however, overt and implicit attention to signs in a graphic-visual channel are still always part of multimodal events of interaction in which racialized structures are constructed. Raciolinguistic personhood is thus always emergent out of a range of non-visual signs (names, linguistic routines, code choice, clothing, etc.) which support the focus on visibility, even while they proceed orthogonally to it, or even upend it as an interpretive default altogether.

As I have hoped to show, references to skin color are but one among many locally available signs that interactants interpret as signs of raciolinguistic personhood. The questions—“what are you?” and “where are you from?”—are often voiced in acts of attempted confirmation, rather than open-ended investigation. That is, when voicing the question, the asker almost always

has some idea in mind of what they believe the answer to be. In extremely rare cases, the asker might inquire point-blank about one's belonging to a particular ethno-racial category, but this is generally only when they believe they have a high degree of certainty as to the answer. Such questioning does not only happen in cases involving broadly enregistered categories of ethno-racial personhood, but also in cases involving categories that do not pertain to assumed ethno-racial personhood in the first instance. For instance, as in the final example, a dark-skinned individual who identifies, or is identified, as a person of Chinese ancestry is not taken to comprise a group-based identity in the same way as Malay or Eurasian identities are constructed.

Of course, when the visual epistemology of race breaks down, people rarely take it as an opportunity to claim new identities or forms of identification: Elyani did not go on to identify as Chinese, nor did Lorna go on to identify as Spanish and Portuguese. My dark-skinned Chinese friend was still able to assert forms of belonging according to a cultural-imperialist structuring of Chinese-ness grounded in imaginaries of consanguinity and linguistic repertoires (Chen 2010). In other words, by speaking Mandarin, my friend still got the last laugh at the expense of their detractors while also benefiting from structures of racialized majoritarian privilege (this is the topic of Chapter 5). Even when the features do *not* say it all (to paraphrase both the final commentator from section five and Obasogie's definition of race), interactants in Singapore remain dependent on the recognition of racially hegemonic selves-as-audiences from whose perspective the legitimacy of belonging is (not) conferred.

Section II: Scaling Raciolinguistic Belonging

Chapter Four: Postracial Policing, “Mother Tongue” Sourcing, and Images of Singlish Standard

In late 2019, I sat down for an interview with Gwee, a prominent public defender of Singlish. As I noted in the dissertation’s Introduction, the label “Singlish”—a portmanteau of “Singapore(an)” and “English”—exists as a shifty category (Fong, Lim, and Wee 2002), sometimes used for any Englishes spoken by Singaporeans, sometimes for a particular basilectal variety¹ in a Singaporean lectal continuum (M.-L. Ho and Platt 1993; Deterding 2007; Jakob Leimgruber 2012; Saraceni 2015; L. Wee 2018). The conversation that day meandered narratively across time and space, moving from details of Gwee’s linguistic biography as a Hokkien-Chinese Singaporean, to his reflections on a Yahoo! TV web series he stars in, to his recent translation of Saint-Exupéry’s 1943 classic *The Little Prince* into Singlish, to a 2016 incident that catapulted him into Singapore’s public-intellectual limelight, after an op-ed he published in defense of Singlish in the *New York Times* received a published rebuttal by none other than the Singapore Prime Minister’s Press Secretary.

Much of the early part of our conversation focused on historical shifts in Singlish’s composition and sociolinguistic variation. This conversation was relatively early in my fieldwork research, and I was still learning how to ask questions that did not reproduce hegemonic scripts

¹ This terminology derives from the (re)conceptualization of *diglossia* by the linguist Charles A. Ferguson (1971[1959]; Eckert 1980). The term refers to speech situations where two varieties (which can include unrelated languages; Fishman 1971; see also Eckert 1980) are used within a community: a superposed, “high” or “H” variety (also called “acrolectal”), and a vernacular, “low” or “L” variety (also called “basilectal”). These varieties exist in complimentary distribution across domains of use of participation frameworks. Arabic-speaking situations are the prototypical example—where Classical or Qur’anic Arabic differs in lexicon, grammar, and written status from various regional colloquial Arabics (Ferguson 1971[1959])—but the term is now used to describe any quasi-bilingual situation where speakers variously switch between high prestige and low-prestige varieties. As Eckert has argued, these varieties are both separate and unequal: diglossia rests on social stratification (1980, 1054).

(Carr 2009; 2010; 2011) of various kinds: scripts about Singlish as an existential threat to “Good English,” hence to Singapore’s economic competitiveness and geopolitical survival (one of the topics I discuss in Chapter 5); scripts about Singlish as the most—even *the only*—“uniquely Singaporean” phenomenon, thus as worthy of celebration and commoditization (for an extended discussion of these scripts, see Wee 2018, Chapters 2 and 5).

At this point, midway through the interview, I asked about a comment I had heard Gwee make during a public event a couple months prior, in which he speculated that Singlish seemed nowadays to be facing pressure toward standardization. Suddenly sitting forward in the chair, Gwee became agitated, speaking faster and with wider variation in pitch than before:

The thing to remember about Singlish is that the words that came from Malay into Singlish came in pre-standardization. Back then, the Malay spelling was much more fluid. People were very tolerant about saying things different ways. It used to be that *o* and *u* were interchangeable. People used both, but it was no problem! Now, people don’t understand how things have changed in Malay. Now they say, “Oh, Chinese people are distorting the Malay language!”

I followed up as soon as I had the opportunity: “May I ask, who is it who says that Chinese people are distorting the Malay language?”

You’ll hear this a lot. People are always saying, “Don’t misspell it”—especially about Malay words. The next stage in the battle is spelling. The thing is that, for most of the time Singlish was spoken, it was just oral. So, it didn’t matter, you just used the words. Now people are becoming more aware of the variety, they’re debating it more and more. But **you**² don’t have to politicize it and make it about race like that.

Needless to say, the *you* of the final sentence did not refer to me as the present addressee of the utterance, but rather to a figure of personhood, a socially salient, differentiable kind of speaker-actor (Agha 2005; 2007b): the critic who critiques a racially hegemonic other (Rosa and Flores 2017, 622) for acts of “distorting” the Malay language (and other minoritized codes) through

² **Boldface** indicates verbal emphasis.

misspelling, mispronunciation, or both. In the 12 months following this interview, I repeatedly encountered this figure as it was enacted by individuals performing such critiques. Yet I routinely encountered another figure during this period as well: that of the counter-critic, who—as in the instance voiced by Gwee—rejects the critic’s attempts to “politicize” Singlish and make “mere” facts of spelling and pronunciation “about race.”

This chapter tracks the materialization of these two figures—the critic and the counter-critic—as they are contrastively performed through two connected discourse registers. Performances of the critic drew attention to instances, or patterns of use, in which Chinese Singaporeans “got it wrong”—and worse, defended their errors as actually correct vis-à-vis a generic figure of “the Singaporean.” Individuals performing the counter-critic, meanwhile, reframed linguistic sources as superfluous: in such performances, what mattered was not how a word was used in the “Mother Tongues” of the raciolanguage community from which it was drawn, but how it is today used by “Singaporeans.” I refer to the two contrastive positions, first, as *postracial policing*—a strategy that indexes “the Singaporean” as the persona whose speech ought to be taken as the reference-point for “correct” Singlish—and second, “*Mother Tongue*” *sourcing*—a strategy that insists on fidelity to patterns-of-use embodied by the (racialized) speakers of (racialized) “Mother Tongues.”

I argue that, despite attempts to recruit Singlish to divergent ideological projects, these divergent projects co-participate in the construction of what I call an *image of standard*. Images of standard, like other images, should be understood as a product of what Constantine Nakassis calls aesthetic textuality: a “principle for construing the sensuousness of semiosis” (2019, 70) through which feeling itself comes to be structured. In the contestations over Singlish that I describe here, this includes the feeling that there is *one correct way to do Singlish* even across

divergent ideological positions, and even in the absence of standardization as such. To be clear: Singlish is not being standardized, and yet, the fact that certain speech sounds and written signs (i.e. signs inscribed in a visual-orthographic channel), have been sociohistorically linked to contrasting raciolanguage communities work together to construct a feeling that some fashions of speaking and writing are wrong: they are deviations from an ideologically neutralized, standard-like norm. This can be understood, following the linguistic anthropologist Greg Urban, as a kind of metaculture of standardization, a culture of the interpretation of culture that “aids culture in its movement through space and time [and] gives a boost to the culture that it is about, helping to propel it on its journey” (Urban 2001, 4).

My aims in this chapter are twofold: first, I elaborate some of the well-trodden conceptual and theoretical ground that is standardization. As stated above, images of standard are distinct from standardizing projects and their various institutionalizations—from the contextual, historically- and socio-culturally specific ways in which one learns to acquiesce to policing by standardizing institutions, or to subordinate others via performances of linguistic gatekeeping (Silverstein 2010; Rosa 2016; 2019). Second, I aim to explicate how a concern for “correct” Singlish—animating, and animated by, totalizing images of standard—serves as a resource in situated acts of comparison among different audiences. These audiences are indexed through linguistic performances that in turn index not only kinds of speakers, but also kinds of addressees or overhearers—that is, various listening subjects, ratified or unratified. In doing so, interactants engage in acts of comparison to signal their value-laden orientations, or footings (Agha 2005), toward other large-scale axes of differentiation taken up in encounters beyond the Singlish debate per se. I reintroduce these axes—*local–global divides*, on the one hand, and *racialized majority–minority divides*, on the other—in Sections 2–4 of this chapter.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows: the first section revisits Michael Silverstein’s “cone of standardization” (Silverstein 2003b; 2017). The second provides further background on ideological constructions of Singlish as a variety (or set of varieties) out of its myriad available raciolinguistic-register contrasts—that is, “alternate ways of ‘saying “the same” thing’ considered ‘appropriate to’ particular contexts of usage” (ibid, 212), differences among which are interpreted by participants as conveying social information about the speakers, listeners, features of the situation, etc. Third, I analyze performances of stances of postracial policing in public literary events, interviews, and online commentary. Finally, I introduce stances of “Mother Tongue” sourcing as they appear in literary events and interviews. I conclude by considering images of standard beyond elite arenas, examining a case of spontaneous interaction in which competing figures were taken up in an act of non-public gatekeeping.

Aesthetic Textuality and Conic Images of Standard

Much has been written about standardization—its ideologies, institutions, and contextual manifestations past and present. In particular, the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein’s extensive work on language ideologies of standardization (Silverstein 1996; 2003b; 2017) has analyzed the model underlying the global movement of standardization, which he calls the “cone of standardization,” a cultural model comprising a “multi-dimensional radial topology of variation of verbal behaviors in the language community, in which any noticeable deviation from standard points to...some identifiable ascribed social characteristics of speakers, of their addressees, or, in short, of anything characterizing the situation in which forms of the non-standard occur” (Silverstein 2017, 136). To put it differently, the invocation of a cone indexes the fact that there is a metaphorically three-dimensional social and cultural space through which speakers themselves move, and in which they are located by others; this model narrows near its

point, meaning that the space of acceptable variation gets smaller the nearer to the imagined standard one moves, at the same time that one moves hierarchically further from varieties ideologically located as “lower” on the cone.

As Silverstein has articulated them, the regimes of language standardization through which this conic model is variously materialized has historically and structurally been linked to a “culture of monoglot standardization” (Silverstein 1996). As elaborated during my discussion of the “indigenized nation-state” in Chapter 2 (C. J. W.-L. Wee 1993), this has been a crucial feature of Enlightenment efforts at aligning primordially monoglot “nations” with the state formations that govern them. Linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have tracked how local versions of the conic model produce multiple stigmatizations: speaking a “vernacular” language alongside a “national language” or failing to speak a “national language” altogether can call one’s citizenship into question (Blommaert 2009) or can limit one’s ability to participate in “national” markets (Heller and McElhinny 2017, 94–102*ff*). This intersects with broader group-based judgments, as “assessments of particular individuals’ language[-]use often invoke...ideas about the (in)competence and (il)legitimacy of entire racialized groups” (Rosa 2016, 163–64).

Of course, these dynamics are slippery and ever-shifting (*ibid*, 166). Even in regimes—like the E.U. or Singapore—that valorize raciolinguistic “diversity,” a culture of monoglot standardization still works to project a neutral top-and-center for each language, a bundle of “codified norms of correctness” (Gal 2006, 167) according to which racialized speakers’ (in)competence and (il)legitimacy is judged. As Heller and Rosa have argued in the context of francophone Canadian- and American Spanish–English bilingual education, respectively, bilingualism is frequently imagined by policymakers, educators, and scholars as “double monolingualism,” with the ideal “bilingual speaker” as one who can refer to and predicate about

any topic fully in two standardized denotational codes. Inability to do so deems one “incompetent” (Heller 2006, 83–110*ff*), even languageless—“incapable of producing *any* legitimate language” (Rosa 2016, 163). Further, different languages within multilingual polities are also often hierarchically ranked, whether due to their ideological status as a high-prestige “global” language or their positive affective value as expressions of various kinds of “local” identities.

For my purposes, the upshot is that the “cone of standardization” ought to be can thus be understood as a generic image of standard, available for presupposition and entailment by various audiences at various scales, but one that is nevertheless only and always materialized contextually. This demands an attention to the aesthetics of standard-like-ness as it motivates embodied investments in registers deemed standard—as well as the statuses those registers make available (Silverstein 2017, 246–47). I suggest that sustained attention to the image of standard highlights the ways in which sensuous qualities get attributed to “correct” (versus incorrect) speech in processes aimed at making standard-backed prescriptive norms (Romero 2012; Tupas and Rubdy 2015; Duane 2017) detachable from their text-specific tokens, rendering them available to de- and recontextualization: to “circulation” as interdiscursivities (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Gal 2018) or events of citation (Nakassis 2012; 2013b; 2016). When evaluating Singlish, some instances of use come to *feel* correct—or not—as an effect of the structuring of qualities felt to diagram a conic, standard-like structure. While images of standard almost certainly underlie overt standardization processes and projects, they also serve as a basis for evaluating speech according to its standard-likeness as a perceivable feature of its structured qualities, even in the absence of standardization as such.

The Singlish Controversy and the Speak Good English Movement

Anxieties over language—and their attendant policy responses—have been a recurrent feature of Singapore’s independent history. Policymakers, politicians, and laypersons alike have long agreed that English is at both necessary for maintaining racial harmony among Singaporeans—serving as a “neutral medium” that does not privilege the “Mother Tongue” of any “race”—and a means of connecting to the global economy (Kramer-Dahl 2003; L. Wee 2015; 2018). At the same time, English is positioned as a threat to the “cultural roots” of the CMIO “races” (Tan 2017; see also Barr 2000). As I noted in Chapter 2, English-use was not widespread until after Singapore’s independence, during 1970s implementations of compulsory English-medium education (Y.-Y. Tan 2017, 95) and “Mother Tongue” acquisition-planning (ibid, 97–98). In other words, as state language policies took hold, Singlish came to be seen during the 1990s as an excess of Singaporeans’ “English-knowing bilingualism” (Pakir 1991).

These anxieties motivated the launch of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in 1999. Now in its second decade, this sustained language-planning campaign was designed in its early years to eliminate Singlish. At the time of its launch, the stakes were made clear: Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew famously, and polemically, proclaimed that “Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans” (K. Y. Lee 1999). In the same month in which then-Senior Minister Lee made his speech, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong singled out the eponymous Singlish-speaking character of a local television sitcom, *Phua Chu Kang*, as both example and source of the problem. Prime Minister Goh announced that his office had called the broadcaster to “persuade” them to enroll the character in English classes. If left unchecked, Goh and other commentators insisted, such TV shows would give impressionable Singaporeans the idea that Singlish was acceptable, even desirable. It might seem comical, even absurd, to imagine the

Prime Minister's Office of a wealthy nation-state calling up the producers of a television show to demand specific plot changes. However, this ought to be interpreted, I suggest, as an index of the anxiety with which Singlish eradication was then being reframed as an economic necessity (L. Wee 2018, 8–9).

In response to decades-long public debates over the need to speak “Good English” rather than Singlish (the latter equated to “bad-” or “broken English”), many Singlish advocates insisted that the two were not mutually exclusive. Building on decades of advocacy work, but particularly since 2015, the terms of the debate have undergone a sea change: public-sphere discourses today much more commonly position Singlish as “uniquely Singaporean,” a language of its own, emblematic of a “desired local identity” (Hiramoto 2019, 451) and an “authentic” medium for the state to communicate with “everyday Singaporeans” (often superficially; Khoo 2015). This is due in no small part to a concession by Singlish defenders that “awareness” is a necessary aim (Kramer-Dahl 2003): Singaporeans must know the difference between Singlish and Standard English (see Chapter 5)—to know when, with whom, and for what purposes to use one or the other. Singaporeans can have their Singlish and “code-switch,” too.

In the following section, I trace out the raciolinguistic register contrasts that come to be ideologically reflected-on as participating in an overarching, totalizing image of Singlish in some instances, but in others come to be ideologically reflected-on as pointing toward sub-national raciolanguage communities as audiences whose gaze must be anticipated in various ways.

Singlish as Raciolinguistic-Ideological Assemblage

As much as Singlish gets commonly talked about in public discourses as if it were a single thing, most (if not all) commentators in Singapore will be quick to accede that there is not one Singlish. Further, they are often adept at projecting and construing both kinds of speaking

personae and situations of language-use from a given linguistic form of Singlish, or vice versa. This is not to deny that there are regularities-of-use that might correlate with different speakers and events of speaking; rather, my point here is that these regularities are neither essential, nor independent of the ideological discourses in and through which they are reflected on. That is, a given register might be associated with a given persona, but it can also be performed by others—whether sincerely or ironically, whether to align with the stereotyped persona or to draw attention to it for another purpose (e.g. to mock or satirize). The ability to felicitously or authentically (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Silverstein 2014) perform a register is asymmetrically distributed across groups of speakers, and the number of those capable of performing registers is always smaller than those capable of recognizing them (Agha 2007a, 14–15); smaller still is the number of those able to describe “*how* they recognize them” (ibid, 15).

This is not to say that descriptions are not, or cannot, be given, even indefinitely. Quite the opposite. It is by no means unique to Singapore for speakers to be able to produce accounts of what they recognize and how, not only spontaneously but often virtuosically. An example should make this clearer. In the early half of my fieldwork research, I was participating in a reading group at the National University of Singapore. An article—I forget by which author(s)—used “enregisterment” in its analysis. The participants, predominantly master’s and Ph.D. students, asked me for a concise example of both register contrasts and enregisterment process. I was reminded in the moment of an essay by literary scholar Philip Holden, in which he elaborated on the challenges that writers in Singapore face when representing its “shifting polylingual environment” through literature (Holden 2017a). Paraphrasing Holden, I invited the group to think about two people in Singapore. These individuals meet and exchange a common greeting, inquiring whether their interlocutor has eaten. This could be Mandarin: 吃饭了没有?

(*Chīfànle méiyǒu*) ‘Have you eaten yet [or not]?’ Or it could be Malay: Sudah makan? Code-mixing is also possible—Makan already?—as are various translational calques: eat already? Eaten or not? It could take a standardized form: have you eaten yet? Or even: how are you?

Each of these would serve as a greeting, but would do so in a different way, and the differences potentially convey information. Granted, my use of this example was not meant to exhaust the range of possibilities, but rather to spark further reflection. And reflect they did: in addition to narrating the settings and participants in which one or another alternant was likely to occur, participants were eager to share further alternants, whether in Sinitic varieties (called “dialects”) like Hokkien, Teochew, or Cantonese, or languages like Tamil or Burmese. Only Chinese people speaking to each other would use Mandarin, they averred, and probably they would be older, since young Chinese-Singaporeans do not like to speak Mandarin with each other. Usually it would be Malay Singaporeans speaking to each other in Malay, but members of older generations might do this with each other regardless of whether this is their “Mother Tongue,” since knowledge of Malay was more common a generation or two ago. “Makan already?” was obviously Singlish, they asserted, but one participant also ventured that all of the other alternants could be Singlish, too, with the exception of the Mandarin³—if and only if they were spoken among Singaporeans. (A brief debate ensued over whether one needed to also use a “Singaporean accent,” but this was provisionally decided in the negative).

Things got more complicated as the participants introduced the question of writing—whether someone were to send this greeting in a text message, for instance. If you wrote, “makan

³ And yet, as an incident in Chapter 5 illustrates, even a Mandarin sentence like this one might find itself typified as a Singlish utterance, though this is often by virtue of (1) its use of a stereotypically Singaporean greeting formula; (2) its use in an act of code-switching; and (3) its use in an informal interaction between or among Singaporeans (i.e. not foreigners).

already?” as “makan orready?”—the latter described by participants as “using the Singlish spelling”—then it was Singlish. Some also ventured that using the Hanyu Pinyin in place of the Hanzi might also be Singlish, but using characters for, say, Hokkien would be Hokkien, not Singlish, since Singlish speakers would not know the Hokkien writing system.

Following this experience, I often began using this example as an elicitation device in a range of other settings. In such encounters, interlocutors were always ready and eager to narrate a scene and its participants, as well as to narrate alternative scenes and participants: for instance, as one interlocutor told me, a Malay shopkeeper or seller at a hawker centre (an open-air complex with stalls selling cooked food) might greet a Chinese patron in Mandarin to be friendly, or vice versa, especially if they were both older—or, conversely, if there was a wide age gap between them. However, this was always from the “unexpected” direction (e.g. a non-Chinese Singaporean speaking Mandarin), I was often told, otherwise it could be deemed to be racist, since it could seem that the Mandarin speaker was trying to exclude or alienate the non-Mandarin speaker. While I will not elaborate all the scenarios—hypothetical or reported—recounted to me during these elicitations, I here want to draw attention to their ready availability for narration. This does not mean that Singaporeans carry such distinctions—and the discourse strategies for deploying them in and through narratives—in their heads. Rather, they exist as a social achievement in contexts of performance, a socialized resource whose deployments shift based on the scale of interpretation and anticipated audiences whose uptake gets differentially imagined.

Put differently, participants in social life are adept at presuming, thereby co-constructing links between linguistic forms and raciolinguistic personhood—as well as producing narratives about those links. This, I suggest, is a condition of possibility for totalizing images of the

raciolanguage community, in the first instance, but it is also a condition for contestations over who the proper custodians of Singlish are or ought to be: whether “all Singaporeans,” or members of the raciolanguage communities whose “Mother Tongue” languages serve as Singlish source material. Not all projects aimed at constructing links and narratives end up being overtly (or even tacitly) contested, but when it occurs, the forms of the contestations are of special interest to me as a site for understanding how links get drawn, narrated, and contested, as well as by whom—that is, by individuals occupying what social positions. I aim to elaborate this in the remainder of this chapter.

Before I continue with my analysis of the two figures and stances that co-animate an image of Singlish standard as a condition of their mutual contestation, I offer an explanation and a concession. I follow other linguistic anthropologists writing about self-consciously “hybrid” registers of language by considering Singlish not as an “objective ‘thing’ to be studied for its exciting linguistic features [but rather] as a series of value judgments and citations that produce a ‘language’ in the sphere of public discourse” (Newell 2009, 179). At the same time, I acknowledge that my own use of singular nouns and pronouns for referring to an object and focus of projects of value-creation and -ascription is fundamentally in tension with this stance (Spitulnik 1998, 31). I have nevertheless chosen to continue using “Singlish” here to foreground the fact that it is commonly referred to in this way by those in Singapore who deploy it. This thingy quality makes Singlish readily available for differential value-creation projects, including those that seek to recruit it to projects of postracial policing, as I discuss in the next section.

Postracial Policing and Counter-Critiques of Racialized Majoritarian Privilege

In this section, I trace out the discursive contours and interactional deployments of *postracial policing*: a discourse strategy that takes Singlish as *sui generis*, indexing “the

Singaporean” as the persona whose speech embodies image-texts of “correct” performance, independent of the members of raciolinguistic groups that are minoritized both demographically and representationally. I examine how individuals engage in the work of scaling sets of local–global divides as encompassing other concerns. They do this by voicing the figure of the *foreigner-who-gets-it-wrong* as an ideological double to a figure that dominates debates over “Good English”: that of the *foreigner-who-does-not-understand*. While the *foreigner-who-does-not-understand* has long been voiced by SGEM spokespeople and those who claim that Singlish is a barrier to “global communication” (hence a threat to Singapore’s economic and geopolitical security), the *foreigner-who-gets-it-wrong*, meanwhile, affords “the Singaporean” an opportunity to occupy the role of linguistic gatekeeper, rather than the position of the linguistically gate-kept. This entails a higher-order indexical value (Silverstein 2003a): individuals performing postracial policing also enact a counter-critique or racialized majoritarian privilege, whether implicating this dialogue by its conspicuous avoidance (Irvine 1996, 152), or by demanding that others focus on foreigners rather than “mak[ing] it about race.”

As I also introduced in Chapter 2, a growing body of critical discourses in Singapore, both academic and nonacademic, have pointed to the hegemonic racialized status enjoyed by Chinese Singaporeans. This has increasingly taken the form of critiques of “Chinese Privilege” (Thanapal 2015; A. Koh and Dierkes-Thrun 2015) together with rejections of or challenges to those critiques (Zainal and Abdullah 2019; D. P. S. Goh and Chong 2020). I will not rehash this history or these debates here. My point in drawing attention to this again is to reiterate the fact that Singapore’s system of racialized majoritarian privilege does not emanate transparently from ethno-racial personhood—that is, from raciolanguage community membership—nor from demographic majority-status, but rather co-constitutes both as conditions of and justification for

privilege. Majority and minority statuses are not self-evident, but point to the issue of who counts, within what “universe of enumeration,” why, and with what effects (Gal 2017, 224–225).

In explicating situated deployments of postracial policing as a dual strategy for rescaling perceived local–global divides and enacting a counter-critique of racialized majoritarian privilege, I draw on ethnographic data gathered from artistic practitioners and literary events, together with online commentaries responding to mediatized texts. Though seemingly a rarified domain, literary practitioners—and the texts they circulate as publications, talks, performances, etc.—often catalyze debates that circulate widely in genres and registers of public communication in Singapore, particularly through mediatizing institutions and reportage. Literary practitioners and figures are often overtly drawn into, or targeted in, public debates by activists or politicians. Literature specifically, and the arts generally, have long been taken as central to the construction of a Singaporean identity (S. Lim 1989; T. A. Koh 2010; Thow 2010; Poon and Whitehead 2017); beyond written works, festivals and other events serve as important nodes for reflexively framing issues as matters of public concern.

The Singapore Writers Festival (SWF), a key site for my analysis in this chapter, first began in 1986 as part of the Singapore Arts Festival (Poon 2018, 127). An officially multilingual affair, the festival has historically been predominantly Anglophone (ibid; see also Tay 2010, 121). SWF is important to the Singapore state’s arts- and cultural policy (Ooi 2008; 2010), contributing to “strategic cultivation of [Singapore’s] identity as nation *and* global city” (Poon 2018, 128). Scores of literary figures—both Singaporean and international—are featured annually, with programing fitted to a rotating cycle of themes that highlight Singapore’s official

languages.⁴ Though frequently presented as merely instrumental to state branding efforts—as so much “creative icing” on an “economically vibrant cake” (Ministry of Information and the Arts 2000, 47, cited in Poon 2018, 130)—others have pointed out that festivals like SWF, whatever their function in statecraft and branding, still serve as key sites for the ritual performance of a reflexively literary Singaporean public, as well as sites at which issues of broader social and cultural concern are articulated (E. Tay 2010, 124–130). In 2019, many of the sessions, for instance, dealt with issues of translation, and the boundaries of the category of “Sing Lit”—a portmanteau of “Singapore(an)” and “Literature,” the boundaries of which have been extensively debated (ought it to include all literature in Singapore, or just works by Singaporean citizens?).

While many discussions of “race” are still dealt with during festivals and arts events via a range of avoidance strategies—most often by referring to languages instead of “races” (e.g. “Mandarin,” not “Chinese[-Singaporeans]”), or discussing “communities” as a term of euphemistic reference—participants are aware that arts spaces are something of an exception. While members of artistic-literary publics will sometimes narrate the pitfalls of drawing attention to racialized majoritarian privilege (which can result in police reports, investigations, and penalties ranging from fines to prison sentences), in other instances, members of these artistic-literary publics merely narrate their concerns in terms of literary realism—that Singlish is a sociolinguistic fact in Singapore, hence any realistic depiction ought to include it—or by drawing attention to the fact that, since the first decade of the 2000s, the state has by and large come to treat artistic and literary practice as a relatively nonthreatening social arena, notable exceptions

⁴ 2019 was (English) “A Language of Our Own”; 2018 (Mandarin) “界 *jiè* The World(s) We Live In”; 2017 (Tamil) “அறம் *Aram*,” glossed in promotional materials as ‘Good’; 2016 (Malay) “*Sayang*,” a polysemic item that can be a verb or a noun, a term of endearment or a lament; 2015 (English) “Island of Dreams,” etc.

aside.⁵ As a well-known poet quipped after a SWF event, “when we write we can be very free, because the government thinks Singaporeans don’t read.” This was met with laughter.

The primary ethnographic anchoring point for the discussion that follows is a series of four public lectures, titled “Words We Love.” In each of the lectures, a Singaporean writer selected a “Singlish word” to explore as they saw fit over the course of a 45-minute talk. These included “Words We Love: Dei,” an etymologically Tamil item (Gopinath 2019); “Words We Love: Lepak,” etymologically Malay (Anwar 2019); “Words We Love: Bo Jio,” etymologically Hokkien 福建话 *Fújiàn huà* (Chia 2019); and “Words We Love: Lah,” from various etymologies (Gwee 2019). As advertised in the official series description, “[i]n this mini-lecture series, we examine four words and phrases Singaporeans love and the richness of meaning they offer us.” However, the label of “mini-lecture series” was an undersell: though all of them drew on scholarship and authoritative texts (e.g. a popular Singlish dictionary) to varying degrees, each of the four lecturers were also consummate performers, well-known for their ability to entertain and get laughs. I here deal with the lectures non-sequentially, beginning with the last out of four, in which I suggest an enregistered discourse strategy of postracial policing is apparent.

In “Words We Love: Lah,” Gwee, with whom I opened this chapter, focused on a discourse particle (lah) that has become highly emblematic of Singlish since the 1970s. The majority of the lecture, approximately 25 out of 35 minutes (not including the 10-minute Q&A),

⁵ A recent case is the 2015 graphic novel by the artist Sonny Liew. The work’s funding was withdrawn by the National Arts Council of Singapore after its printing. The stated reason was that the work’s “retelling of Singapore’s history...potentially undermines the authority or legitimacy of the Government and its public institutions, and thus breaches...funding guidelines” (Silvio 2018, 6). Reportage on the funding withdrawal drove the book’s popularity and sent it into multiple rounds of reprints. After it won several prestigious international awards for comic art—a Singaporean first—various state institutions ironically began circulating news of the award to boost Singapore’s global image as a “creative city” (Ooi 2010).

was spent addressing Singlish “errors” and admonishing against a reliance on “origins.” In answer to the question of who is making the “common mistakes,” the figure who “gets it wrong” is the ang moh, a ‘foreigner’ or ‘white person’. Attributed to Hokkien 红毛 (Mandarin *hóng máo*, lit. ‘red hair’), the term often refers narrowly to ‘white person/people,’ but also to ‘foreigner’ broadly. As Gwee narrated it (boldface indicates emphasis): “Some consider lah among our most mysterious words, if not **the** most mysterious word. It’s because we know **intuitively** what it’s supposed to mean, but the exact meaning isn’t easy to pin down.”

A slide appeared on the screen behind him, titled “Don’t Do This.” This section was spent enumerating “common mistakes” in a deadpan comedic style: (1) “getting the tone wrong” (in the sense of intonation, not tonal inflection: i.e. the placement and usage of lah are technically correct, but do not accomplish the user’s intended effect); (2) “dissing the word” by dismissing it as a way to exclude foreigners (this came with a defense: “We’re not using it just to exclude you! [But] you really need to go native to know how to say it as we say it”); (3) making a “Sound of Music joke” (“We’ve already heard ‘Is lah a note to follow so?’ from gazillion ang mohs!”); (4) using it as a form of “hip address” (e.g. “Wazzap lah?”); and (6) as a Romance-Language style feminine definite article (e.g. “lah Little Prince”).

The next section—signaled by a slide titled “Origins”—lasted 15 minutes, and explored a speculative etymology linking lah to Malay and Sinitic languages. It ended with a caveat: “When we’re dealing with Singlish, we must admit multiplicity and transformation. It’s what makes Singlish lah different to Malay or Chinese lah...So the question of origins only goes that far...As with any language, absorbed words move away from their original meaning. So, with lah, there are senses that don’t fall into any source language use.” During the post-lecture Q&A, an

audience member added that “Tamil has a lah as well”; Gwee responded animatedly, “So it **really** does come from all the languages of Singapore!”

Relatively overt responses to arguments regarding Singlish “origins,” meanwhile, can be found in online commentaries posted in response to opinion editorials in Singaporean media. For instance, a 2019 article published by a self-identified Chinese-Singaporean author—titled “Look Can We Please Learn How to Spell Malay Words Properly Before Using Them???” (Lam 2019)—was framed by the author as a rebuke against “fellow privileged brethren.” After hiring a polling company to carry out a randomized survey of 4,000 Singaporeans, the author reported that, as suspected, “Chinese people” performed “worst among the races” in their ability to spell Malay words. Though the use of a survey methodology was unusual, the article was still fairly typical for critiques of racialized majoritarian privilege, in that it used wrong orthography as an index of wrong phonetics, and vice versa. The article opened with an example that I have seen and overheard being debated numerous times: “jelak,” a Malay item that, in Singlish, describes ‘the feeling from eating too much rich food,’ metaphorically, ‘to be tired from doing something too many times.’ Many interlocutors use formulations like “pronouncing the letter t” to index a common verbal error: of replacing a glottal stop—indicated by roman k, i.e. jelak /jə-‘laʔ/—with an aspirated or unaspirated dental stop—indicated by roman t, i.e. jelat /jə-‘lat/ or /jə-‘lat^h/.

In numerous online responses, however, commentators replied by dismissing the focus on “Chinese-Singaporeans”:

T. Y.: Today got so many ang moh try to speak Singlish and make so many mistake . Why the author never talk about this? [...]

K. L.: This is just how we Singaporean say it. Minority dun be so sensitive lah

Comments like the first (by T. Y.) refocused attention on “ang moh” speakers who, like the Chinese-Singaporeans who were the focus of the article, also “make so many mistake[s].”

Though the comment did not state that Chinese-Singaporeans are *not* making mistakes, this comment nevertheless can be seen to deflect attention away from racialized majoritarian privilege in Singapore, insisting that local–foreign divides deserve the same, or greater, attention in public talk about Singlish, thereby working to rescale the issue as pointing toward an axis of differentiation beyond Singapore. Comments like the second, meanwhile, locate the perceived problem in minority “sensitivities.”

While “Words We Love: Lah” did not explicitly name the target of critique in rejecting “origins,” Gwee still obliquely implicated the critique of racialized majoritarian privilege, voiced by critics as a concern over “Chinese people getting it wrong.” In the counter-critique, Gwee and others cast Singlish as *sui generis*, comprising items detachable from their etymological sources. However, Singlish still needed to be policed—both against non-Singaporeans’ errors and others’ misplaced trust in “origins”—not by one raciolinguistic group, but by “the Singaporean.” From the relatively covert counter-critique of racialized majoritarian privilege articulated in the “Words We Love” lecture to the relatively overt counter-critiques in online commentaries, such performances foreground, but disavow, “race” as an available explanation, in the process siting Singaporean-ness (and its defense) as a more encompassing—and pressing—concern.

“Mother Tongue” Sourcing and Racialized Community Gatekeeping

In this final ethnographic section, I outline “Mother Tongue” sourcing, examining instances in which it serves as a strategy for enacting critiques of racialized majoritarian privilege, in the process insisting on the necessity of racialized community gatekeeping: an insistence on “correct” Singlish’s fidelity to patterns-of-use embodied by (racialized) speakers of (racialized) “Mother Tongues.” When voiced in interaction, appeals to “Mother Tongue” sourcing signals a speaker as taking a stance directly opposed to those who enact a strategy of

postracial policing, and indexes competing stances regarding the speech communities—“all Singaporeans” versus racialized speakers of “Mother Tongues”—whose habitual use gets taken as the model for competing images of standard, conic models of valorized language-use against which individual acts of speaking feel correct (or not). When performing “Mother Tongue” sourcing, interactants focalized a majority–minority axis of differentiation as the salient scale of concern, often, but not always, to the exclusion of a concern for constructed local–global divides. In this section, I revisit the last three among the “Words We Love” lectures. While all of the remaining performances insist on the importance of embedding Singlish words “in a community”—an articulation of raciolinguistic community gatekeeping—only two of the three do so to enact a critique of racialized majoritarian privilege.

While in “Words We Love: Lah” (Gwee 2019), exemplary tokens of use were few, the remaining lectures in the series differed markedly. All three extensively deployed selections of (auto)ethnographic vignettes and mediatized texts, rather than utilizing abstracted semantic or functional glosses. The first lecture in the series—“Words We Love: Dei” (Gopinath 2019)—took place on a Monday evening, delivered by an Indian-born Tamil-Singaporean poet, Shivram. The lecture was presented in a format common to Shivram’s works, juxtaposing found texts sourced from media reportage, online commentary, and recorded spontaneous conversations (sometimes digitally recorded, sometimes written ex post). It began with a reading of an 880-word *Straits Times* article from 23 March 2016, titled “Lee Kuan Yew Turns One Today in Tamil Nadu” (Ganapathy 2016) The article described a Tamilian boy, Lee Kuan Yew, named after Singapore’s founding Prime Minister in acknowledgement of the historical connections between Tamil Nadu and Singapore. The rest of the lecture comprised a series of vignettes: the first, a childhood memory in which the poet’s two pet goats were slaughtered for Ramadan. As

he transitioned between the second and third vignettes, Shivram asserted, with a deadpan monotone and staccato rhythm, “Not all deis are made equal, as you can tell. Some people say dei is kind of like a ‘hey.’ Those people do not know what they are talking about” (Gopinath 2019). This was met by laughter from the audience. He continued, describing a man mocked online in 2018 for shouting a prolonged “dei” into a reporter’s camera to express his rage at the death and destruction following an attack on a Malaysian Hindu temple; then dialogue from the Rajinikanth film *Baasha*; and finally, a conversation with a Chinese-Singaporean taxi driver: “Dei you work in I.T. ah? I know a lot of Indian work in I.T., right?” (ibid).

“Words We Love: Lepak” (Anwar 2019) was delivered on Tuesday by the Malay-Singaporean writer, playwright, and television personality, Nessa. The lecture began with an extended description of the sociality and sociology of what was titled “The Malay Lepak”: “To be Malay is not to lepak, but to **know** how to lepak” (ibid). The lecture went on to gloss the term lepak generally as ‘relax/chill,’ but with multiple caveats (i.e. not all relaxing/chilling is lepak). Nessa then presented a lepak typology, describing each type according to its contextual features, participants, and settings. She noted that stereotypic associations between Malay people and the lepak have long been used in Singapore as evidence of Malay “laziness” and “unproductivity,” but that this fails to understand the way the practice functions “in the community” (ibid).

On Thursday, a Chinese-Singaporean poet and editor, Christine, delivered the next of the Singlish mini-lectures—“Words We Love: Bojio” (Chia 2019)—to a packed audience. Unlike any of the other lectures, Christine began by citing the famed *Coxford Singlish Dictionary*, an important text in galvanizing resistance to 1990s efforts at eradicating Singlish. An image of the Dictionary appeared on the screen behind the lectern: “*Bo Jio*. 没叫 Verb. A Hokkien

exclamation used to express dismay at not being invited along for an enjoyable event.” As the presenter elaborated, the phrase indexes a “quintessentially Hokkien”—not generically Chinese—“FOMO” (fear of missing out). The lecture proceeded through a series of banana-related puns (没叫 *bojio* ‘did not call’ sounds like 没蕉 *bojio* ‘without/no banana’; Hokkien *jio* is shorthand for 金蕉 *kimjio* ‘banana’) before examining a series of “incorrect” uses, all of them misfires involving the wrong addressee: “[j]ust like you cannot anyhow use lah, you also cannot anyhow⁶ use bojio. Cannot use bojio with elders, bosses, or children, because they are **not** your friends” (ibid).

In different ways, each of the three lectures made references to the “appropriation” of Tamil, Malay, and Hokkien words in Singlish. When I later contacted the individual lecturers, I thus took pains to be careful about calling the words “Singlish words,” having come to the conclusion that “appropriation” involved claiming that these were *Singlish*, as opposed to Tamil, Malay, or Hokkien. I later realized that I had misinterpreted their concerns. Sitting with Shivram outside a gallery a couple weeks later, he began by critiquing the form of Singlish celebrated as unifying all Singaporeans: “[i]f you look at what Singlish actually is- what people actually say it is, it’s very Chinese, and Malay that’s been appropriated...” Here he trailed off. I began to follow up by asking about his lecture without calling the series “Singlish words,” but I turned out to be hedging too much: “The series was all Singlish words,” he cut me off to assert. When I spoke with Christine a month later, she also asserted that, while appropriation is a risk, it rarely occurs: “**Hokkien** culture is really unique, and you need to understand that to get it, to get bojio. If you don’t get it, you just appropriate the culture. But I **really** think most people get it.”

⁶ In this usage, “anyhow” can be glossed as ‘in a haphazard manner’.

Later, when interviewing Nessa, the presenter from the “Words We Love: Lepak” lecture, our discussion focused mainly on the issue of errors. Nessa asserted that “most people use lepak wrongly.” However, Nessa focused primarily on errors “pronunciation,” which she sharply distinguished from errors of “use.” Unlike pronunciation errors, errors of use are often not the user’s fault.⁷ “Words **evolve** to become different things, but at least take the root- the- the **essence** of lepak is, you know, essentially Malay, essentially from the Malay community.” In this framing, evolution, everyday use, and origins come together through pronunciation. While evolution leads to “wrong” usage in the sense that it detaches an item from its putative origins, for Nessa, this was not a problem, since the “wrong” form is still regularized across the speech community. The real problem was errors of “pronunciation.” Unlike errors of “use,” these indexed something worse: a “lack of effort.” She contrasted this with the effort made by non-Chinese-Singaporeans to pronounce “Chinese words and names” properly: “I mean, it’s a bit irritating because our national la- our- our national **song** is in Malay, but I still- we can- all of us know every single non-Malay speaker mispronounces it, then **why**? Why is that still happening?” Though Nessa initially asserted the consistent pronunciation effort by non-Chinese Singaporeans (which, it was implied by negative parallelism, was not reciprocated), the final turn raised the stakes, rescaling the mispronunciation of Malay in the anthem as a matter of national importance, articulated along raciolinguistic lines.

To return to my earlier mistake vis-à-vis “appropriation” talk: I had mistakenly assumed that a Chinese-Singaporean should not use Malay or Tamil words, and that one should not call Malay or Tamil words “Singlish” words. Yet what became apparent is that—even when scaled

⁷ **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis. Text followed by a dash (-) indicates truncated speech or a restart. Roman text inserted in [square brackets] has been added by the author for denotational clarity.

via raciolanguage-community distinctions (as with the “Hokkien community,” a subset of the “Chinese community”)—to avoid “appropriation” requires first and foremost that one “get[s] it”: that is, one must work to understand a “community” and a “culture,” and to use items focalized as a raciolinguistic community’s cultural patrimony in ways that accord to the images of standard performed by authorized users. In other words, as in the performance of postracial policing, such concerns over Singlish—voiced as “appropriation,” “distorting,” or “butchering”—yield forms of indexical inoculation (Silverstein 2017, 152–3; 1985): attributed misuses of a term (as misspellings and mispronunciations) are taken to point, at a higher order, toward a majoritarian disrespect for, disregard for, or ignorance of minoritized “races.” This move (re)locates the scale of concern, and the source of images of standard, to the level of majority–minority divides, while also critiquing performances of racialized majoritarian privilege.

Conclusion: Images of Standard Without Standardization

In the final months of my fieldwork research, during an informal gathering at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, a mostly good-natured confrontation occurred between two of my acquaintances, the first (S1) a Chinese-Singaporean man in his 30s, the second (S2) a Malay-Singaporean woman in her mid-20s. It began with S1’s mispronunciation of the aforementioned playwright Alfian Sa’at’s surname, but quickly escalated to a contestation over language, one that sharply staged the contrast between postracial policing and “Mother Tongue” sourcing. The initial impetus was not even an overt correction directed at S1, but rather a clarification: his utterance of Sa’at as /Sai-at/ rather than /Saʔ-'at/ was unintelligible to interactants at first. That is, we did not at first understand who he was talking about. Needless to say, this was clarified relatively quickly and the conversation moved on, but several turns later, S1 reentered the discussion with what initially seemed like a non sequitur:

- 1 S1: Nowadays everybody got problem. Why ah? Nasi lemak,⁸ jelat, this is just how we Singaporeans say it! Suddenly everybody trying to say not correct, not correct.
- 3 S2: I speak Malay. I can **tell** you it's not correct.
S1: So, Malay is different, you say it differently in Malay, ok lor.⁹ But Singaporeans have our
- 5 way to say it, our own pronunciation. Cannot say it's not correct, it's just our way.
S2: Huh? Malay not Singaporean is it?
- 7 S1: No:: la::h. Why you say it like tha::t?...So for Malay, it's different lor. Why must tell me all other Singaporeans are wrong?

It became clear as the interaction unfolded that S1 had taken himself to be interpellated into the role of the “Chinese person butchering Malay”—a role he did not want to play. Deploying common shibboleths of “error” (nasi lemak/lemak and jelat/jelak), S1 went on to broadly dismiss linguistic critique as racialized, parochial concerns. To counter this, in lines 1–2 and 7–8, he claimed “all other Singaporeans” as the measure of an utterance’s “correctness,” not Malay, which is “different.” This was countered in turn by S2 in lines 3 and 6, as she first asserted herself as a raciolinguistic authority—asserting her status as an ethn racially Malay woman, hence a Malay-language speaker authorized to make judgments about it—then challenged the exclusion of the category of “Malay” from an encompassing category of “Singaporeans.”

While the turns in this interaction did not focalize or overtly typify any given item as *Singlish*, nor was Singlish otherwise brought up as such, I still see this interaction as bearing important continuities between the roles taken up in this conversation and the discourse strategies that have been my focus throughout the chapter. I find it additionally important that S1 was able to so readily deploy these items, which often rise to the level of awareness as worthy

⁸ The (mis)pronunciation of nasi lemak—a Malay rice dish—is another common shibboleth of “Chinese” error. Text followed by colons in the transcript (::) indicates a lengthened sound.

⁹ The particle “lor” is generally used to express resignation or grudging acceptance.

objects of contestation over Singlish. All this suggest to me that the wider contests over images of Singlish standard had come to serve as part of the interaction's emergent contextualization.

As I noted in this chapter's third section, I here concede once again that few, if any, of my Singaporean interlocutors subscribe overtly to the idea of a single, unified Singlish. In fact, many argue that multiple Singlishes exist, and that these vary according to socioeconomic class, "race," linguistic biography, and migration trajectories (though such variation is still often imagined in relatively rigid ways). In other words, contests over Singlish norms are rarely focused on standardization through processes and projects aimed at unifying Singlish or subjecting it to the managerial purview of standardizing institutions. And yet, such recognitions of multiplicity are still often subordinated to broader imaginaries according to which there is, or ought to be, a context-free variety—a standardized register—for each articulable stratum of Singlish's variation. Such stratified envelopes of linguistic enregisterment thus remain deployable in the service of maintaining conic images of a neutral top-and-center for each variety, a top-and-center to which everyone can (and should) aspire, and deviation from which gradiently locates one's degree of moral failing.

This chapter has traced out two competing discourse registers in Singapore that implicate one another in a structure of available contrastive stances, while also co-participating in the production and maintenance of images of standard as a highly ubiquitous kind of totalizing image through which raciolinguistic audiences mutually orient to and anticipate one another's responses. While these are sustained in part by the existence of hegemonic text genres (like dictionaries); mediatized public debates over language; and nested histories of standardization-

based education- and language-policy regimes,¹⁰ as I have sought to show, images of standard can be detached from, and circulate beyond, standardization as such. By tracing out the movement of an envelope of linguistic practices, evaluative discourses, and competing figures of personhood (Agha 2007b) across a distributed range of sites and objects, I have sought to show how an image of standard links together dispersed sites and objects through a shared concern for “correct” Singlish speech. This both generates judgements about the raciolinguistic embodiment of speakers, overhearers, and evaluators, and draws apparently competing positions together through their co-production of images of standard.

¹⁰ Singapore’s language policy and -planning regimes in general—and education-policy regimes in particular—have featured numerous, historically disjunct standardization efforts beyond the Speak Good English Movement. With the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, the previous Taiwanese standard (國語/国语 *Guóyǔ* ‘Mandarin’) was replaced by Modern Standard Mandarin (普通话 *Pǔtōnghuà*, though this is referred to in Singapore as 华语 *Huáyǔ* ‘Chinese language’); this was to suppress the use of “dialects,” thereby to eliminate Chinese intra-ethnic divisions (Bokhorst-Heng 1999). *Sebutan baku* ‘standard pronunciation’ was introduced to Malay instruction and mediatized industries in 1993, a constructed voice-from-nowhere to replace the previously widespread voice-from-somewhere: the Johor-Riau dialect (in 2007, however, a study noted that the Johor-Riau variety was still in widespread use; Sulor 2013, 7). Finally, “Standard Spoken Tamil” (SST) was introduced by the Ministry of Education as a supplement to “Literary Tamil” in 2005. A subdivision of the ‘L’ variety in the diglossic speech situation, SST is still a standardized variety and is monitored prescriptively. It is talked about by educators and policymakers as an ideal variety for students to (learn to) use “actively and spontaneously” in their “community” (Lakshmi 2012, 115).

Chapter Five: Local Bodies, Foreign Language

In July 2018, a debate team from Singapore placed third in the annual World Schools Debating Championships. Yet the competition itself, and the Singaporean team's strong performance, were generally overshadowed in Singapore by a Facebook post about it. Posted by Singapore's Law Minister K. Shanmugam, it stated: "[China wins English Language World Schools Debating Championships] The four teams in the semi-finals were China, India, Singapore and England. Three Asian countries, non-native speakers of English. Interesting" (2018). Shanmugam's post went on to construct a parallel between the outcome of the debate tournament—which pits teams of students ages 16–19 against one another—with a changing global order, in which “big countries like China, India” were Singapore's future “competition.” In the post's conclusion, Shanmugam turned the Chinese debate team's victory into an allegorical warning for the Singaporean polity writ large: “China has caught up very fast, and has begun overtaking, even in areas like mastery of English” (ibid).

Shared over 250 times, the post sparked controversy in both on- and offline talk. Many comments took the form of a critique of the People's Action Party (PAP)—Singapore's ruling political party since the granting of self-rule in 1959—whether for putatively allowing Singapore's competitive advantage to slip, or for the characterization of Singaporeans as “non-native speakers.” Some responded humorously by insisting that the Minister was correct: their “native tongue” was not English, but Singlish. Others insisted that because Singaporeans use English to study, to conduct business, to interact with friends, to communicate within families, even to joke, they are unequivocally “native speakers.” Still others defended Shanmugam's description, arguing that, though English may be Singapore's most widely spoken language, in many cases spoken from birth, it is “foreign” since it is not any local group's “Mother Tongue.”

Taken together, the Law Minister’s online post and responses to it highlight the way race and language come together in the figure of the “native speaker.” As I described in Chapter 2, this is not unique to Singapore: a category crucial to the emergence of nationalisms across the modern world, “Mother Tongues” have long been figured as the hereditary birthright of nations—groups defined by consanguinity, geographical origins, cultural practices, and the like (Bonfiglio 2010). As I also developed in Chapter 2, in Singapore as elsewhere, “Mother Tongue” is overtly linked to race, both in state-institutional arrangements and in interactional routines for imagining and talking about Singaporean society. Such links get made in the academy, through the widespread routine of beginning analyses of various phenomena from the starting-point of Singaporean multicultural-multiracialism.

As earlier chapters have also noted, race comprises neither a rarified bureaucratic-institutional structure nor an “etic”—that is, analyst-imposed—construct. Official race categories are listed on Singaporeans’ and residents’ identification cards, and this determines where one can buy a home (Haila 2016)¹ and how one can access social security benefits (Yeoh 2004, 2437–8; L. Y. C. Lim 1989). Students are required to study their “Mother Tongues” as a subject in school (though Malay and Indian students can opt to study Mandarin; Rahim 2010, 39); public signage and other state-produced textual materials are often (but not always) printed in four languages. Race is also explicitly inquired after in interaction: “What is your race?”—along with variations like, “What are you?” and “Where are you (*really*) from?”—are common getting-to-know-you questions, and individuals volunteer information about their race as part of various genres of

¹ This is oriented toward integration rather than segregation. To defend against the formation of ethnic enclaves, housing policy has been used since Singapore’s independence to ensure that public housing estates match the racial-demographic composition of the city-state as a whole. This is particularly relevant, since approximately 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing.

self-presentation. Emergent out of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories, such raciolinguistic chronotopes—narratives linking place, time, and speaking personae (Bakhtin 1981; Agha 2007b)—today serve to position an imagined there–then of ancestral “origins” and prior migration trajectories as weightier than a here–now of interactional co-presence (Wirtz 2014; Rosa 2019; see also PuruShotam 1998). “Race” itself comes into being through these historical processes, both as a resource deployable in interaction, and as a feature of reality to be “read” off the surface of things (often visually; see Chapter 3).

As I described in the dissertation’s Introduction and Chapter 4, during the 1960s, in the immediate post-independent aftermath, it was publicly argued that the defense of multiculturalism qua racial harmony required English as a unifying medium for both interracial and international communication. These discourses were used to position English—indexed exonormatively to American and British standard registers (L. Wee 2018, 33)—as a moral imperative, a “global language” necessary to Singapore’s socioeconomic development and to maintenance of harmony among its “races.” This meant that the domains of English-use had to be broadened through language planning and -policy. As language contact intensified in both state bureaucratic offices and educational institutions, representatives of state institutions were increasingly worried during the 1970s about the “falling standards” for written English (Low 2014, 441). Although English-substrate contact varieties had begun emerging in English-medium schools pre-1942 (see Platt 1975 for an early overview), it was not metadiscursively constructed as a public problem until the introduction of universal bilingual education policy from the 1970s (Y.-Y. Tan 2017, 99). Framed in this way as a threat, various contact repertoires were regrouped and recharacterized as Singlish. This new category was constructed and disseminated in public-sphere discourses across parliamentary debates, mediatized reportage, and educational

institutions—and multiply scaled through interactional encounters between Singaporeans and foreigners—as a form of “broken English” threatening to crowd out “Good English.”

Through projects that ranged from education policy to the Speak Good English Movement and other public campaigns, the Singapore state’s enregistered contrast between Singlish and “Good English” remains hegemonic today. This is in spite of efforts by artists, cultural producers, and advertisers to resignify Singlish as a positively valued “local” emblem (Hiramoto 2019). Because English was accorded a status as a “neutral medium” for uniting Singapore’s “races,” concerns over “Good English” have come to be linked to broader concerns over race, language, and culture in Singapore. “Good English” has thus come to participate in the co-construction and co-naturalization of group-based difference in both overt and covert ways.

This has unfolded through the following processes: the historical construction of the model of the raciolanguage community has both naturalized and stabilized the idea that each raciolanguage community is a racialized group possessing its own language, and vice versa, each language requires a group to possess it (see Chapter 2). At the same time, even though English was widely used in Singapore by this time, an early-2000s ruling deemed that it was incapable of being a “Mother Tongue” in Singapore because no “local” group spoke it historically (L. Wee 2002; Y.-Y. Tan 2014). In this decision, it was judged incapable of conveying the “Asian values” necessary to building a moral polity. Who, then, “possessed” English? Through this logic, English was implicitly cast as the linguistic patrimony of another group: “Caucasian” foreigners.

This chapter describes how “Good English” in Singapore positions English as the linguistic patrimony and “Mother Tongue” of a “Caucasian” raciolanguage community. This group is not officially countenanced either through policy or other institutionalized forms, but nevertheless deploys the same model for covertly projecting a racialized group category as is

accorded to each of Singapore's other CMIO groups. This is notwithstanding the fact that "Other" groups in CMIO officially includes people with European ancestry. Irrespective of citizenship, people perceived to be white are equated by default with the category of "foreign," a move that by default excludes both Singaporeans of European descent and many Eurasian-Singaporeans from belonging to the image of Singapore. Despite being constructed as "foreign" by default, the "Caucasian" raciolanguage community is nevertheless constructed as parallel to Singapore's other raciolanguage communities, and is seen, in ideological perspective, to "possess" English in the same way that Chinese-Singaporeans "possess" Mandarin, Malay-Singaporeans "possess" Malay, Indian-Singaporeans "possess" Tamil,² etc.

In this chapter, I trace the contrastive, chronotopic projection of a "Caucasian" raciolanguage community across historical media accounts; submissions in a reader-generated advice column, titled "English as It is Broken"; and participant-observation at a Singlish awareness class. I argue that, although the project of "Good English" invites Singaporeans to adopt white listening subject-positions—that is, to adopt racially hegemonic, unmarked listening subject-positions (Rosa and Flores 2017, 627–28)—in policing both their own and others' English, "the Singaporean" is nevertheless constructed as a "non-native speaker," thereby needing to always remain on guard against "breaking" English by virtue of their nonwhiteness. This entails an unstable moral imperative for the subject attempting to speak "Good English." It

² This also amounts to an ideological erasure, of course: Singaporeans officially classified as "Indian" are not a homogenous group, and many identify with language communities beyond Tamil. This is recognized in policy, since five "non-Tamil Indian Languages"—Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Panjabi, and Urdu—have been made available for "Mother Tongue" instruction. Even this does not include other South Asian languages spoken in Singapore, for instance, Malayalam and Telugu. Non-Indian-Singaporeans, however, are rarely aware of this, nor are they generally aware of other languages from the Indian Subcontinent spoken in Singapore (Cavallaro and Ng 2014; Starr and Balasubramaniam 2019).

also entails a corresponding set of anxieties: “Good English” invites “the Singaporean” into aspirational investments in malleable whiteness as they address and are addressed by “global audiences,” but it also saddles speakers with the blame for potential failures to be understood.

The remainder of this chapter elaborates my argument across four parts. The first part gives an overview of present-day Singaporean relationships to British colonial legacies, which constitutes what I call *ambivalent postcolonialism*, a condition in which continuities between colonial and postcolonial structures and strategies of governance (Thum 2017) coincide with discourses that celebrate, or at least are ambivalent, toward colonialism. The next section articulates what I mean by aspirational investments in malleable whiteness (Christian 2019), whereby speakers target prestige raciolinguistic assemblages linked to global structures of whiteness without believing themselves to *be* white. In this way, “Caucasian” speakers are positioned as the speakers who, by default, occupy the position nearest the apex³ of the “cone of standardization,” which I elaborated in Chapter 4 (following Silverstein 2017). The third section analyzes features of “English as It Is Broken,” a reader-submitted self-help column ongoing since 1999 as part of the Singapore Government’s “Speak Good English Movement,” to which readers submit queries about and critiques of “broken English.” The final section analyzes interactions at an adult continuing-education class, “Singlish to English,” designed to raise

³ This does mean that all speakers taken to be “Caucasian” get valorized, nor that their verbal productions are automatically valorized. Rather, whiteness is differentially projected on populations constructed as “native speakers.” People interpreted as white are presumed, by default, to have greater proficiency than most, if not all, other English speakers. However, I have both overheard, and been the addressee of, complaints from Singaporeans about the difficulty of understanding many Australian, British, and American regional Englishes. I have also encountered verbal and written critiques of Americans’—especially Black Americans’—“broken English” online or in mediatized artifacts. The category of “Good English” is thus to be seen as a resource, which can be deployed situationally and interactionally to stigmatize a range of groups, including people interpreted as white; at the same time, this does not durably undermine the fact the social persona imagined to anchor the category is, by default, “Caucasian.”

awareness of the differences between and appropriate contexts of use for Singlish and standard-register English. In this class, I was positioned as a token of a foreign listening audience—a token of a type that is the “Caucasian” raciolanguage community—interpellated in service of the work of making attendees aware of their own “errors” in use.

Before I continue, I will note that references to aspirational investments in malleable whiteness through discourses of “Good English” in Singapore are likely to be met with skepticism by those who insist that Singapore is a “nonwhite society” (D. P. S. Goh 2008), or who hold, as many in Singapore do, that white supremacy is a Western concept that does not apply in an Eastern context. I here follow formulations by Michel-Rolf Trouillot and philosopher Édouard Glissant in insisting that “the West...is a project,” (Glissant 1996[1989], 2), a “multilayered enterprise in transparent universality” (Trouillot 1991, 32); it is not “a place” (Glissant 1996[1989], 2). Whiteness is central to the West-as-project, but this is not whiteness as a property or quality of people of European ancestry, but a position in a global, contrastive structure enabling some people to believe themselves to be white (as Ta-Nehisi Coates has put it; 2015). This is not about “belief” as an interior state or overt statement of personal convictions, but about global and globalizing projects for enregistering and institutionalizing whiteness as a position in a racialized hierarchy. Such work has been driven by global white supremacy as its ordering principle, a principle that is nevertheless always manifested locally (Robinson 2000).

Ambivalent Postcolonialism, Malleable Whiteness, and Covert Raciolanguage Community

Critical scholarship in and about Singapore has for decades sought to intervene into widespread, hegemonic constructions of the “Singapore Story.” As noted in Chapter 1, narrations of the “Singapore Story” posit Singapore’s present success as indebted to, but radically breaking with its colonial legacies. The historian Lily Zubaida Rahim has shown that narratives about

“modern Singapore” as beginning in 1819 enable the erasure of centuries of Singapore’s historical ties to the Malay world (Rahim 2010). Others have shown the continuities between colonial policies toward and representations of Malays and present strategies for constructing and governing them as a racialized minority group (Alatas 1977; Haikal and Yahaya 1997). These critiques, however, run up against a number of counter-positions. First are counter-critiques that reject history as firmly in the past. For these counter-critics, focusing on history amounts to nothing more than misplaced resentments about events that are over and done with. Second are those that frame colonialism as *the* source of Singapore’s present success, hence, as something that ought to be celebrated. A variation on this second position is taken by counter-critics who do not insist on celebration per se, but still insist that critiques of colonialism ought to be “balanced,” acknowledging its positive contributions to Singaporean society.

While the first counter-critical stance most often takes the form of zero-uptake or expressions of confusion about why history is being talked about now, various versions of the second position often take the form of highly elaborated narratives. Singapore’s former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong can be seen to voice such a highly elaborated, celebratory stance in a speech titled “Multiculturalism in Singapore: The Way to a Harmonious Society”:

British rule provided two essential cultural tools that changed the ready mix of the various ethnic and religious components of Singapore society and made it possible for the different communities to live together in peace. The first is imperial rule and its institutions buttressed by English law and the English legal system, which regulated the affairs of the various communities. Over the years, English common law has become Singapore’s common law...[.]

The second cultural tool, which may be even more important, is the English language... We owe this to the vision of Sir Stamford Raffles. When Singapore became independent, our equally visionary political leaders had retained English as the common language of all the communities, while at the same time [they] allowed each community to retain its own languages... The English language has provided all races in Singapore with a common space to develop and nurture shared values and a common identity. It has enabled the different racial groups to share a common space in all aspects of Singapore

life—its social, political and economic life—and has enabled the different communities to understand and accept one another’s culture. Multiculturalism in Singapore would not be possible without English as a neutral common language that all can learn to write and speak as an official language, and that can unite the people as Singaporeans (S. K. Chan 2013, 87, paragraph break added).

To repeat a point I have made earlier in the dissertation, the link between Raffles “vision” and Singapore’s post-independence adoption of English as the medium for business, education, and government is not as linear as Justice Chan presents it. As the linguist Tan Ying-Ying and others (see Lee 1989) have shown, the British had little interest in teaching English to the populations of the Straits Settlements (Y.-Y. Tan 2017, 97). By connecting Raffles and post-independent Singapore’s “visionary political leaders” in this way, however, Justice Chan’s speech constructs a parallel, mythic status for both sets of exceptional individuals, while also framing English-use as an actually existent political and sociocultural reality that was merely maintained by the People’s Action Party rather than something they actively introduced. This speech—and statements like it—also reasserts a common trope of inherent difference among “races,” who required (and require) the rule of law and the English language to achieve harmony (ibid). It should also be noted that the English language is positioned via these discourse strategies as something that must, in a non-trivial sense, be *learned*; this is contrasted with the languages “retained by” each community, framed as preexistent facts.

And yet, the institutions of British law, the English language, and CMIO cannot be separated from the white supremacist projects that motivated, and were motivated by, colonization. As I also elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3, British Malayan colonial administrators’ use of category-structures and technologies developed in British India were explicitly aimed at enacting local projects of racial ordering in Singapore (N. PuruShotam 1997; 1998). These projects were mediated by raciolinguistic ideologies that positioned the British as embodying

hegemonic whiteness (Stoler 1995). Administrators presumed that raciolinguistically classifying the population of Singapore was a necessary and natural part of their efforts at governing by racial “communities,” even as their classificatory efforts repeatedly failed. Administrators further presumed the necessity and naturalness of a world in which the “English race” ruled. Writing in the late 1800s, Sir Frederick Weld, Governor of the Straits Settlement (1880–1887), voiced a common perspective among members of the Malayan Civil Service and broader empire:

I think that capacity for governing is a characteristic of our race, and it is wonderful to see in a country like the Straits, a handful of Englishmen and Europeans, a large and rich Chinese community, tens of thousands of Chinese of the lowest coolie class, Arab and Parsee merchants, Malays of all ranks, and a sprinkling of all nationalities, living together in wonderful peace and contentment. It always seems to me that the common Chinese feeling is that we—an eccentric race—were created to govern and look after them, as a groom looks after a horse” (quoted in E. Lee 1989, 6).

Governor Weld’s statement can be seen to index a range of ideological positions that were quickly becoming sedimented in this period: a burgeoning Social-Darwinism-as-white-superiority that converged with the “white man’s burden” (Stockwell 1982; Hirschman 1986) as twin bases for a British “will and legitimacy to rule” (E. Lee 1989, 6).

Of course, such white supremacist ideologies did not stop with the formal end of colonialism, even if they were largely (though by no means entirely) transformed into other raciolinguistic hierarchies. In a classic history of the ideological co-construction of “Mother Tongues” and “native speakers,” the literature-and-linguistics scholar Thomas Paul Bonfiglio begins with a case from the early 1990s in Singapore. An advertisement in *The Straits Times* stated: “Established private school requires native speaking expatriate English teachers” (2010, 1). The next day, it was amended: “Established private school requires native speaking *Caucasian* English teachers” (ibid). My own research in *Straits Times* archives found

advertisements stating preferences or requirements for “Caucasian,” “native speaking” teachers of English as recently as 2006.

I revisit and juxtapose these two historical moments to emphasize both their differences and their continuities. The British colonial examples highlight the overt white supremacist logics of English rule that animated the construction of race in pre-independent Singapore. The processes of this were contingent and uneven, even if they were often seen as coherent, natural, and/or necessary by some participants involved in these projects. The latter cases from the 1990s and early 2000s emphasize the continued co-naturalization of language and race in the making of the “native speaker.” Pre-independence, white listening subject-positions were associated normatively in Singapore with the figure of the British colonial administrator, though English-educated members of a local elite could also align with this position (albeit in limited ways). Post-independence, the category of the “native speaker” continued to animate the racialization of English. This accorded a privileged status to “Caucasian” speakers as the default speaker and measure of standardized, “correct” speech. By the early 2000s, however, the launch of campaigns like the Speak Good English Movement meant that state institutions began to take up the mantle of the white listening subject-position in overhearing and managing Singaporeans’ language-use, as well as in inviting Singaporeans, by-degrees, to do the same.

Concerns over English standards, framed as an urgent economic imperative, motivated the 1999 launch of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). Now in its second decade, this sustained language campaign was designed in its early years as a way to eliminate Singlish (Kramer-Dahl 2003), but now aims instead at increasing “awareness” so that Singaporeans can both recognize Singlish forms and understand the appropriate contexts for their use. As scholars have shown, Singlish has come to occupy positively valorized positions today as a “uniquely

Singaporean” identity-marker, a commoditizable emblem of local identity (Hiramoto 2019), and an “authentic” medium for the state to communicate with “everyday Singaporeans” (Khoo 2015). However, the hegemony of linguistic standardization is strong, and explicit discourses that denigrate and decry Singlish still persist across a range of social positions.

As I hope is clear, both historically and institutionally, “Good English” in Singapore has long been linked to structural whiteness. This is both in the ways that it has been linked to times, spaces, and speaking personae outside Singapore, and in the ways that it has been targeted through policing strategies oriented toward bringing “nonnative speakers” into alignment with the speech of “native speakers” as embodied tokens of the white listening subject position. Yet as I have also sought to argue, this rests on a gap that does not quite amount to a possessive claim. My choice of *aspirational investments* in malleable whiteness differentiates it from what has been theorized in an American context as *possessive investments* in whiteness (Lipsitz 2006[1998]) among groups and individuals who believe themselves to be white—that is, whose claims to whiteness are socially recognized and institutionalized (Coates 2015).

I focus in this chapter on situational performances of desire for the regimes of value that are linked to various resources enregistered as signs of whiteness: specifically, desire for “Good English” as an embodied “Caucasian” raciolinguistic patrimony, contrasted to “Singlish” as “bad English” emblematic of Singaporeans’ “nonnative speaker” status. I draw on the sociologist Michelle Christian to conceptualize these as *aspirational investments in malleable whiteness*: *aspirational* investments as opposed to *possessive* investments in that individuals recruited to the projects of “Good English” do not claim in the process to be white, but rather seek to gain access to the social, cultural, and economic privileges linked to whiteness as an imagined, superordinate, structural position in projects aimed at hierarchically ordering raciolinguistic

being (Smalls 2018). Because totalizing projects are never total, aspirational investments in whiteness produce effects that cannot be said to fall neatly into a hierarchy, too.

My emphasis on the *malleability* of whiteness emphasizes the shifty, context-specific character of whiteness as a position in a hierarchy, not an embodied condition. It also emphasizes the scalability of whiteness across global geographies understood as raciolinguistic chronotopes (Gilmore 2007; Wirtz 2014). In this sense, aspirational investments in whiteness are both “deep and malleable,” linked through interpersonal, interactional and global-institutional extensions of racial capitalism (Christian 2019, 170). Following Christian (and others), this means acknowledging the intertwinement of racial order, linguistic hierarchies, and global divisions of labor across racialized groups and the locations to which they are imagined to belong (Heller and McElhinny 2017). I begin to trace this out in the next section by focusing on the production and circulation of the figure of the English-speaking foreigner who potentially does not understand Singaporeans’ speech. I do so to track the multiply scaled anxieties that this figure provokes, together with the institutionalized means through which, by submitting one’s own or others’ English to public scrutiny, individuals are imagined as learning to perform “Good English.”

The Foreign Listener and “English as It Is Broken”

This section analyzes the weekly advice column, “English as It Is Broken.” The column participated in the public construction of Singlish as (a) language (Gal and Woolard 2001) during a particularly intensive period of public awareness-building and debate over the variety’s status, from the late 1990s onward. As I show, the series constructed situated contrasts between “broken English” and “Good English” via the figure of the “foreigner-who-does-not-understand.” While contributors rarely claimed to embody the category—that is, they do not claim to *be* foreigners—contributors frequently spoke through “the foreigner” to legitimate their own stances.

The connection between this advice column and Singlish can be seen in its institutional relationships rather than in its overt metadiscourses. The column was promoted as a place to learn about “everyday errors” of English in Singapore. It was also launched as a collaboration among the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), the Singapore Ministry of Education, and *The Straits Times*, Singapore’s state-run journal of record. As I elaborated in Chapter 4 (and earlier in the present chapter), the SGEM was launched to target Singlish. This is an important institutional link between Singlish and the categories of “bad” or “broken” English, even though series editors and contributors almost never referred to Singlish overtly, using the lexical label.

“English as It Is Broken” appeared in print as a weekly column in *The Sunday Times* from 1999 until the early 2000s. From 2006, it moved online, housed on the *Straits Times*’ STOMP “citizen journalism” platform.⁴ The column comprised reader-submitted inquiries and harangues about “everyday errors” made either by themselves or by others, real and imagined. Select contributions were compiled and republished as a two-volume book series, *English As It Is Broken* (*The Straits Times* 2007) and *English As It Is Broken 2* (*The Straits Times* 2008). In the foreword to the published volumes, the editors made the claim that, in the years since launching the column, the *Straits Times*’ (ST) “panel of language experts” received thousands of submissions, only a subset of which were published (approximately 1,000 submissions ended up in print). For them, this was “gratifying” evidence of “the desire of Singaporeans to want to speak good English” (*The Straits Times* 2007). The first book was reprinted seven times and was on various Singaporean bestseller lists throughout 2007.

⁴ STOMP is an acronym for “*Straits Times* Online Mobile Print.” The platform was developed to encourage “citizen journalism” by providing a portal to submit photo or video documentation of misdeeds, whether illegal, inconsiderate, or merely outside perceived norms. STOMPers (the name given to contributors) have been widely criticized for submitting xenophobic, sexist, racist, even fabricated content, as well as for their harassment tactics (K. Han 2014).

The column featured both photo and written content, though it predominantly comprised written content. Column entries were quite short, under 100 words, and each entry was titled by the *ST* editorial team. After reading each of the entries and noting their genre conventions (Q&A format, short length, titling), I carried out an inductive coding process to identify patterns in both the questioners' and answerers' presuppositions, and in the ways of asking questions. Questions were generally posed in one of three ways: (1) asking the "language experts" to decide between two (or occasionally more) options; (2) inquiring after "rules" of use; or (3) suggesting a correction to a found usage (on public signage or elsewhere in written or verbal sources). These questions co-participate in producing an image of standard English as "correct" English, thus linking an image of standard (introduced in Chapter 4) to an overt standardizing project in this case. The majority of inquiries in the series were framed with relatively little overt metacommentary, as in the following:

Will/Would Demystified

Q: May I know when do you use 'will' and 'would'?"

(*The Straits Times* 2007, 44)

Here, the question was titled by the *ST* editors as a case of reader "demystification." Both question and answer were framed acontextually as a set of prescriptive "rules for use." The underspecified framing suggests that the specific reader, and others like them, should understand the answer and its corresponding "rule" to presumably apply in any setting.

Despite the frequency of this sort of underspecified form, a recurrent figure throughout the advice column's entries is that of the *foreigner-who-does-not-understand*, referenced in just over a third of the entries (n=342) in either the question, the answer, or both. This occurs through the lexical item "foreigner," through noun phrases like "[person] from abroad," or a citizenship/country-of-origin reference like "American," "Belgian," etc. Given that the SGEM

was launched with the overt aim of making Singaporeans “globally understandable” to non-Singaporeans (the latter ostensibly already having “native” command of “good English”), many of the submissions report their coming to awareness of a potential error through an encounter with a foreigner-who-does-not-understand, or one who finds Singaporeans’ English “amusing”:

Have You Taken Your Lunch?

Q: We love to say “Have you taken your lunch/dinner?” as some sort of greeting. My friend from abroad somewhat amused with the use of the word “taken”. Is there something wrong with the sentence?

A: [...] This unusual greeting is likely to draw a blank look from a foreigner. You might want to try a “How are you?” until the visitor is a bit more familiar with Singapore culture... The word “taken” seems to suggest physically taking—and not eating—someone’s lunch. Asking “Have you had lunch?” is clearer.

(The Straits Times 2007, 44)

This open-ended question contextualized the motivation behind the question to a greater degree than the previous example, briefly describing an encounter (or generic pattern of encounters) with an unnamed but specified biographical individual, the “friend from abroad,” retypified in the answer as a more generic “foreigner.” Yet both the question and answer ultimately still framed the inquiry acontextually: the question did so by enquiring whether the amusement of the “friend from abroad” indexed something generally “wrong with the sentence”; the answer did so by presenting an unqualified retypification of the proposed sentence, “Have you had your lunch,” as being “clearer”—not as “clearer” to foreigners or those with differing language-socialization histories, but “clearer” in general.

It should be noted that “take [a meal]” would not necessarily draw a blank look or come across as amusing to all English speakers, even those who routinely claim “native status”: corpus studies have shown that the phrase to be relatively common in British English, especially in the context of “take tea,” but also other mealtimes (Andor 2014); more than this, it also occurs in

American English, albeit in marked settings (Andor 2010). I am not merely pointing out an ostensible empirical error or misjudgment by the questioner or expert in the entry above. Rather, I point this out because it draws attention to the specific kind of foreigner figured in the reader submissions and expert responses: not a generic foreigner, but an *American* English-speaker. Sociolinguists and other scholars of language have noted the rise of American English as a privileged exonormative standard in Singapore, one that has driven change in both metalinguistic evaluations and speech practices—for instance, an increase in /r/ postvocalic rhoticity (Starr 2021) and widespread vowel shifts (Poedjosoedarmo 2000; Starr 2019)—I want to also draw attention to the ideological focalization of American listeners as a default foreign listener. This participates in the anxieties over and local stigmatizations of Singlish generally (Park and Wee 2009) by positioning it in contrast to a specific imaginary of an American English default.

Many of the entries also took the opportunity to express their writers' negative emotions or to denounce the failures of those who should know better as exemplary users (e.g. as teachers, government officials, or institutions). Such critiques commonly psychologized allegedly aberrant individuals' underlying motivations:

The Media & I

Q: I am irked each time I come across the inappropriate use of 'and I'. Some people use the phrase in place of 'and me' to sound high brow not knowing that they are really betraying their poor command of English. Even the Media Development Authority does it...

(The Straits Times 2007, 37)

This example proposed a correction obliquely by critiquing a pattern of usage, albeit without proposing an alternative; the alternative was suggested in the Answer segment, which I have not reproduced here. In this entry, the commenter takes aim at a range of individuals and institutions, including the Media Development Authority (MDA), Singapore's statutory board for regulating

broadcast and media industries. It does so by ascribing the behavior to an inner desire—the desire “to sound high brow”—which simultaneously serves as an act of self-elevation for the questioner, who unmasks the MDA’s (and others’) motivations. By revealing the behavior to be an index of “poor command of English,” the commenter also positions themselves, via a higher-order characterization, as both a user and an arbiter of “Good English.”

Together, the co-animation of these different characterological figures, or voices, give the sense of a chorus of disparate views, interests, and political investments toward the category of “Good English” across the “English as It Is Broken” series. However, despite this performed multivocality, the column is nonetheless crafted to give a sense of a unitary Singaporean public that is, at base, concerned over “correct,” “unbroken” uses of language, and ever vigilant against “breakage” being done, wittingly or unwittingly. Voicing questions or harangues thus becomes an opportunity for self-fashioning as a Singaporean, whether through a figural contrast with the non-Singaporean (the foreigner), or through an unmarked alignment with speakers, listeners, and readers collectively participating in public-sphere discourses for aligning Singlish with “broken,” hence not “Good,” English, and seeking to fix what is “broken.” Taken together, items in the series also serve, collectively, to position of the foreigner-who-does-not-understand as a default measure for the adequacy of a communicative act.

Chronotopes of Malleable Whiteness and “Know[ing] the Difference”

In this final section, I describe interactions I observed and participated in during a one-day training hosted by the Singapore British Council, titled “Singlish to English.” While official course materials did not overtly frame the class’s intervention as “correction” or “remediation” of attendees’ English, the course was nevertheless organized around an axis of differentiation between “Singlish and Standard English,” framed via overt metadiscourses as aiming to teach

attendees to “know the difference.” After describing the structure of the class more generally, I focus on a pivotal moment of interaction in which I was recruited by both instructor (called a “trainer”) and attendees as a token of the white listening subject—that is, recruited as an embodied raciolinguistic counterpoint to attendees’ lack of awareness of their own nonstandard speech. As I seek to show, such moves fuse racialized chronotopes of malleable whiteness to a Singlish–Standard English divide, laminating this in turn onto a local–foreign divide, via two moves: the first, a move that rescales all speech by Singaporeans as “Singlish” when it differs from American or British usage; the second, a move that repositions “difference” as “deviation,” “deviation” as “error.” I elaborate these two moves across the remainder of this section.

As the linguistic anthropologist Kristina Wirtz has argued in her analysis of Blackness and historical memory in Cuba, racialized chronotopes are important in linking “the poetics of language use—and of performance in all its multimodal complexity—[to] particular models of time, subjectivity, and history” that become compelling through their multiply iterative narrative reproduction (Wirtz 2014, 11; Rosa and Flores 2017, 626). Wirtz extends the more general linguistic anthropological analysis of the chronotope—models through which specifically linguistic (as well as broadly semiotic) formulations of time, space, and social personae are culturally co-constructed (Agha 2007b, 321; Silverstein 2013)—to acknowledge the centrality of *recognition* in the functioning of racialized chronotopes as sites for the reproduction of raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa 2016). Recognition, in this sense, amounts to both political recognition—the interpersonal-relational dynamics out of which selves are constituted (Wirtz 2014, 10, 35–6)—and to the generalized dynamics of uptake in social life. Discourses of “Good English” serve to construct an unmarked time-space of geographical place as an originary, *longue-durée* center of emanation for judgments of the correctness for the English language—a

socio-space-time that is nevertheless centered ideologically on the West broadly, but more recently, on the U.S. narrowly. “The Caucasian” is positioned as the characterological persona who populates the “Good English” raciolinguistic chronotope, which is co-constructed and invested-in as desirable by Singaporean standardizing institutions, together with their representatives and audiences. “The Caucasian” is thus positioned as the white perceiving subject whose evaluation is rendered a natural, acontextual frame for judging English, some relatively inconsequential, but others extensively consequential.

At eight hours in duration, with a registration fee of SGD \$668.75 (approximately USD \$500), “Singlish to English” was not a casual affair. Rather, because it demanded a significant investment of time and money, it targeted Singaporean working professionals, most of whom were employed in government ministries and statutory boards, the vast majority of whom are eligible for full or partial state-provided tuition assistance via the state-run lifelong-learning scheme, SkillsFuture (J. J. Woo 2018). In speaking to current and prior trainers for the course, I was told that, in the past, the course had been offered more frequently, but in recent years it had been experiencing lower demand and was therefore offered less often. One trainer ascribed this to the fact that Singlish was “on its way up in the world,” measured not only through the addition of Singlish items to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but also by the fact that many Singaporeans—especially young people—could now “code-switch,” speaking both “fluent Singlish,” and “fluent English.” Another trainer voiced the opposite worry, speculating that declining enrolment indexed unconcern for “effective communication” and a view that Singlish was “good enough.”

Though my research methods and data do not allow me to compare these claims against, say, enrollment numbers or prior catalogue listings, nor did I have the opportunity to speak with

a broad range of past attendees, it is nevertheless important to note the way these reports were constructed, not only as *reports*, but also as *psychologized explanations*, as speculations on the individual or collective motivations underlying the course's declining popularity. Speculative explanations are not just claims that can be judged true or false, nor investigable phenomena happening in individuals' heads, but sites for vicariously voicing socially meaningful characterological figures—here, pertaining to the kinds of people who do (or do not) engage in practices of linguistic “self-improvement.” These psychologized explanations also point both in different toward the qualities attributed to the individuals choosing not to attend this class, both as individuals and members of a Singaporean collective. The figure of the *young-person-who-could-code-switch* was one that had already achieved the ability to “know the difference” between Singlish and Standard and to “code-switch” when necessary. This figure was further legitimated by pointing to the recognition of Singlish by global institutions, taken to index in turn Singapore's rising global status. The second explanation, meanwhile, constructs a morally suspect figure, both as an individual and an imagined sign of the potential (or imminent) decline of Singapore society.

The course that I attended that day was structured according to nine topical sections: (1) Course Objectives; (2) Introduction and Overview; (3) Vocabulary; (4) Grammar; (5) Directness and Question Forms; (6) Putting It All Together; (7) Action Plan; (8) What Next?; and (9) Resources. Each section contained a variety of activity types, ranging from group tasks to role-playing exercises in pairs or triples to trainer-led discussions. The course's overall construction diagrammed an imagined, idealized student trajectory: beginning from broad objectives, students

were to be guided toward general histories and concepts, then toward learning about items more readily available to metalinguistic awareness,⁵ and finally to higher-order, synthetic tasks.

On the day that I attended, I was one of 24 students, and the only non-Singaporean. Most of the students were mid- to late-career professionals between 30 and 55 years old. We were allowed to seat ourselves in groups of four at small tables around the room. The trainer had been warned of my attendance by the registrar, but took it in stride, announcing to the class that they had a “special guest” joining them. Unlike the Singaporean students, the trainer said, I was there to improve my Singlish. This was met with light laughter—though throughout the day, I was also an object of mild confusion and suspicion, albeit not more so than I caused by being a foreign stranger in other spaces. From my informal conversations with other attendees that day, it became clear to me that attendees had joined primarily for the chance to take a day off from work while also “up-skilling,” a term that was repeated to me in a number of answers (this term has also become common through SkillsFuture advertising campaigns). Many voiced, albeit often tenuously, that they did not expect to learn much during the class.

The trainer opened the class by introducing themselves in standard-register English as an ethnically Chinese person who was born elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but who was still a “native Singlish speaker” after having lived in Singapore during 14 of their most formative years. The trainer went on to invite the class to guess which other languages they spoke (Bhasa Indonesia and Mandarin) and why they had an “American accent” (because they had worked for an American-owned cruise line). The trainer then moved into a module on the overarching aim of the course: “to know the difference” between Singlish and Standard English. This would enable

⁵ As Michael Silverstein has pointed out surface-segmentable linguistic features like “words” and “vocabulary” are widespread loci of everyday ideological reflections on linguistic forms, meanings, and the relationships between them (Silverstein 1979, 202–203; 1993).

attendees to “use Standard English in situations that require it,” thereby to “communicate more effectively in a global environment.” As the instructor was at pains to emphasize, Singlish is one among many World Englishes: “not wrong, just different.” During an introductory activity in this segment, students were asked to name examples of World Englishes. Ratified items included Philippine English and Indian English, but the instructor gently rejected a student’s answer of “American English.” “American English,” the instructor explained, “when spoken well, is standardized, and it’s many people’s Mother Tongue, so it’s not World English.” This introduction on World Englishes segued into a role-playing exercise, in which students practiced introducing themselves to different kinds of people on a premade list, ranging from “a friend’s mother” to a “potential employer” to a “friend’s friend (Singaporean).” My groupmates at the shared table were quick to identify the pitfall in the last prompt’s contrastive framing: only one option was marked by a parenthetical “Singaporean,” they collectively asserted while we conferred as a group, so that was the “only one where Singlish was acceptable.”

After each group was asked to perform one item each from the list of role-playing exercises for the full class to hear and react to, the instructor continued, saying that the point of the exercise was not to say that Singlish is wrong, but rather to make students “aware” of how they “habitually speak”—the key, they elaborated, lying in the term *habitually*: “When I speak with my colleagues here at the British Council, it’s a professional setting, so I use Standard English, even to the Singaporeans. But when I speak to the uncle who cleans the office, I speak Singlish. I’ll say, ‘Hey uncle, 早, 吃饭了吗?’” (*Zǎo, chīfànle ma?* ‘Good morning, have you eaten?’). The 了 *le* particle indicates completion or state-change, which was not represented lexically in the gloss provided by the instructor (when glossing such a sentence in a variety ideologically recognized as standard, many people in Singapore would include “already,” e.g.

“Have you eaten already?” in place of the 了 *le* particle). Having spent almost a year conducting fieldwork research at this point, the utterance caught my attention as atypical for utterances to which the label “Singlish” was commonly applied, since, after the initial salutation (“Hey uncle”), it comprised a string of standard-register, etymologically Mandarin lexical material (“uncle” is a common fictive-kin term for addressing an elder man, whether known or unknown to the speaker). This was further surprising to me given the growing critiques of racialized Chinese-Singaporean majoritarian privilege that I described in Chapter 4 (even more so in light of the contestations of the Sinification of the image of Singapore that I analyze in Chapter 6). When I asked a classmate whether this sentence was Singlish during our first break shortly after, she responded as if the question had been about the denotational code, and replied saying the sentence was “Chinese only.” My classmate further offered a gloss, “Have you eaten already,” adding ‘already’ as a gloss on 了 *le*, as mentioned above. This points, to me, toward the fact that Singlish is not solely about code, even if its overt metadiscourses tend to focus on its status as (a) code. In the trainer’s initial production, the sentence’s status as “Singlish” was not a function of its form, but a contrastive function of its participation frame and participants: in other words, it was “Singlish” because it was *not* Standard English, *not* addressed to a foreigner (i.e. addressed to a fellow Singaporean), and *not* uttered in a setting typified as formal. My classmate’s later typification of it as “Chinese,” meanwhile, focused only on the utterance’s denotational code.

Following the discussion of World Englishes, where Singlish was presented as one variety among many, and the exercise in “awareness,” the next formal segment of the day’s schedule was a module introducing the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). Though the student workbook opened with a short paragraph—“Singlish is a particular dialect of English with its own unique grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. It often uses a Chinese sentence

structure and loan words from Malay and other languages”—the section went on to offer a provocative, often-circulated public statement by Lee Kuan Yew describing Singlish as “a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans.”

As the day progressed, some of the trainer’s claims were not accepted as easily as the one about American English not being World English. In the latter half of the class’s third section, focusing on “Vocabulary” (during a module on “Numbers and Dates”) one participant challenged a set of sentences provided in a handout. This was the day’s first public contestation. The exercise comprised six sentences, framed by a question: “What words would you delete? Why?” Each sentence in the section contained a calque on Mandarin classifiers (indicated by my own addition of boldface), e.g. “He smokes 10 **sticks of** cigarettes every day,” “Please give me twelve **stems of** roses.” The bolded items were to be crossed out by participants. After the class had collectively completed the exercise, one participant raised her hand to object: “For me, the sentences are grammatically correct. Students taking exams should get no marks [*jb—would receive zero examination points*] if they left these words out. These are not Singlish.” The trainer replied: “I see your point, but remember that outside Singapore, these words are not used.”

The class attendee’s objection can be seen to link together two scales of justification: the first, an abstracted grammaticality judgment, the second, an appeal to the evaluative practices of normative educational institutions (here, schools) during examinations. The final turn, “These are not Singlish,” discursively constructed a negative parallel: because the sentences were grammatical, and because (in the speaker’s estimation) they would be required by gatekeepers in state educational institutions, they could not be Singlish a fortiori. Even in this act of contestation, the ascription of “not Singlish” framed it as the opposite of “grammatically correct,” aligning Singlish with “grammatically incorrect.” The response from the trainer,

meanwhile, discursively bypassed the matter of educational institutions, curricula, and assessments altogether, and reasserted the exercise's legitimacy on the grounds of an exogenous standard: how words are used "outside Singapore." This reasserted a version of the figure of the *foreigner-who-does-not-understand* as the aspirational target for proper verbal conduct.

Until this point in the class (including this contestation), attendees generally voiced their answers confidently, and their responses, elicited by the instructor, were often interspersed with jokes about how facile the exercises were. This changed during a module titled "Recognising Singlish Vocabulary," which closed the "Vocabulary" section of the course. The exercise comprised a single page, printed with a table in two columns, labeled with the headers "Singlish," on the left," and "Standard English" on the right. The list began with sentences containing items that are commonly focalized in public Singlish discourse, but which increased in difficulty as the exercise continued. When presented with the sentence, "I will revert to you soon," class attendees responded confidently that "revert" is Singlish, since such uses of "revert" are commonly focalized in public sphere discourses as "Singlish." In Standard English, attendees averred, the sentence would be "I will reply to you soon," or "I will return [something] to you soon." This dynamic continued for the first four items in the list of 12, until we collectively reached the fifth sentence, "My TV is spoilt, I can't watch the football match." Here there was a long, collective pause. Finally, one attendee at a different table ventured that this sentence was "correct, nothing wrong with it." This was, after all, a possibility: item three—"I'll bring my book home after we finish here"—had already been confidently deemed Standard English.

After a rhetorical question from the trainer—"Do you all agree?"—was met by silence (though by a few affirmatively nodding heads), the trainer gently disaffirmed: this was, in fact, Singlish. Following this retypification, class participants began peppering the trainer with

alternatives without waiting to be called on: “My TV *got* spoilt?” “My *television* is spoilt?” “My *television* is spoilt, I *can no longer* watch the football match?” Each was met by silence from the trainer. After an interminable few minutes, the trainer turned to my table: “Josh?”

Interpellated in this way, I floundered. After a pause, I weakly protested, “I understand the meaning of this sentence.”

“Of course. But how would *you* say it?”

After another long pause, seeing no way out, I ceded: “I think Americans would say ‘My TV is *broken*.’”

My hedging notwithstanding, this was followed by another collective silence, after which one participant at my table muttered breathlessly, almost inaudibly: “Oh.”

The collective mood for the remainder of the day was decidedly subdued. Participants became more tentative in their replies and engagement in activities, especially activities to be performed before the entire group. Granted, the course was also moving away from subjects that are commonly focalized as sites of ideological-metalinguistic attention, but subsequent encounters with classmates also made it clear to me that the experience of discovering that they had been unaware of Singlish lurking in the crevices of their own unawareness—and moreover, of thinking it was Standard English—had been jarring, if not existentially so. During the lunch break that followed shortly after, one of my groupmates approached me and asked, with an air of borderline disbelief, “You really say ‘broken’, not ‘spoilt’?” Again trying desperately to hedge my response, I replied, “I think many Americans would say ‘broken,’ but I think they would still understand the meaning of the sentence.” My hedging seemed once more to go unregistered. Nodding, my groupmate replied: “I never knew this was wrong.”

Though I immediately tried to repeat that it was not “wrong,” my groupmate (and the others who had joined us at the lunch table) had already turned their attention elsewhere. In one of the wrap-up modules, where we were prompted to formulate an “Action Plan,” this same groupmate wrote, under a header in the student workbook titled “Something you are going to **stop** doing”: “I will stop saying spoilt.” Under “Something you are going to **start** doing,” they wrote: “I will speak Good English.”

As I hope is clear, these interactions deployed the axes of differentiation anchored by binaries of “correct” versus “incorrect,” “Singlish” versus “Good English,” “Singlish” versus “grammatical English.” In this case of spoilt–broken, it should be clear that the imagined incorrectness of the usage was due to the projected connection between a there–then of my American-accented English, together with perceptions—no doubt linked to signs of my surname, as well as my appearance—of my belonging to a “Caucasian” raciolanguage community, thereby chronotopically positioning my usage as “correct” and class participants’ as divergent, therefore “wrong.” Despite the course’s relativist early framings of Singlish (“not wrong, just different”), and despite the fact that the trainer did not, save for a few instances, refer to Singlish sentences as “incorrect,” the hegemonic status of these widespread axes of differentiation nevertheless led to their continued redeployment in participants’ interpretations of their own and others’ speech.

As in the “English as It Is Broken” series, the figure of the foreigner-who-does-not-understand continued to characterologically mediate acceptable patterns of use in interaction. The linguistic insecurity that ensued on the heels of the spoilt–broken exercise makes clear that the stakes are constructed as much higher than “misunderstanding” might abstractly seem to entail. The stakes of interactional misfire or coordination-failure can be raised, constructed as a reflection back on the inner qualities, even the essence, of the individual who makes a

“Singaporean blunder” and is subsequently misunderstood—a move described by linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal as *rhematization* (Gal 2013; 2016b). In other words, confusing a foreigner, or saying something that is not understood, is rhematized as a moral failing: if one is not understood, it reflects a personal failure to sufficiently value “effective communication” and a lack of commitment to uphold Singapore’s global image and reputation (L. Wee 2018, 41).

As should be clear, though such evaluative registers have been institutionalized by colonial-legacy institutions, language policy, mediatized representations, and political-economic arrangements, they are made and remade through acts of comparison in which individuals engage in situated, real-time events of interaction with social others. These events are not merely ephemeral, *sui generis* occurrences, but rather project global hierarchies—universalizing in their ideological construction—by which difference is made primordial, existing as the mere perceivability of preexistent differences in fashions of speaking that emanate from already racialized speakers. The category of the (American-)foreigner-who-does-not-understand(-our-Singlish)—or more generally, the foreign addressee—is not merely an abstraction, but can be (and in my case, *was*) linked to actually existing interactional participants. This proceeds via racialized projections that serve to link places, times, and speaking bodies as a chronotopic basis for the evaluation of the correctness, or incorrectness, of language-use. This thereby entails the construction of “the Singaporean” as doomed to fail in this aspirational project of linguistic self- and other policing.

Conclusion

As I hope the previous section makes clear, I have found myself personally implicated in the ideologically mediated processes through which institutionalized, if nevertheless covert, white-supremacist structures are reproduced. This is not accidental or peripheral to the facts of

my own institutional positions and perceivable, embodied signs: despite the fact that, in the U.S., I am frequently slotted into the position of a “racially ambiguous” Other, in Singapore, I am almost always white-passing, hence “Caucasian.” This interpretation does not simply relate to my appearance, but also relies—as I described in Chapter 3 on the visual epistemology of race—on my phonologically, prosodically, and lexically American speech patterns, together with the effects produced by interpretations of my etymologically English (i.e. British) surname, when it is known to interactants.

More generally, I suggest that widely circulated scholarly and lay assertions that Singapore is a “nonwhite society” ought to also consider the fact that white people—that is, people who believe themselves to be white, often hailing from the former colonial metropole—enjoy a great deal of privilege in Singapore. This can be perduring—for example, up until 2006, job ads for English teachers continued to list a preference or requirement for “*Caucasian* native speakers,” and white foreigners continue to be demographically overrepresented in high-ranking posts in Singapore-based private- and government-linked corporations (Yeoh and Lam 2016, 648)—but it can also be ephemeral: individuals taken to embody white perceiving subject-positions are ideologically focalized as requiring “accommodation” in ways that place the burden of “accommodation,” as well as the moralizing risks of failure, on the Singaporean speaker.

Of course, these facts are shifty, contextual, and relational: in Singapore, I have also been taken as belonging to categories ranging from Latinx/Latine to North Indian. Yet the fact remains that my research-mediated engagements have worked, in observable ways, to reproduce white supremacist structures, notwithstanding my paltry—if persistent—efforts at contesting notions that language can be naturally differentiated into “good” or “bad,” “broken” or

“unbroken.” Indeed, it was my own complicity in such situated reproductions of white-supremacist structures that motivated this line of interpretation in the first place.

Needless to say, (a) language cannot be “broken.” The idea of “languages” as bounded, discrete structures for reference-and-predication is a colonial/imperial/modern-ideological projection (Silverstein 2005). While describable in abstract, systematic terms, these linguistic structures are nevertheless only and always immanent in use (this was, after all, the basis for the famous Saussurean *langue*–*parole* distinction). Yet as I hope to have shown, concern over “English as it is broken”—part of a more generalized concern over *language* as it is “broken”—is implicated in a host of other divergent ideological projects in Singapore. The fear of “breaking” English is linked to global anxieties, locally expressed, over the animation of English by Asian bodies, to whom it does not “belong” (Lo and Reyes 2008). Circulated during the British colonial period and institutionalized from the early years of extensive English-language use and -policy in post-independent Singapore, a range of discourse strategies have emerged for construing English as other than a “native” language for Singaporeans, hence as being under constant danger of improper use. The threat, as I have argued, animates a moral imperative to “be understood,” imagined as following transparently from acts of “speaking well.” Though discourses of “Good English” invite “the Singaporean,” as a characterological persona, to by-degrees align to the position of the white listening subject. At the same time, as K. Shanmugam’s characterization of Singaporeans as “nonnative” speakers of English alongside other Asian speakers of English in the opening vignette, this naturalization figures “the Singaporean” as nonwhite, “nonnative,” thus permanently hamstrung in their “Good English” aspirations.

Chapter Six: Foreign Bodies, Local Language

On the eve of National Day 2020, media outlets in and around Singapore began releasing their obligatory annual National Day messages. Produced by both state and nonstate media, most of these took the form of conventional messages about unity, national pride, and racial harmony. Many of them further foregrounded themes of connectivity in the face of isolation and social distancing and resilience in the face of existential crisis and socioeconomic hardship caused by the ongoing pandemic. Some, however, took a different tack, choosing to look toward the unexpected in Singapore's present and burgeoning possibilities for its future.

The two media artifacts that anchor this chapter's analysis caught my attention because of their subject matter and narrative-poetic structure, as well as their on- and offline circulation. The first video appeared in my Facebook news feed shortly after its release, as Singaporean friends and friends-of-friends began sharing and commenting on it. The video's title immediately caught my eye: "These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You" (The Royal Singapore 2020). At 07:10 in length, it was released on 7 August 2020 by The Royal Singapore, a content-marketing firm. That same day, the video link was shared to an auntie WhatsApp group I belong to, initially accompanied by the message: "I never knew there were African Singaporeans! Not ppl from America, Singaporeans with African heritage." Another group member replied with, "Wah they speak Chinese better than me! So Singaporean." Later came another reply: "Today got so many foreigner like them..... looks totally foreign but sound like us!"

The next day, on 8 August, the second video was released, again generating a great deal of online buzz. Titled "What Makes Us Singaporean?," the 03:15 video was released by the self-constructed "alternative" publishing outlet *Rice Media* (2020). It was paired with a photo-essay and human-interest journalistic piece, "Class of 2050: Imagining a More Diverse and Inclusive

Singapore” (also mentioned in Chapter 2; Liotta 2020). Many online commenters discussed and debated the featured individuals’ races and migration trajectories or posted messages admonishing (or celebrating) the fact that Singapore has always been defined via the transcendence of race, ethnicity, religion, and language by “true Singaporeans.”¹

Yet even in these video celebrations—which respectively declared “these Afro kids” to be “more Singaporean than you” and showcased young, mixed-race individuals as the future faces of Singapore—the featured individuals’ marked status remained firmly intact; their status as a notable deviation from an expected norm (Waugh 1982) was not dislodged, either in the videos’ construction or circulation. As with other media analyzed in the dissertation (e.g. Chapter 3’s “My Roots Are _____?”), the videos’ entertainment value was constructed as a function of the viewer’s ability to experience of a disjuncture between what they saw and the revealed facts of “heritage” or “race.” For many commentators, “These Afro Kids” offered something truly unexpected: visibly Black individuals speaking Singlish—but more shocking still, speaking Mandarin. “What Makes Us Singaporean?” and its adjacent commentary similarly foregrounded Mandarin proficiency as an unexpected feature that allowed some individuals (but not others) to “sound Chinese”—not to racially pass as Chinese, but to pass as Singaporean.

This chapter evaluates these videos and online commentary surrounding them to extend the analysis of the previous two. While Chapter 4 asked who—that is, what audiences qua social positions—can rightfully claim a custodial role for Singlish, and Chapter 5 asked how embodied linguistic deficiency gets attributed to “the Singaporean” through discourses about “Good

¹ There were other kinds of comments, as well: some messages celebrated Singapore’s diversity as a source of metaphorical value-creation qua wealth. Some commentators related this to their own heredity (e.g. claiming that they themselves are “as rojak as” the featured individuals and/or Singapore), while others indexed this to Singapore as a whole (i.e. the fact that Singapore is, and always has been, a multicultural–multiracial “rojak” society).

English” even in the absence of overt efforts to denigrate Singlish, Chapter 6 asks what it means to *look like a Singaporean*. The visual epistemology of race discussed in Chapter 3 also remains in place as an interpretive default, even as it is challenged by the presence of verbal signs that run counter to it. Of course, looking like a Singaporean crucially involves sounding like one, too, both at the level of register- and code choice. However, this chapter seeks to extend the analysis in a different direction. As much as racialized Chinese-ness is contested or disavowed in public- or private-sphere discourses about what the image of Singapore is or ought to be, these media artifacts highlight how racialized Chinese-ness still exists as an available resource, which can be recruited in the service of claims to national belonging.

Encounters with media artifacts like these, together with the commentaries that emerge in relation or reference to them, stage this tension clearly: whereas critiques of the generalized situation of racialized majoritarian privilege (i.e. “Chinese Privilege”; Thanapal 2015; Koh and Dierkes-Thrun 2015; Zainal and Abdullah 2019; Goh and Chong 2020) in Singapore often work to contest the naturalized, even invisibilized link between Chinese-ness and Singaporean-ness, individuals in ambiguous or tenuous positions vis-à-vis national belonging still frequently assert their belonging by aligning themselves with a Chinese-Singaporean default. Individuals—like the three Black siblings in *The Royal Singapore’s* video and the young, mixed-race individuals comprising the “Class of 2050” featured by Rice Media—thus often reinscribe a Chinese-Singaporean default despite, or because of, the fact that they are categorically excluded from belonging to it. As I argue in this chapter, it is in this way that nationalness—the distinctive sensuous, aesthetic qualities semiotically and ideologically linked to a national “essence” (Ng and Skotnicki 2016)—enters into the fray as existing in conflict with dominant constructions of both raciolinguistic-community purity and national hybridity in Singapore. Individuals taken to

occupy ambiguous or tenuous statuses vis-à-vis belonging are forced to confront, and subsequently resolve, tensions between what they are taken to look like—looking “foreign”—and what they sound like—sounding “local.” This yields different responses depending on the imputed or self-enacted raciolinguistic identity of the performer, but it also depends on who looks and listens: that is, on the shifty existence of racially hegemonic perceiving subjects.

A point of clarification is in order before I continue. To be clear, I do not take Chinese-ness as an a priori ontological status. Rather, it is a position in a raciolinguistic structure. To see it as the former is to naturalize the historically and institutionally contingent affordances of the raciolanguage community in Singapore, thereby conflating an ideological focus on origins, language use, cultural practices, and phenotype with structural racialization. Much like my use of the term “Singlish” in the grammatical singular (discussed in Chapter 4)—which was intended to signal my own alignment with the usage of my Singaporean interlocutors and not to suggest a kind of homogenizing, ontological totality to the category label and its referent(s)—my use of “Chinese-ness” here follows my Singaporean interlocutors’ use of “Chinese” in the grammatical singular, often without qualification. Yet I want to make clear that Chinese-Singaporean identities have never been a monolith. Like any group, the collective that would eventually go on to become Singapore Huaren varied widely in terms of socioeconomic class, migration trajectories, religious affiliation(s), modes of occupation, linguistic profiles, and claimed cultural affinities (Bernards 2015; Gungwu 1989; D. P. S. Goh 2010); likewise for those presently categorized as “C” in “CMIO” (L. K. Chan 2009; R. B. H. Goh 2009; E. L.-E. Ho and Foo 2020; J. J. Lim, Chen, and Hiramoto 2021). And of course, members of this group have experienced degrees of displacement and structural violence, not only in Singapore (Chiang 2017), but also beyond. At the same time, I do not grant these concessions to undermine critiques of racialized

majoritarian privilege, which draw attention to the ways that racialized majoritarian privilege both sustains, and is a product of, structures for producing (non-)belonging.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds in four parts. The next two sections offer a descriptive-analytic overviews of the two media artifacts. The first of these two sections, which discusses “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You,” focuses on the group-based contrasts that are produced and amplified by the diegetic juxtaposition of Mandarin and Zimbabwean- and Singaporean Englishes, together with nondiegetic phenomena like music, sound effects, intertitles, and animations. The second section examines “What Makes Us Singaporean,” tracking how featured individuals both overtly narrate and implicitly perform their understanding of what is “uniquely Singaporean” about them. The third section focuses on key threads running through the online commentary that responded to these artifacts’ circulations, as commentators constructed and debated the categories of “good” versus “bad” migrants. In commentaries about the first video, much of the discussion centered on what makes the three siblings “more Singaporean than” oneself or others; commentaries on the second video, meanwhile, juxtaposed “good” and “bad” migrants by engaging the equally contested category of the “true-blue Singaporean,” drawing contrasts not only across local–foreign/local–global axes of differentiation, but also projecting a differentially valorized hierarchy of nationalness internal to the nation(-state). The conclusion brings the online commentaries together with a discussion of broader strategies for recruiting and disavowing racialized Chinese-ness when laying claim to competing images of Singapore.

“Let’s Talk About Race—Is It True That You Are Fluent in Mandarin?”

Although “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You” (The Royal Singapore 2020) was framed overall as a message about the transcendence of difference across multiple

axes (race, migration trajectories, language) as a “uniquely Singaporean” phenomenon, the video’s poetics created a series of contrastive segments that foreground and mark difference. Across the video, this worked via three moves: first, framing difference as epiphenomenal, as mere (visual) appearance; second, collapsing the image of Singapore into a racialized Chinese-ness via standard Mandarin, with the Chinese body as its unmarked speaker; and third, to ambivalently construct the Black, Mandarin-speaking subject as “not Singaporean” by virtue of their marked racial personhood. Crucially here, we see how members of a hyper-minoritized group also deploy the trope of the Singaporean as failed linguistic subject—rhematized via “broken,” disfluent language-use (described in Chapter 5). In so doing, however, individuals marked as “foreign” work to claim their belonging on the basis of transcendent nationalness, one that presupposes rather than contesting either the visual epistemology of race or the model of the raciolanguage community.

The video consists of interview clips interspersed with title cards, sometimes containing text, sometimes text and still images in combination. The title cards feature items in a numbered list together with the interview questions. These questions are not asked verbally by an onscreen or offscreen narrator or interviewer, but these only appear in writing preceding the interviewees’ answers. The video as a whole is divided into three main sections, each of which is signaled by main title text and marked off from preceding segments through visual design and layout; this is also marked through its signal form, each of which begins with, “Let’s talk about...” The three main sections are (I) “Let’s talk about culture,” (II) “Let’s talk about race,” and (III) “Let’s talk about being Singaporean” (see Figure 7, next page, for an example). Six numbered sub-questions appear as part of these main sections, though these are unevenly distributed across the three sections (three questions appear in Section I, two in II, and one in III). In addition to these



Figure 7: “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You” Intertitle slide: “Let's Talk about Culture” (screenshot by the author).

named/titled segments, further divisions are signaled through their contrast with what precedes and follows. These contrasting segments include *interludes*, featuring both text and still images that narrate biographical details about the three featured siblings, and *comedic asides*, which feature a combination of onscreen annotations, overlaid graphics, and sound effects. The comedic asides in particular suggest that the video’s construction has prioritized entertainment-over informational value. The comedic asides sometimes feature outtakes in which the depicted siblings’ embodied-physical action appears onscreen overlaid with text, though in one notable comedic aside, the camera zooms in on one of the three participants’ facial expressions, overlaid with mathematical graphics—a citation of an internet meme where the mathematical symbols suggest the depicted figure’s confusion (Figure 8, next page).



Figure 8: “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You” Comedic Aside: Zooming Effect with Graphic Overlay (screenshots by the author).

In the video, the three siblings—two born in Zimbabwe, one born in Singapore—are interviewed about their experiences living and coming of age in Singapore. Much of the talk describes familiar racist encounters: the common questions that are asked of them, assumptions that get made about them, and the ways that their bodies—particularly their hair—are touched in public without their consent. In other talk, they narrate encounters with racially hegemonic others whose Chinese-ness is narratively unmarked, but who are nevertheless marked along other axes of differentiation, especially (presumptive) low socioeconomic status and (elderly) age cohort. The remainder of the video features the siblings listing their favorite Singaporean things—foods, television shows, Singlish words and phrases.

The video’s first 23 seconds in particular stages a series of distinctions, diagramming a series of contrastive figures of raciolinguistic personhood that organize the remainder of the video that follows and outlining the tensions that continue to play out across the remaining 06:50 of runtime. The video opens with the three siblings—Nancy, Alvin, and Wendy—seated together on a sofa in their HDB flat. Seated in the center, Alvin—the youngest sibling—speaks in a phonologically and prosodically Zimbabwean–African English. This is accompanied by an “African drums” soundtrack, as he speaks slowly about being African: “Because we know we are Africans, so we have to keep the culture alive.” Before the sentence has ended, however, a

rock organ arpeggio enters, rising dramatically to a crescendo that ends with a ska band hit. Alvin switches suddenly into a phonological, prosodic, and lexical register of Singaporean English, trailing off at the end: “But then hor, we are still Singaporeans lah, so...” The sentence features two pragmatic particles (A. F. Gupta 1992; Low and Brown 2005) broadly recognizable as Singlish: the focalizing particle hor /hə/ or /hɔ̃/, which in this case boosts illocutionary force and draws attention to something previously established (it can also attenuate illocutionary force, making a statement a question; Kim and Wee 2009), and the particle lah /la/, which—though often classified by sociolinguists as “assertive” (A. F. Gupta 1992, 37)—here takes the form of an invitation or appeal to “accommodate” the speaker’s mood (Jakob Leimgruber 2012, 86; L. Wee 2004, 125). This is followed by an abrupt jump-cut, after which Nancy is seen speaking Mandarin: “为什么, 我们讲一点的华语 *wèishéme, wǒmen jiǎng yī::diǎn de Huáyǔ*... ‘Why [is it, when] we speak just a **bit** of Mandarin’...” Alvin and siblings begin imitating ordering dishes at a mixed rice stall (点菜饭...一次一问 *diǎn cài fàn...yīcì yī wèn* ‘ordering dishes one by one’) by pointing, with a terse, “这个 (.) 这个 (.) 那个 *zhège* [pause] *zhège* [pause] *nàgè*” ‘this... this...that.’ The performance culminates in a comically exaggerated, ‘Wow! Their Mandarin is so good!’ with jaws dropped and hands on both sides of their faces (Figure 9, next page).² The final turn stages a satirical contrast between the relatively basic, non-virtuosic verbal performance involved in ordering food and the hyperbolic reaction that ensues—here an index of the addressee’s surprise rather than features of the utterance as such.

² **Boldface** in the transcripts indicates verbal emphasis. Text followed by colons (::) indicates a lengthened sound. Text followed by a dash (-) indicates truncated speech or a restart. Roman text inserted in [square brackets] has been added by the author for denotational clarity. *Italic text* inserted in [square brackets] preceded by the author’s initials (“jb”) are added to elaborate further context. In the video, the line is uttered in Mandarin, with English subtitling: “Wah! 他们的华语这么好:::!! *Tāmen de huáyǔ zhème hǎo:::!!*”



Figure 9: “These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You” Dramatic Reaction: “Wah! 他们的华语这么好:::!! (Tāmen de huáyǔ zhème hǎo:::!) ‘Their Mandarin is so good!’” (screenshot by the author).

Like the case of Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* that motivated classic analyses by Bakhtin (1981),³ further elaborated by Agha (2005; 2007), the contrasts performed by Alvin and his siblings in the video’s opening segment is not only—or even primarily—a detachable effect entailed by his switches in code. Rather, the

typifiability of voices presupposes the perceivability of voicing contrasts. Voicing contrasts are made perceivable or palpable by the metrical iconism of co-occurring text segments—the likeness or unlikeness of co-occurring chunks of text—which motivate evaluations of sameness or difference...Such entextualized contrasts are wholly emergent and nondetachable: [t]hey are figure-ground contrasts that are individuatable only in

³ This literary episode, analyzed by both Bakhtin and Agha, enacts a contrast among non-individuable voices describing a dinner party and praising its host. The novel’s dialogue is unmasked by the voice of the narrator, who reveals (and morally evaluates) the disingenuity of the prior voices: “*O what a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man, what a master man, how blessedly and enviably endowed—in one word, what a rich man.*” The final phrase does not itself convey irony, but does so via its contrast with what came prior (Agha 2005, 40–41).

relation to an unfolding text structure (hence emergent) and are not preserved under decontextualization (hence nondetachable) (Agha 2005, 40).

While some descriptions of Alvin’s opening lines do hold up relatively well under de- and recontextualization—e.g. “Alvin speaks Zimbabwean/African English (Segment 1), the switches to Singlish (Segment 2), then to Mandarin (Segment 3)”—what this does not convey is the broader effect of building and executing an anticipated sense of surprise in the video’s structure and design. This seemed to be taken up as such by viewers: many online and WhatsApp commentators explicitly fixated on this sequence and the discernible contrasts through which likenesses and non-likenesses were staged.

During the video’s second segment, an interlude presents further context on why the featured individuals were catapulted to fame, after youngest sibling Alvin’s TikToks went viral, especially those where he and his sisters share rants about their experiences with casual othering and racism. “These Afro Kids” excerpts a selection from one of Alvin’s TikToks, but notably, the chosen video featured Alvin describing his frustrations with Singaporeans whom he characterizes as incapable of speaking both English *and* Mandarin:

Then hor (.) if I’m with my Singaporean friends, right, then 我跟他们讲华语, 如果他们不懂华语, jialat lor:: 都不懂, 他[们]不懂英语, 不懂华语, 跟你[们]讲什么话? *Wǒ gēn tāmen jiǎng huáyǔ, rúguǒ tāmen bù dǒng huáyǔ jialat lor. Dōu bù dǒng, tā[men] bù dǒng yīngyǔ, bù dǒng huáyǔ, gēn nǐ[men] jiǎng shénme huà?*

‘[When] I speak Mandarin with them, if they don’t understand Mandarin it’s exhausting. They don’t understand [anything], they don’t understand English, [they] don’t understand Mandarin, what do I speak with/say to them?’ (The Royal Singapore 2020).

While both the initial performance and the editing strategy seem designed to foreground Alvin’s virtuosic performance of both Singaporean English and Mandarin—the Mandarin sentences are delivered extremely rapidly, far more rapidly than most Mandarin interactions I overheard—the

content amounts to a critique of Alvin’s “Singaporean friends,” with whom he reports feeling frustrated and exhausted at their collective lack of a shared denotational code.⁴

Segment II of the video—from which I draw this chapter’s section title—highlights the highly naturalized link between race and language, which has been a recurrent theme throughout these chapters. Though the second segment was titled “Let’s Talk About Race,” the first question that the siblings are asked is: “Is it true that you are fluent in Mandarin?” While all three siblings answer in the affirmative—saying that, yes, they are fluent—the interaction (which lasts a total of 18 seconds) primarily features the two sisters ribbing their brother for answering “yes” “super fast,” and expressing their surprise that he considers himself fluent. This prompts a series of turns in which Alvin qualifies that he considers himself a fluent *speaker* of Mandarin, but that he would not consider himself fluent when it comes to writing. After the opening question in the intertitle slide, the siblings are asked to name all the “Chinese dialects” they are able to; following this, another intertitle appears: “Although they feel Singaporean / they still get stared at for how they look.” Nancy explains that Singaporeans’ curiosity and inquisitiveness about their unfamiliar appearance is understandable, and can act as a starting point for educating them about “what Tanzanian culture is, or what African culture even is.” This segment closes, however, by presenting appearance as superficial, as Nancy addresses an unspecified audience: “Find out about us as genuine human beings and not, like, based on the color of our skin or the (.) hai::r on our head, or the clothes that we wear. But yeah- but remove all that, there’s a lot more to us” (ibid). Here, it should be noted that Nancy’s deracializing description of their

⁴ This is not including interactions in which I was a participant, since speakers often (kindly) spoke to me in Mandarin slowly (when they could be convinced to do so at all). In general, Mandarin-medium conversations I overheard were not delivered with pacing as rapid as Alvin’s.

underlying humanity mirrors the Enlightenment image of humanity critiqued by Sylvia Wynter, in which racialized difference gets treated as detachable from default (white) “humanity” (2003).

Although being Singaporean was discussed throughout the preceding segments, the video’s Segment III begins with a title card that overtly focalizes this: “Let’s talk about being Singaporean.” After a series of assertions about how the siblings love their family, friends, and various locales in Singapore, Alvin offers the following narrative:

Singapore’s (.) awesome, never really found it as a- (.) a **place** that I didn’t fit in. It’s been a place that’s always been like, (.) uh:: somehow even though, like, me being **born** here, I mean- because I’m the **one** who was born here amongst them (.) So (.) I would **genuinely, genuinely** forget that I’m not [*sic—jb: likely “forget that I’m even African sometimes”*] even African sometimes. Like, I’ll be with my friends, like **normal** chilling and stuff, and then, like, sometimes we’ll just (.) **all** be going to buy food, then I’ll be like, “Auntie want 鸡饭啊, 三块半 *jī fàn a, sān kuài bàn* ‘chicken rice, [set that costs] \$3.50’.” [Voicing a surprised auntie] “可以讲华语 *kěyǐ jiǎng huáyǔ* ‘[You] can speak Mandarin?’” Oh yeah [claps hands] I’m **not** Singaporean, forgot that, that kind of moments, like you have **that** (.) kind of (.) like **snap**. So:: (.) for **us** (.) we still always felt so included, like, it’s not- we never felt like (.) a:: that **foreign** kid in class kind of thing, but we always kind of **felt** like we were just part of- **Singapore**, we were just **all** Singaporeans. We just look different, that’s it (The Royal Singapore 2020).

Across this stretch of narration, Alvin outlines a series of contrastive positions: between places where he did (versus did not) fit in, between being African and being Singaporean, and between the siblings, who feel they are “just part of Singapore,” versus “that foreign kid” who does not. Crucially, the closing utterance reasserts the fact of their visible alterity: in spite of loving Singapore and being Singaporean, despite being socially included, and despite feeling as if they fit in, they still “look different” from a prototypical Singaporean.

As in the previous segment, Chinese-ness is here framed as coterminous with Singaporean-ness. It should be noted that, in Segment II, Alvin does not specify the racialized identities of the non-Mandarin-speaking friends, but the fact that he expects them to understand Mandarin—yet finds that they do not—suggests to me that the reported personae are being

figured as Chinese-Singaporeans (other “races” in Singapore are not expected to be able to do so). In addition to leaving the Chinese-ness of the “Singaporean friends” unmarked, Alvin also deploys a common trope of Singaporean languagelessness (Rosa 2016). Like the cases of U.S. bilingual education described by Rosa, in Alvin’s formulation, his friends’ perceived failure to achieve an image of standard through their linguistic performance led to ascriptions of their “disfluency” in all denotational codes. In both the contextually underspecified reported interactions between Alvin and his “Singaporean friends,” and in the interactions among the siblings, as Nancy and Wendy contest Alvin’s assertion that he is “fluent” in Mandarin, we see the implicit, relatively narrow assumptions about what “fluency” consists of.

The overall construction of the video—particularly the effects created by sound and music—downplays the narrative tensions and subtle critique performed by the three siblings. Though the siblings are made to allegorically stand in for a narrative about how the image of Singapore transcends racial, cultural, and linguistic difference, the narratives they recount still emphasize experiences of disjuncture and imputed non-belonging. Despite the narrated point that all three siblings are always “included,” the fact remains that the non-Chinese body—but more particularly here, the Black body—speaking Singlish or Mandarin remains marked, experienced by hegemonic others as embodying a gap between (foreign) appearance and (local) verbal performance.

“It’s Pretty Much the Only Way People Can Identify That I’m Singaporean”

Released the day before National Day, 8 August 2020, “What Makes Us Singaporean?” (Rice Media 2020) was a short (03:15) video companion to both a written article and photo essay, “Class of 2050: Imagining a More Diverse and Inclusive Singapore” (Liotta 2020). These artifacts feature 9–16 individuals marked, implicitly or explicitly, as “mixed-race.” While the

video focuses on these individuals' answers to various questions grouped according to the title's question, "What makes us Singaporean?"—together with related questions, like "what is a childhood memory you have that is uniquely Singaporean?"—the written text features reflections on their experiences of marginalization in Singapore—particularly of being either racially misidentified, or misidentified as "foreign." The video is presented without intertitles or overt section breaks, though the content is still chunked thematically. The video alternated between interview segments—with featured individual sitting on a chair in front of a multicolored wall with shuttered windows in Singapore's Little India neighborhood—and B-roll footage, where featured individuals were seen walking through the surrounding neighborhood. Most of the audio is non-diegetic, happening independently of the onscreen moving images, though occasionally, the onscreen individuals can be seen speaking to the camera.

Notably, the video does not describe featured individuals' racial mix. This is in contrast to the written text, which lists individuals' "racial mix" according to two, but not more, hyphenated terms, e.g. "Malay-Black" or "Malay-Kiwi." An exception is the individual who is "Filipino," where only one label—"Filipino"—was given.⁵ As it has been framed and edited, Singaporean-ness is overtly described by featured individuals as a function of precisely this mismatch between how one looks and how one speaks. The video opens with featured individuals answering an offscreen question: "what is the most Singaporean thing about you?" The video then moves on to show participants offering a series of rapid cuts among common metadiscursive descriptions of Singlish, in which it is implicitly valorized as superior to

⁵ There is an additional oddity about the "mix" of the final featured individual, labeled as "Chinese-Peranakan." Several commentators noted the strangeness of describing "Chinese-Peranakan" as being the same kind of "mix" as, say, "Malay-Black," given that, for them, Peranakan is already a "mixed" identity.

standard-register English: as is common elsewhere, participants in the video describe Singlish as faster, more semantically efficient, and more authentic than standard-register English, as well as being “untranslatable” (L. Wee 2018, 60). However, while the content and status of Singlish is not explicitly problematized in the video, “sounding Chinese” is: Mandarin and Chinese-Singaporean Englishes are overtly focalized as ideologically marked varieties when spoken by the wrong bodies.

Though a total of 16 distinct individuals appear in the video, only three individuals receive a substantial amount of airtime: first, an individual identified by the Rice Media written text as “Chinese–Black” (Speaker 1, below); second, an individual identified in print as “Chinese–Indian” (Speaker 2); and third, an individual identified as “Filipino” (Speaker 5). The first two focus on sounding Chinese—the first by drawing attention to the fact that she speaks a variety of English that sounds “incredibly Chinese,” the second through the use of Mandarin—while the third describes, then performs, an act of “code-switching” (Figure 10, next page):

- 1: I **feel** like I’m very like (.) Like half ah lian half minah:: (.) you **know**? **So**:: a lot of people they think that I’m (.) Malay? Or:: (.) if I speak like how I’m speaking now which is incredibly Chinese, then they will probably think I’m Chinese neh. It’s pretty much the only way people can identify that I’m **Singaporean** at this point. (.) So **that’s** what makes me Singaporean.
- 2: [Enthusiastic, exaggerated prosody] **你好!** 我的名字是 Xiaoyan. 今天要吃什么? *Nǐ hǎo! Wǒ de míngzì shì Xiǎoyan. Jīntiān yào chī shénme?* ‘Hello! My name is Xiaoyan. What would you like to eat today?’ (.) [Laughter, covers face; long pause] So, my **Mother** Tongue was actually Mandarin, and sometimes when I speak Mandarin I actually really sound, like, **not** how I look. I think that might be the most Singaporean thing about me:: (Rice Media 2020).

In the first turn by Speaker 1, which opens the video, the speaker refers to herself via two gendered raciolinguistic figures that anchor an array of signs indexing low-socioeconomic status, the ah lian and the minah—the first associated with young Chinese-Singaporean women, the

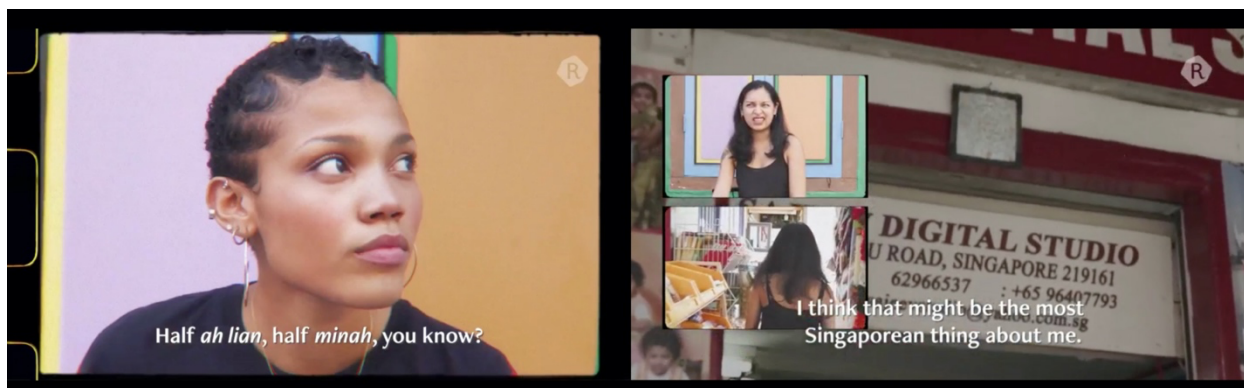


Figure 10: "What Makes Us Singaporean?" Left: "I feel like I'm very...half ah lian, half minah." Right: "I think that might be the most Singaporean thing about me" (screenshots by the author).

second with young Malay-Singaporean women (Mattar 2009, 189–190; see also Chua 2005).⁶

While the co-occurrence of linguistic and nonlinguistic signs is typically naturalized in the performance of these figures, these two modalities are relatively detachable, with the use of an ah lian or minah register—marked lexically and suprasegmentally through rapid pacing, exaggerated prosody, and heavy use of Mandarin and “dialect” or Malay, respectively, together with “crude,” sexualized references and brusque, “direct” address—used to index the persona in the absence of sartorial and comportment cues, and vice versa.

In the case of Speaker 1, raciolinguistic identity gets narrated as being interpreted by others via through physical and verbal signs, pointing, as they do, to the presumable links between racialized visual cues, language use, and other statuses (like class). At the same time, Speaker 1 describes their own speech as “incredibly Chinese,” an ascription that pertains here to prosody, phonology, and pacing rather than to lexical features or code-choice. For Speaker 1, speaking in an “incredibly Chinese” way is described as a way to make people think the speaker

⁶ While these figures were historically associated with illicit activity—whether petty crime, gang activity, drug use, and the like—these figures have become something of a punchline in recent decades, enacted through enregistered linguistic and sartorial performances of low socioeconomic status and lack of education (Brown, Jie, and Koh 2014).

is Chinese—that is, that they belong to a Chinese raciolanguage community—even though their phenotype and skin color point to other raciolinguistic groups, or a combination thereof.

Speaker 2 also narrates a disjuncture between how they sound and how they look. The opening sentence in Mandarin offers an elementary-level self-introduction and inquiry (‘My name is...What would you like to eat today?’) delivered with a comically exaggerated enthusiasm about which the speaker subsequently performs their own embarrassment, covering their face and laughing. However, the semantic- and denotational content of the performance seems to be less important than the embodied performance as such. As Speaker 2 describes, Mandarin is their “Mother Tongue”—the language associated with their officially designated raciolanguage community, thereby the language they studied as a subject in school. The chosen sentences suggest an important form of anticipatory uptake (a phenomenon I introduced in Chapter 1, in which speakers change the form of their performances, verbal or otherwise, in anticipation of what someone else will do in response): Speaker 2 appears to have opted to verbalize sentences that allow them to “sound fluent” according to broadly enregistered indices, and which are likely to be understood even by those with ambient, or self-described “poor,” Mandarin proficiency. As with Speaker 1, the disjuncture between appearance and speech is self-narrated by Speaker 2 as the “only way people can identify that [the speaker] is Singaporean.”

Speaker 5—categorized in the Rice Media article as “Filipino”—by contrast asserts “code-switching” activity as the “most Singaporean thing” about them. However, later in their turn at talk, they rescale these values, pointing toward their knowledge of “other cultures” as emblematically Singaporean (Figure 11, next page):

What is the most Singaporean thing **about** me? Um:: (.) I mean- I **guess** the fact that I could **code-switch**. [Laughter] *Uh auntie ah, can I have ah **one** chicken rice (.) ok (.) ah **dabao**. (.) alright.* [Laughter] And **also** like, when I’m talking to my mom she’s- you know- Filipino:: (.) so:: her accent’s a bit **thicker**:: I think (.) what makes me



Figure 11: “What Makes Us Singaporean?”: “What is the most Singaporean thing about me? I guess the fact that I can code-switch” (screenshot by the author).

Singaporean is definitely:: just **being** aware of different cu:ltures knowing different languages and uh **respecting** different cultures (Rice Media 2020).

Though Speaker 5 does not explicitly name the “switching” activity as a shift into Singlish, the sentence in italics above involves a shift in phonology that would mark it for most listeners as “Singlish” (indeed, several online commenters singled this moment out, labeling it *Singlish* “code-switching”). In addition to this, Speaker 5’s talk about code-switching was edited in the context of the video to come on the heels of two previous speakers’ uses and metadiscursive evaluations of Singlish. Speaker 4 had just been shown asserting: “**Singlish** lah is in our **blood**. It’s **easier**, it’s **quicker**, you know? **Complete** sentence **faster**. *Can? Can? Ca::n. (.)* [Laughter].” In Speaker 4’s performance, both the initial description and the fictional dialogue of the final sentence feature the use of a register broadly recognizable as Singlish. In the final sentences of their turn, Speaker 5 narrate their mother’s Filipino identity as a source of the

“awareness of” and “respect for” different cultures, which is rescaled as the thing that “makes me Singaporean.” This final move—rescaling individual cultural “awareness” and “respect” as part of the image of multicultural, racially harmonious Singapore—should by at this point be familiar to readers of this dissertation. Rather than focusing on or emphasizing the mother’s ethnoracialized-cum-linguistic Filipino-ness (or, potentially, for that matter, that of Speaker 5 themselves), Speaker 5 shifts the focus, insisting instead on their own embodiment the image of Singapore, narrated as a function of their own embodied difference, not in spite of it.

Across both of these videos—“These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean than You” and “What Makes Us Singaporean?”—it should be noted that race, language, and their various interrelationships (as encompassing one another; as taxonomically hierarchized; as superficial or misleading, etc.) are overtly focalized as an object of attention, with overt metapragmatic discourses about speech common throughout both. Both videos foreground performances of embarrassment, amusement, or anxiety surrounding Singlish and Mandarin. These anxieties get ideologically located—in the varieties themselves, as well as in the attributed (or claimed) racially embodied personhood of the speaker—in ways that that afford resources for claiming belonging, contesting claims made by others. I focus further on this dynamic in the next section.

“Good Migrants” and Raciolinguistic Integration-as-Assimilation in Online Talk

Just as the videos I have analyzed in the previous sections were polyvalent in their voicing and stance-taking, so too were the online comments. In this section, I examine viewer comments on both of the videos discussed in the previous sections. I first give an overview of my sampling and analysis strategies, then offer a snapshot of some of the recurrent themes I identified. From there, I focus on an overarching axis of differentiation that emerged across both videos: between the “good migrant” who “assimilates” or “integrates,” and the “bad migrant”

who does not. I suggest that this indexes broader anxieties over mobility and migration, both in Singapore and involving Singaporeans. The latter anxieties appear in narratives about the threat of dilution or loss—as a vector via which Singaporeans themselves potentially become “less Singaporean”—thereby becoming lesser Singaporeans by becoming “good migrants.” I trace out these themes across two narrative strategies that emerge across the two videos’ comment threads. Numerous comments in the first thread take up the formulation in the title—“These Afro Kids Are More Singaporean Than You”—to claim the featured siblings are, indeed, “more Singaporean” than the commentators themselves, or someone else. The second narrative strategy takes the form of debates over the category of the “true blue Singaporean,” constructing its boundaries and category-membership in terms of what it is not and who it does not include.

4.1 The Comment Threads in Textual Perspective. In total, the two videos I have considered here garnered approximately 2,100 comments, most of these (1,700) posted in response to the video by The Royal Singapore, “These Afro Kids.” In both threads, a majority of comments consist of the following kinds, in descending order of prevalence: (1) tagging other Facebook users, sans commentary, in order to share the video with them; (2) posting with a short (generally one- to three-word or -emoji) reaction, e.g. “Wow!,” “Love this!,” “Didn’t expect that!,” etc.; and (3) generic National Day well-wishing, e.g. “One United People ... Singapore!” or “Happy National Day!” Across the remaining comments, a variety of stances and debates get performed. In the case of “These Afro Kids,” comments that grant the siblings the status of “more Singaporean than” another often occurs together with presumptions of their “migrant” or “foreign.” Comments replying to “What Makes Us Singaporean?,” meanwhile, often describe the video’s featured mixed-race individuals as emblematic of Singapore’s assimilationist, postracial future or its current state of multicultural racial-harmony. These coincide, or clash, with

comments aimed at differentiating the “true-blue Singaporean” from variously racialized and classed pretenders.

4.2 More Singaporean Than You/Me/Singaporeans I Know. Rather than coding each item in the thread of 1,700 comments on “These Afro Kids,” I opted for a random sampling strategy. After reading through the comment thread, I randomly selected five chunks of 100 comments each, taken sequentially from points at the beginning, middle, and end of the thread. I also focused on nested replies and responses wherever they occurred, i.e. cases where commenters used the built-in “reply” feature to signal their direct reply to another commenter. As with other comment threads I analyzed, this was relatively infrequent. Overall, 48% of the sampled comments (n=240) tagged other users without commentary, and 24.8% (n=124) gave only short expressions of surprise. The remaining 136 comments in my sample focused on the siblings’ language-use and appearance.

Many of the 136 comments voiced surprise at the disjuncture between what was seen and what was heard. Some comments articulated this through extended narratives, as in:

Wow! THESE ARE THE KIDS I encountered many years ago!

I always tell my friends how multicultural Singapore is by sharing this story.

During my NS time after duty, I was fast asleep on the MRT and was somewhat awakened by two loud chatty kids speaking in mandarin.

When I opened my eyes, I was trying to identify where are the kids. At first, I couldn’t quite locate them as I was trying to look for the chinese kids.

Then I saw these two African kids speaking FULLY FLUENT SINGLISH. I thought I was dreamy and I looked again, and thought, “Wow! This is what social integration is, and this is how multicultural Singapore is”.

I think they must have been in lower primary school then. And I’ve shared this incident with all my close friends (Comment by R. H., 7 August 2020).

In comments like these (which comprised a relatively small number in the sample [n=5] and in the comment thread overall), the comment stages the commenter's surprise at hearing Mandarin/Singlish being spoken, then seeing "two African kids." R. H. in particular bookends this narrative with a moral lesson, beginning with "I always tell my friends how multicultural Singapore is by sharing this story" and ending with "Wow! This is what social integration is, and this is how multicultural Singapore is."

Many comments describe the commenters' unfolding experience using far fewer words, with comments that focus primarily on the disjuncture between expectation and revelation:

They hv completely local Singaporean accent. They love the local food. If nvr heard their talking no body will think they're Singaporean but African. (Comment by A. A. S. M., 7 August 2020)

I closed my eyes and yes thats Singaporean accent alright. Sweet! (Comment by R. B., 7 August 2020)

In comments like these, we can see how a number of contrasts are being staged between what is heard and what is seen. This begins with the expectations cued as part of a visual epistemology of race, as the visible signs of the siblings' appearance are presented as a default mode for understanding their racialized personhood and hence for predicting their linguistic performances. In much commentary to this effect, a further disjuncture is posited between racialized embodiment and national belonging: to be "African" is presumed to be in contradistinction with being Singaporean. Confirming the authenticity of an "accent," further, is presented in many of these comments as requiring that a visual channel be temporarily closed (as when commentator R. B. reports closing their eyes to prevent visual interference with their confirmation).

Beyond such comments expressing surprise, other commenters asserted these siblings' status as "good migrants," whether positively and/or overtly—through overt acts of naming as

such—or negatively and/or implicitly, by describing contrastive categories of “bad migrants” (or their individual tokens). Overt references often involve statements like the following:

Love these kids they genuinely feel ‘Singaporeans’ and blend well with locals. Good to welcome more good migrants like them making Singapore a more interesting, colourful and a better place.

They learnt as we also learned from them ! Welcome !! (Comment by A. A., 9 August 2020)⁷

Here, the commentator makes a move common to many of the 136 comments under consideration, and perform an act of offering a “welcome.” This negatively indexes an alternate possibility: that one might remain *unwelcome* despite the fact that one is born in Singapore or has Singaporean citizenship.⁸ Many of the commenters who voiced the “bad migrant” negatively did so by performing stances of anti-Indian racism (specifically against those born in India), voicing resentment against these “Foreign Talents” whose migration to Singapore had been facilitated by trade agreements (like CECA) introduced in the 2000s. I will not reproduce the comments here, but I will note that expressions of anti-Indian racism also signals the commenters critical stance toward the PAP, which is accused of having “sold out” or otherwise “harmed” Singapore and Singaporeans by allowing in “bad migrants” from India (and, to a lesser extent, mainland China; Kathiravelu 2020b; Ho and Foo 2020).

⁷ There have been a couple incidents in previous years where videos of white individuals—that is, people of Western European ancestry born and raised in Singapore—went viral for their ability to speak Singlish. Commentators similarly expressed surprise, delight, or repulsion at the felicity with which these performances were carried out. While such cases involve assumptions about raciolinguistic embodiment as the locus of emanation for speech varieties, reactions to the trio of Black siblings differed from those to white Singlish speakers: reacting to the siblings, many commentators voiced their surprise through stereotyped anti-Black references to “rhythm,” “spice,” “spirituality,” etc. This was not the case for white Singlish speakers.

⁸ In only one instance, a commenter critiqued another by saying that the siblings were born in Singapore and/or had lived there for their whole lives, more or less, and hence a “welcome” was unnecessary and exclusionary.

This deployed contrast between “good-” versus “bad migrants” is made to relate directly to a graded distinction according to which an individual claims, or is described as, “less Singaporean” than the three Zimbabwean-Singaporean siblings. In comments like these, commentators point toward an inverse relationship between mobility and authenticity, on the one hand, and insularity and authenticity, on the other. The fact that “Singaporean” is, among other things, a designation of citizenship foregrounds the fact that one can become Singaporean by citizenship irrespective of the degree of one’s assimilation or integration. Yet this points toward at least two anxieties: on the one hand, that one can forever be seen as a “migrant,” irrespective of citizenship; on the other, the fact that even one who is “Singaporean born and bred” can become “less Singaporean” over time, or due to other sociological and demographic features.

This takes at least two forms in the comments under analysis here. The first involves a strategy of self-elevation through overt self-lowering, in which one elevates their own self-position, however ephemerally, but insisting that they are “less Singaporean than” the individuals in the video. The second involves a critique of other Singaporeans—that is, individuals whose citizenship status or belonging are not routinely subject to scrutiny—for failing to embody a quality of Singaporean-ness. These stances appear in comments like these:

They’re more Singaporean than me by a long shot (Comment by N. W. X., 9 August 2020)

You guys are more Singaporean than some Singaporeans I know, who don’t even know anything else beyond their own culture and race. (Comment by P. L., 9 August 2020)

While like the first by N. W. X. do not specify the grounds of comparison, comments like the second (posted by P. L.) point to an understanding of the image of Singapore as typified by a quality—albeit one brought about by facts of assemblage. Such comments voice multicultural-racial-harmony as the measure of Singaporean-ness, thus evaluating some individuals who are

Singaporean by birth—that is, by citizenship and socialization—as nevertheless failing to meet the normative expectations the image of Singapore. Like Speaker 5 in “What Makes Us Singaporean?,” who states that “just being aware of different cultures (.) knowing different languages and...respecting different cultures” is the “most Singaporean thing about” them, P. L. rescales knowledge of “anything else beyond their own culture and race” as indexing a quality that, while pointing to “the Singaporean,” is neither inherent nor essential. One can become “less Singaporean” than someone else by failing to know what lies beyond their own “race or culture.”

4.3 The True-Blue Singaporean. Among the 443 comments posted in response to “What Makes Us Singaporean?,” nearly half (n=218) tagged other individuals without further commentary, and a relatively large number (n=102) comprised National Day messages without overt references to the video itself. Of the remaining 123 comments, 60 express affirmative messages about Singlish (to my surprise, there were no comments that denigrated Singlish) as emblematic of the image of Singapore. Other comments involved more implicit contestations or critiques of the individuals’ belonging: for instance, individuals listed in the article as having white European ancestry were often described dismissively in comments as looking “ang moh” (phenotypically white-European) as opposed to Singaporean. Some commentators also expressed consternation that so many of the featured individuals had lost their “Singaporean accent” and become “Americanized” (an evaluation that is often interpreted when individuals use rhotic /r/ and nasalized vowels). Meanwhile, the remaining 43 comments in the sample directly participated in a debate over the status of the “true-blue Singaporean.”

It should be noted that several commentators overtly critiqued the implied links between Singaporean-ness and speaking Mandarin or “sounding Chinese” when speaking English. Often,

these commenters voiced broader critiques of Malay erasure in representations of Singapore, drawing attention to the fact that the National Language is Malay:

S. G.: Speaking mandarin doesn't make you a singaporean ... we are multi racial Bahasa kebangsaan is more of the National language ... I grew up most singaporean speaks Bahasa kenangsaan

B. S. reply to S. G.: S. G. yup.. agreed.. Bahasa Melayu is the National language.. these people dun even know the national language is Bahasa Melayu

N. F. reply to B. S.: B. S. yes well said!!!

B. D. S. reply to B. S.: [thumbs up emoji]

K. B. reply to S. G.: A true Singaporean should know Bahasa kebangsaan coz it's the national language... It's the root where you belongs to.. It's a shame if you declare you are an Indian but you don't know how to speak Tamil..

In this nested set of comments, commenter S. G. initiates the thread by noting that speaking Mandarin is neither necessary nor sufficient to be Singaporean, before going on to assert that Singapore is multiracial and that the National Language is Malay. The reply from B. S. takes this up, asserting that the absence of Malay from the video is evidence that some individuals (but who? those featured in the video? the video's makers? others?) are ignorant of what Singapore's National Language is. After two nested replies to B. S., commenter K. B. built on S. G.'s thread-initial post by asserting a raciolanguage community model, analogizing the link between National Language and being Singaporean to knowing one's "Mother Tongue." Again deploying a form of textual parallelism, K. B. asserts that not knowing one's national "roots" by speaking the National Language—Malay—is analogous to being "Indian" and speaking Tamil. This points to the fact that projective membership in a raciolanguage community is also subject to diminishment by degrees: one is still Indian without speaking one's "Mother Tongue," but it is a "shame" not to. More particularly still, K. B.—who has a Sinitic surname and occasionally posts

in Mandarin on their own Facebook page—equates Indian-ness with being/speaking Tamil (this kind of strategy was described also in Chapter 2).

Other comments answer the question in the title—“what makes us Singaporean?”—in terms of affective identifications, socialization trajectories, and notions of “choice”:

Its choosing Singaporean as your primary identity. Simple as that. When you do you will naturally pick up the social mores and Singlish. It might take years of socialisation but it will happen. There are some exiles who hold other passports but see themselves as Singaporean first and foremost. I also had an NS buddy who was ethnically Greek, but if he stood behind a curtain, you could have sworn he was Singaporean. (Comment by R. S., 10 August 2020)

In comments like this one, “choosing” to be Singaporean leads to an inevitable (if gradual) internalization of both values (“social mores”)—*and Singlish*. In contrast to other commentators, who describe overseas Singaporeans as losing or diluting their Singaporean-ness, R. S. focuses on those who hold citizenship elsewhere, yet continue to identify as Singaporeans. The comment’s concluding anecdote—about the ethno-racially Greek individual (almost certainly Singaporean by citizenship, given that they were participating in National Service) who sounded, but did not look, Singaporean—reiterates what should by now be a familiar raciolinguistic ideology, in which visible signs act as a default, but can be unsettled through signs in other channels—especially how one speaks.

While comment threads such as the preceding ones either construct a contrastive grading of Singaporean-ness—between the “true Singaporean” who speaks Malay regardless of their race and the deficient Singaporean who does not speak Malay (or worse, who does not speak their “Mother Tongue” either)—or describe the image of Singapore as something one can assimilate to over time (among other things, through Singlish-use), other comments overtly theorize the boundaries of the category of the “true-blue Singaporean.” Some articulate these boundaries in relatively inclusive terms:

D. C.: Race is our heritage, our ancestry origin. As Long as they are born in Singapore, are considered true blue singaporean.

In the comment by D. C., race is first differentiated from facts of birth (though birth remains relatively unproblematized, at least overtly), and the “true-blue Singaporean” is articulated in relatively open-ended terms, as simply being born in Singapore. At least in this minimal articulation, this is more inclusive than extant citizenship law accounts for, insofar as not everyone born in Singapore is automatically given citizenship.

Still other commenters construct “true-blue” status in highly elaborate, exclusive terms:

Fundamentally, a ‘true-blue’ Singaporean is one who does not have the money, connection, or expertise to move to anywhere else in the world when Singapore is in a crisis, hence he has no option but to ‘do or die’ here. I dun see how anyone who has an ‘escape option’ can be any more Singaporean than that... does that mean the poor is likely to b more ‘Singaporean’ than the rich? When it comes down to basic survival, my answer is yes.

National identity has always been defined by localization, not globalization. Hence, it is particularly challenging for Singapore, as we are a migrant society that has to stay well-connected to the globalized world in order to be relevant. Our short history as a tiny, independent nation means that our local ‘culture’ is easily ‘overwhelmed’ by ‘bigger, older, and richer’ cultures. My favorite example of this is the cuisine of ‘mala hotpot’, which has ‘overwhelmed’ all heartland coffee shops in a matter of years. I bet there are more hawker stalls selling mala hotpots now than stalls selling ‘local’ cuisines such as char kway teow or kway chap... (Comment by ZY. H., 9 August 2020)

Beyond the romanticizing characterization of the “true-blue Singaporean” in terms of class status qua lack of mobility, ZY. H. also articulates a familiar version of the Singapore Story (Holden 2001; 2017b), in which Singapore’s migrant population, small size, and global interconnectedness poses a threat to its survival at various scales, and makes it susceptible to geopolitical interference and sociocultural decadence. ZY. H.’s choice of “mala hotpot” as an example of a “foreign” cuisine that has crowded out “local” Singaporean cuisine is not totally unusual, insofar as many reflexively public anxieties over the decline of hawker center culture and cuisine tend to focus on the rise of purveyors of “inauthentic” foods. The association of mala

(麻辣 *málà*) with Sichuan cuisine in particular marks it for most commentators as “foreign,” though this has been contested in recent investigative-journalistic writing.⁹ The choice of “mala hotpot” is still an odd example, in that it bypasses more familiar constructions of a “foreign threat” to Singapore as embodied by recent migrants from India and PRC. It is *not* unusual, however, in the way that the commenter posits a graded distinction by which to authenticate and rank Singaporeans. As always, this leads to the production of a higher-order index, constructing the individual doing the authentication as themselves being authorized to evaluate others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described how a number of distinctions get made through mediatized film artifacts and adjacent commentaries that focalize a set of disjunctures between expectations and reality in constructing what it means to be “local.” “Being local” is often constructed, in the first instance, as a function of how one looks and speaks, but as I have shown, this draws in a range of other distinctions as well: among cultural values, knowledges, embodied practices, socioeconomic statuses, migration trajectories, and more. This differentiation-work reproduces an available contrast between two competing models available for constructing the image of Singapore: first, of Singaporean-ness as metasemiotic, that is, as a combination of elements; and second, of Singaporean-ness as a quality inherent in any individual thing deemed “Singaporean.” In the former case, the image of Singapore is projected as “hybrid,” as the juxtaposition of elements whose representativeness of the place and its people holds as a function of their combination at various scales (from the juxtaposition of etymological material in Singlish, to dominant discourses about multicultural-racial-harmony among the “races” of

⁹ The cuisine turns out not to have any direct association with Mainland China, and appears to have been a culinary innovation that developed within Singapore (Pan 2019).

Singapore). In the latter, the image of Singapore is an abstract quality held constant within or across each element taken to be “uniquely Singaporean,” through which difference must be subsumed to sameness in order to neutralize its (perceived, potential) threat to national unity.

However, as shown by the case of the siblings featured in “These Afro Kids”—together with the performances by and responses to the “mixed-race” individuals featured in “What Makes Us Singaporean?”—the ability to “sound local” does not guarantee that one will be taken to be Singaporean, at least not durably. Further, despite the circulation of discourses about “hybridity,” which claim that a Singaporean can “look like anything,” there are clear interactional limits to this in uptake. Moreover, these media artifacts and adjacent online commentary show that Singaporean nationalness continues to align closely with a structural position of racialized Chinese-ness whose performative indices are linguistic as much as embodied. What I hope this chapter has shown is the importance of attending, situationally and multidimensionally, to the question of who challenges or bestows recognition, on what grounds, how durably, and with what effects. Of course, this has not been restricted to this chapter, but is a broader concern that recurs in myriad ways across this research project. I return to this in the dissertation’s Conclusion.

Conclusion

I did not set out to write a dissertation about systemic racism in Singapore or the role of language in maintaining it, whether as a medium of semiotic expression or as a focus of ideological metadiscourses. Rather, my investigations into the multiple, situated construction of the image of Singapore turned out to require that I engage with both reported accounts and my own observations about the structuring of raciolinguistic (non-)belonging across arenas of social action. In other words, this focus was motivated empirically, by what I observed and participated in. And yet, acknowledging that this was an empirically driven decision is not to deny the constitutive, inextricable place of politics in both my research and writing. My decision to focus on raciolinguistic belonging—and to locate its constructed, provisional, and situational, yet nevertheless very real conditions of (im)possibility—was still a political choice. This choice was driven by my desire to produce a piece of scholarship I could stand behind as much as it was driven by my desire to stand in solidarity with individuals and groups doing the difficult work of drawing attention to historically constituted structures and their entailed interactional: in exclusion, marginalization, oppression, and non-belonging, both in Singapore and beyond.

In coming to terms with what this dissertation has become, over the past 12 months I have, like countless other scholars, asked myself why I am writing what I am writing. As I write this conclusion, I have continued to bear witness (at a distance) to the latest in a litany of instances of racism targeting members of minoritized racialized groups in Singapore: In April 2020 an Indian-Singaporean couple and an Indian-Singaporean man were both verbally abused and accused of not being Singaporean by passers-by in two separate incidents for not wearing masks while exercising (Yahoo! News 2020). In April 2021, a commuter dubbed the “Hwa Chong woman” was filmed as she demanded that other commuters tell her their races and

educational credentials, and belittled a Malay-Singaporean passenger for the educational institution they attended, linking this explicitly to their Malay-ness (Sun 2021); the woman repeated throughout the encounter that she was a graduate of the elite Hwa Chong Junior College, hence the source of her subsequent nickname. In May 2021, an Indian-Singaporean woman was physically and verbally attacked while out for a brisk walk, and had anti-Indian racist slurs hurled at her blaming her for the rise of the Delta variant. The variant was initially reported in mediatized outlets as the “Indian variant,” and this was the name often used in such racist encounters fueled by the pandemic (one further notes that white-presenting or British-English-speaking people were not targeted during the same period in spite of the rise of cases in the U.K.; Menon 2021). In June 2021, an interracial couple was accosted and verbally abused in public by a school lecturer for their racial “mixing” (later, it was reported that the lecturer had also repeatedly used the classroom as a space to voice Islamophobic discourses toward Malay-Singaporean and Muslim students; Jain 2021). Also in June 2021, a Chinese-Singaporean woman was filmed intentionally interrupting a neighbor’s Hindu prayers by banging a gong (Qing 2021). Many public commentators in Singapore exceptionalized these acts even as they individually condemned them; commentators who drew attention to the longstanding, systemic conditions underlying these events, meanwhile, were dismissed or even counter-accused of racism.

Again, this is not to suggest that Singapore is somehow uniquely bad in this respect. To repeat what I said in the Acknowledgements and Introduction to this dissertation: this text is not a story with heroes and villains. Neither is it a Manichean struggle of good against evil, a classic underdog story, a David-meets-Goliath allegory whose raciolinguistic battleground is the image of Singapore, yet whose locality nevertheless accords a detachable “lesson” as academic value-added for the knowledge-appropriating arm of the white settler-colonial state (Tuck and Yang

2014). I also do not draw attention to these events in Singapore as a distraction from the myriad local instantiations of systemic racism in the U.S., whether the continued state-enacted and extra-judicial murder of Black men and women; the recurrent acts of overt physical violence, harassment, and intimidation against Asian-Americans;¹ the continuations of Indigenous dispossession and physical violence against defenders at the Red Lake Treaty Camp and throughout the unceded territories of North American indigenous peoples; or continued U.S. monetary and political support for Palestinian oppression and the Israeli settler state. This is by no means intended as an exhaustive list, nor do I intend to forget the countless violences that never rise to the level of national news headlines. This is meant as yet another reminder that the structures on which I focus are global, even if the manifestations are always local, and that racism is not the aberration of racialism: it is its *modus operandi* (Fields and Fields 2012).

And yet, I want to also acknowledge the courage and persistence with which my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in Singapore have pushed both to start new conversations, and to maintain longstanding conversations about systemic racism. These conversations are as crucial as they are difficult. I do not mean here to blithely assert that things are getting better, thus falling into the common fallacy of relative privation—comparing something to a worst or best case (or to a worse or better case) in order to make the present seem better or worse. It is a distraction to compare the present state of housing discrimination; casual racism in public and private settings; acts of stereotyping and wearing black- and brownface; the making of recurrent jokes or offering of backhanded compliments; neighbors acting out their disgust toward others' religious practices; etc. as being “not as bad as” the so-called race riots of the 1960s (a favorite

¹ I also draw on this term's historical extensions: as a movement and a politics, this term indexes an encompassing and inclusive category, not one that is exclusive to so-called “local-” or “native-born” people of Asian ancestry (Schlund-Vials, Trinh Vĩ, and Wong 2015).

point of comparison for Singaporean policymakers and apologists, as the sociologist Laavanya Kathiravelu and others have shown; 2017, 160–161). To return to the quote from Toni Morrison that I offered in the Introduction: “the very serious function of racism is distraction” (address at Portland State University, 30 May 1975; cited in Rosa and Flores 2017, 622). To put it differently: it is a distraction to insist on comparison vis-à-vis relative privation. The absence of riots in the streets does not mean that the work is done, nor that there is nothing to be confronted, critically interrogated, repaired, unlearned, and relearned.

This Conclusion is not my attempt to neatly tie up all the threads that I have introduced throughout the preceding chapters, although I do present a handful of vignettes that I think productively illustrate previous points in a relatively new way. Instead, I use this Conclusion to point toward a few areas I feel are acute absences in my dissertation, as well as to introduce a few areas that my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in Singapore have felt as acute absences in this work. My reason for doing so is not to belittle or dismiss such reminders; neither is it to uncritically concede the premise underlying many of the calls to acknowledge specific omissions. I do this both as an act of epistemological humility—to grant the limits of my own methods and perspectives—and to suggest further arenas of social life (Gal 2018, 3–5) variously entangled in the concerns that I have explored across this dissertation.

The remainder of this Conclusion proceeds as follows: first, I introduce and annotate a fictional dialogue between a Singaporean and a foreigner, titled “A Confused Society,” which circulated online in January 2020. Second, I offer an interlude on the status of Singapore’s migrant worker population, a group that has long served as a constitutive other to the image of Singapore. Finally, I offer final reflections on what I call *dispensational belonging*; this term is my effort at providing a metadiscursive label to an interactional dynamic that has appeared

repeatedly in the events and encounters that I have described across the dissertation, in which individuals work to differentially occupy a hegemonic position as skeptic, and to thus differentially act as gatekeepers for (non-)recognition of others' claims to belonging.

“A Confused Society” and the Foreign Questioner

Released on 20 January 2020, “A Confused Society” was shared on Facebook by a page titled “Sila Duduk, Jangan Lari,” a page that predominantly shares political memes about Malaysia. The page’s title quotes a memorable phrase by Sultan Muhamad V, who briefly served as King of Malaysia. In 2018, the king jokingly chided lawmakers about an earlier walkout by opposition members of parliament: “sila duduk, jangan lari” ‘Please sit, don’t run [away]’. The quote reportedly drew laughter from parliamentarians, and went on to become emblematic of Sultan Muhammad V’s brief reign (BERNAMA 2019). The Facebook page belongs to a group that began producing t-shirts printed with “Sila Duduk, Jangan Lari” in 2018, but the page has relatively few followers and does not regularly post content. I became aware of the page only after “A Confused Society” was both shared online and sent to me directly by a handful of friends and acquaintances in Singapore, none of whom were particularly concerned about its provenance. Rather, as one friend deflected when I inquired about the origin of the image after they forwarded it to me via Facebook Messenger: “It’s just something I saw and is very relatable. EVERY Singaporean has experienced this.” Another message followed soon after: “Maybe you can use this as an example for your thesis :).”

Written as a long image caption, the text of the post took the form of a quasi-catechistic dialogue between a foreigner (labeled “F”) and a Singaporean (labeled “S”), with 33 couplets presented as a pair-part structure of replies and responses. In it, each character—F and S—takes

a single, brief turn. The foreigner addresses the Singaporean, and the Singaporean responds.

Below, I have interspersed the text with my own commentary:

- 1 *A CONFUSED SOCIETY*²
- Foreigner: You look Chinese.
S'porean: I am a Singaporean.
- F: But you look Chinese.
5 *S: I am a Chinese Singaporean / I am a Singaporean Chinese.*
- F: So do you speak Chinese?
S: Yes, but not fluent.
- F: But you are a Chinese.
S: I am a Singaporean Chinese, not Chinese from China.
- 10 F: So you are not a Chinese?
S: I am not Chinese from China.
- F: But your great grandfather is from China?
S: Yes, but I was born in Singapore, so I am a Singaporean Chinese.
- F: So your great grandfather speaks Chinese?
15 *S: He speaks dialect.*
- F: Do you speak dialect?
S: No, I don't.
- F: Why not?
S: Because our country has a Speak Mandarin campaign that is so successful that the new generation practically do not speak dialect anymore.
- 20 F: So you should speak very fluent Mandarin since it's so successful?
S: No. That campaign was effective before, but not anymore.
- F: Why?
S: Because most people speak English nowadays. We have a Speak Good English campaign.

² Based on the presence of the asterisks before and after several of the turns in the dialogue, I suspect that this originally circulated on WhatsApp or another messaging platform. These applications automatically reformat text between asterisks as boldface text. When copied and pasted onto Facebook from a mobile device, these asterisks often appear as inline text, like the above example. However, I can neither confirm nor deny this suspicion.

25 F: So English is your National Language?
S: No!

F: So what is the National Language of Singapore?
S: Malay.

29 F: What?
S: Yes, Malay!

The dialogue began with the foreigner's phenotypic evaluation in the form of a national category, Chinese; such a move is common both in Singapore and elsewhere, where chronotopes of raciolinguistic personhood privilege "origins" or present nation-state formations as the ideological basis for projecting and construing visible difference. The Singaporean responds by countering the national category with another: Singaporean. After the foreigner challenges this response by appealing to what the Singaporean "looks like," the Singaporean responds by shifting scale, offering on the hyphenated "Singaporean-plus-Chinese" as a version of a formula commonly used to index Singaporean multicultural racial-harmony (Chua 1998). Beginning in line six, the foreigner restarts with a different tack, inquiring after the Singaporean's language abilities. After the Singaporean responds in the affirmative, but with a qualifier—yes, they speak Mandarin ("Chinese"), but not fluently—the foreigner expresses a kind of bull-headed bewilderment, performing their unwillingness to consider the possibility that race and language do not map neatly onto one another. How can a person of Chinese descent not speak Mandarin?

Responding to this, in line nine, the Singaporean invokes a new axis of differentiation: to be ethno-racially Chinese is not to be from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The foreigner again performs their bewilderment, questioning whether the Singaporean is really, therefore, Chinese; the Singaporean responds by reiterating the difference between being a citizen of the PRC and being a Chinese-*Singaporean*. At this point in the dialogue (turn 12), the foreigner

takes yet a different tack, focusing on migration trajectories and the Singaporean's ancestors' places of origin—jumping, it should be noted, directly to the great-grandfather's ostensive birthplace (perhaps a decision by the dialogue's author to save time and space by not asking first about their father/mother, grandfather/grandmother, etc.). The Singaporean concedes in line 13 that, yes, their great-grandfather was from China, but they themselves were born in Singapore. Again, this is followed by the foreigner's appeal to language as by necessity linked to race. From lines 14–18, the Singaporean further concedes that their great-grandfather spoke “dialect” (that is, mutually unintelligible, non-Mandarin Sinitic languages like Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka once common in Singapore; Leimgruber 2013, 3; Bokhorst-Heng 1999), but that they do not.

This invites a question about the cause of the language shift, in response to which the Singaporean invokes language policy, namely, the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), which was successful in suppressing the public use of non-Mandarin varieties. The answer leads to yet another expression of skepticism: if the SMC was so effective, the Singaporean ought to be able to speak Mandarin fluently. From lines 20–23, the Singaporean asserts a stage theory of policy development and language shift: like the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which allowed Mandarin to crowd out “dialect,” the Speak Good English Movement was also successful—too successful: it led English to crowd out Mandarin in Singapore's linguistic ecology. This voices a common perspective in Singapore, a zero-sum politics of language survivance that can also be seen to animate anxieties discussed earlier in the dissertation about English supplanting “Mother Tongue” languages (see Tan 2017). The foreigner's line of questioning leads to a question about the status of English, which the Singaporean resolutely rejects as *not* the national language of Singapore. After the foreigner inquires after what *is* Singapore's national language, we encounter in lines 28–29 a shift in footing, or value-orientation toward the voices currently being

performed (Agha 2005; also see Goffman 1979). The foreigner replies with an unqualified expression of confusion or disbelief: “What?”; the Singaporean re-assents: “Yes, Malay.”

Beginning in turn 30, the questioning returns once again to the Singaporean’s linguistic abilities and Singapore’s broader histories, as well as to raciolinguistic institutionalized structures like CMIO and the perceived differential ability in proficiency across majoritarian and minoritized raciolanguage communities:

30 F: Do you speak Malay?
S: No.

F: Why not?
S: Because I am not Malay.

35 F: Then why is your National Language Malay?
S: That’s another long history lesson.

F: So your National Language is Malay and nobody speak it?
S: The Malays speak Malay. That’s their mother tongue. We have 4 races: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian. Each speaks their own mother tongue.

40 F: So your mother tongue is Chinese?
S: Yes.

F: But you can’t speak it fluently?
S: Yes.

F: Does the Malay or Indian speak fluent mother tongue?
S: More fluent than the Chinese speaking Chinese I supposed .

45 F: Why?
S: Because that’s their mother tongue.

F: Then why can’t the Chinese?
S: Because we speak English mainly in school.

50 F: I last heard that Singapore has a bilingual policy.
S: Yes, we have, we do learn mother tongue in school.

F: But you cannot speak Chinese fluently.
S: Yes.

F: Why?

S: Because our country's working language is mainly English, there is not much places to use the language, perhaps only with our grandparents and when we buy things in the market.

55 F: Then how is that bilingual?

S: I don't know.

When asked why they cannot speak Malay, the national language, the Singaporean reasserts the group boundaries typically voiced in articulations of the raciolanguage community. The dialogue does not focus here on the ways that linguistic profiles shifted over time, nor on the fact that, in the past, it was much more common for Singaporeans to speak Malay to varying degrees as a lingua franca. As it is described by the Singaporean character, the explanation stops at the fact that Malay is not “their” “Mother Tongue”: they do not speak Malay because it “belongs to” the Malays. This gives way to an overview of CMIO in line 34, and an inquiry into Malay- and Tamil-Singaporean language proficiencies. Note that Eurasians—equated in the dialogue with the “O” in CMIO—do not similarly become the subject of questioning; their “Mother Tongues” are neither mentioned nor evaluated. By contrast, in evaluating the “Mother Tongue” abilities of Malay- and Indian-/Tamil-Singaporeans, the Singaporean also performs a perspective that I have heard commonly voiced primarily by Chinese-Singaporeans: that members of these groups have higher “Mother Tongue” language proficiency overall than Chinese-Singaporeans. This is often linked to other factors, whether attributed to qualities inhering in the language itself (e.g. that Mandarin is inherently more difficult, hence harder to learn), or to the habits of minoritized racialized groups (e.g. that minoritized groups are linguistically and socio-culturally insular, hence they have more opportunities to use “their” language).

Turn 54 by the Singaporean acknowledges the context-specificity of Singaporean Mandarin-speakers' code-choice, which implicitly indexes class distinctions: shopkeepers are often assumed to be members of older generations, the majority of whose language socialization took place before the tectonic shifts brought about by language policy from the 1950s onward, but especially during the 1970s and 1990s. Hence, the attention to the *where* of code-choice is also an attention to the *who* and the *what*—sociologically speaking—of one's interlocutors. The segment closes with a reassertion of the common myth of bilingualism as “double monolingualism” (Heller 2006; Rosa 2016): the idea that to be “bilingual” is to refer-and-predicate equally well in any code with which one claims proficiency or affinity, a standard that is more indicative of modernist language ideologies than it is of most speakers' actual practices.

At this point, in line 57, the foreigner delivers a recap, followed by further criticism and (quasi-)historical queries:

57 F: So you are a Singaporean Chinese who can't speak your National Language, and cannot speak your mother tongue fluently and can only communicate in English with a strange accent.

S: What's wrong with my accent?

F: I don't know, it is just weird.

60 *S: Does it sound British or American?*

F: Neither, I thought you should sound British since you have been colonized before?

S: No, that was long long time ago, dude.

F: How come you try to sound American?

S: Because I watch alot of Hollywood movies.

65 F: Your English still sounds weird.

S: Oh, we call it Singlish.

F: So what are you really?

68 *S: I am a Singaporean!*

Beginning in turn 58, the dialogue turns toward a critique of “accent” and yet another expression of confusion, from the foreigner, about the Singaporean’s English-use not sounding British. It is at this point that we also find confirmation of the gendered dynamics that were likely assumed by many of the dialogue’s readers: the category-default of the address as “dude” assigns a masculine role to the foreigner in turn 62.

The final couplets proceed less semantically and discursively stepwise than many of the previous turns in the dialogue, when in line 63 the foreigner asks why the Singaporean tries to sound American. This voices a common anxiety about the wholesale “Americanization” of Singaporean Englishes due to the influence of U.S. media (Poedjosoedarmo 2000; but cf. Starr 2019). Note here that the Singaporean character does not here contest the attribution of the fact that they “try to sound American”; they merely accept the assertion and explain why (Hollywood movies). Similarly, in 65, the Singaporean responds to the foreigner’s typification of their English-use as “weird” by naming it as a difference in code (“we call it Singlish”) without contesting the claim about its “weird-ness”—by pointing out, for instance, that it is not “weird,” but is unfamiliar to a foreigner (a figure often presumed as American; see Chapter 5). The dialogue’s conclusion amounts to a sort of *deus ex machina*: the foreigner’s final attempt to get “behind” the Singaporean’s answers—“So what are you really?”—does not cohere particularly well with anything that came before beyond its textual poetics—that is, its position in an unfolding interactional, denotational, and aesthetic text-structure (Nakassis 2019; Silverstein 2004). However, the space is created for the Singaporean to have the final turn, and through their answer to return full circle to their assertion at the beginning: “I am a Singaporean!”

It should be clear that, unlike the suggestion of the title, what is “confused” here is not the Singaporean (or their “society”), but the foreigner. The dialogue is focused on the figure of

the foreigner who interrogates, a figure whose ignorance must be met on its own terms, regardless how willful. The foreigner's continued challenges to the Singaporean's answers represent the dialogue as one in which the burden of accommodation and explanation is repeatedly placed on the Singaporean, who is thus called on to justify the gap between their reality and the foreigner's assumptions, not the other way around. It should also be clear that the Singaporean is a Chinese-Singaporean, who speaks on behalf of Singapore's other sub-national groups indexed through the dialogue. Despite the apparent obviousness of this point, this was not mentioned by any of the individuals who I saw sharing the dialogue on their social media accounts, or who shared the dialogue with me directly. This is likely due in part to the fact that the specific individuals doing the sharing were less likely to contest such instances of conflating Singaporean-ness with Chinese-ness than others I have encountered in my time in Singapore. Yet it is also likely due in part to the fact that this kind of encounter—between these kinds of personae, projected at this particular scale—indexed a different audience whose uptake required different anticipatory work because of the ways the encounter homogenized the image of Singapore vis-à-vis a foreign challenger. To put it differently, when representing Singapore to a foreigner, it is less fraught to voice raciolinguistic others or simplify socio-historical and -cultural complexity than it might be when interacting with other audiences.

To reiterate another point that I have made in this dissertation, it is not just “foreigners” who demand answers about what kind of place Singapore is or what does it mean to be Singaporean—or, as in the preceding dialogue, who challenge or work to undermine the answers given. As myriad examples throughout this dissertation have shown, this gets asked and answered repeatedly, both implicitly and explicitly, at a variety of scales and oriented toward a range of audiences. I will leave this line of analysis to rest for now and turn in the next section to

the often explicitly disavowed status of the migrant worker as a figure for indexing audiences via its status as a constitutive, and permanent outsider to the image of Singapore.

Migrant Labor and the Bounds of “Community”

Singapore emerged early as a global success story in COVID-19 containment and response, with low infection rates, stable food systems, and adequate medical infrastructure. In March 2020, the WHO commended Singapore for its swift, “all-of-society, all-of-government approach” (Teo 2020). Media routinely referred to Singapore as a “model” and “lesson” for the world, part of a decades-long set of discourse strategies for rendering Singapore “modular,” a source of decontextualizable models for the world to learn from and iteratively (re)deploy elsewhere (Chua 2011). A Trump staffer even tried to take credit for the Singapore state’s effective response (Sholihyn 2020), and Barbara Streisand made waves in Singapore after tweeting in praise of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Kok 2020). In April 2020, however, the situation changed. A rise in unlinked infections led government actors to institute a partial lockdown, or “circuit breaker” (CB). Shortly after the CB, Singapore’s migrant worker dormitories became new epicenters for rapidly expanding clusters. From 38 cases in early April, by May 6, a total of 16,998 migrant workers in dormitories had tested positive for COVID-19, accounting for almost 85% of Singapore’s then 20,198 cases (Yong and Iau 2020).

Before this point, spokespeople for the Singapore state had claimed that Singapore had been successful because it had been preparing for crisis for a long time—not this particular crisis, but crisis in general. Following the disclosure of the migrant worker COVID-19 clusters, spokespeople instead insisted that foresight had its limits, and rushed to lock down the dormitories (the lockdowns likely led to increased exposure for still-uninfected inhabitants; Geddie and Paul 2020). Intermittently since 2015, and more intensively since 2018, I had been

attending to the choreography and rehearsal—the anticipatory planning and preparation for how bodies ought to be arrayed in and move through space (Gotman 2018)—of Singapore as a “nation under threat.” This myth of Singapore as “vulnerable” has been a persistent feature of public discourses over the past 50 years (and beyond; Thum 2017). But I began to pay closer attention to how the trope of the “nation under threat” was taking new forms since COVID-19: what the threats were understood to be, who was included as worthy of protection from those threats, and who was excluded as a source of—or as unavoidable collateral damage in the fight against—threat.

Activists, writers, academics, and others in Singapore have long pointed out what is at stake in the state’s choreographies and rehearsals of threat. As these commentators pointed out, when COVID-19 response was garnering international praise, government spokespeople said it was due to their “foresight.” Yet as cases in worker dormitories began to skyrocket, the discourse shifted. Spokespeople instead lamented the unknowability of the future. As journalist and activist Kirsten Han wrote in an op-ed, this appeal to “hindsight” was spurious on two counts. First, labor activists had been reporting on and raising awareness about migrant worker dormitory conditions for a long time—among other things, describing how dormitory overcrowding posed health and safety risks. Second, as Han and others pointed out, the excuse of “hindsight” was not about “hindsight” at all. Rather, it was part of a discourse strategy for summarily rejecting critique and justifying containment measures: bodies already deemed threatening were further isolated from the “Singapore community” (K. Han 2020).

Further, scholars showed that these exclusions have been decades, even centuries in the making, and are one of the reasons for the existence of migrant workers’ dormitories in the first place (D. P. S. Goh 2018). Activist and writer Constance Singham linked the current treatment of

migrant workers to that of 19th century convict laborers, especially Tamil convict laborers (Singham 2020). Other scholars showed how the 2013 Little India riots, rather than being an opportunity for labor and housing reforms called for by workers, became an opportunity to place blame on workers' "culture" for their own conditions and to justify the deepened exclusions and extended surveillance that followed the riots (D. P. S. Goh 2014; V. Koh, Lim, and Tan 2020). These uprisings were attributed to "race" and essential "racial character" rather than to demands fueled by violences engendered through racialized geographies of migrant labor. Many of the migrant worker dormitories are located in industrial areas and are built so that their only points of entry and exit are via lorries or other vehicles, thereby restricting movement into and out of the surrounding areas.

The exclusion of migrant workers from the national community was reflected in the reporting of case numbers by the Singapore Ministry of Health (MOH), as well. As case numbers rose citywide in April 2020, the MOH shifted from reporting cases according to the four categories of (1) "imported cases," (2) "linked to known clusters," (3) "linked to other cases," and (4) "pending contact tracing" to the categories of (1) "imported cases," (2) "local cases *in the community*," (3) "work permit holders (residing outside dormitories)," and (4) "work permit holders (residing in dormitories)." Both representationally and institutionally, this positioned the dormitory cases as belonging to a raciolinguistic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical "outside" to the national community (V. Koh, Lim, and Tan 2020). Such divisions have been further institutionalized beyond the epidemiological reports.

By "migrant workers," I have been referring primarily to non-domestic migrant workers holding Work Permits, a status that is institutionally separated from "skilled" migrants—often called "foreign talents" or "FTs" (Ong 2006, 186–87)—who hold other kinds of visas. In this

way, the state's decision to separate a class of COVID-19 cases according to visa status was already racially coded, and linked to racialized group-based stigmas around attributed lack of cleanliness, "Third World" culture, sexual promiscuity, and crime that had originally driven decisions to construct isolated, restricted-access worker dormitories (D. P. S. Goh 2018). Other categories of migrants also face stigma and resentment, which often intersect with raciolinguistic hierarchies as well: this can be in the recurrent, yet differential expressions of xenophobia toward the so-called "new immigrants" from India versus China (Kathiravelu 2020b; Ho and Foo 2020); it is also seen in the desirability of Western, Euro-American highly skilled migrants for corporate-executive positions, though this desirability is coupled with anxieties over the perceived limits to these groups' "social integration," hence Singapore's broader "social cohesion" (Yeoh and Lam 2016). Yet whereas Chinese migrants (by citizenship) and migrants racialized as white are often targets of resentment due to their expressions of cultural supremacy and imagined unwillingness to "integrate," migrants from South and Southeast Asia are often the target of fear due to the perceived "threats" they pose to the "community."

This brings to mind a longstanding feminist critique of the exclusionary politics of "community," through which socio-cultural and geopolitical boundaries get policed, and through which elements deemed not to fit get expelled or otherwise eliminated, often violently (Young 1986; Fraser 1990; Gal 2006; Lorde 2012a). This is more broadly linked to histories, institutions, and interactional habits for subordinating migrant workers as raciolinguistic others in Singapore. In this way, what I have called aspirational investments in malleable whiteness (see Chapter 5) get manifested in the ability to control others' labor, activities, movement, and interactions (Ong 2006, 186–86)—and to control their exposure to premature death (Gilmore 2007) whether through institutionalized, infrastructuralized relationships, or their absences.

Toward a Critique of Dispensational Belonging

Despite the various efforts at ascribing determinate content to the image of Singapore, like any category, the image of Singapore exists as a function of its contrast from what it is not. The previous section has reflected on institutional and mediatized processes through which the image of Singapore gets made—and made available for reflection—through encounters with the migrant worker as outsider within. The category of the “migrant worker” itself collapses a division between domestic and non-domestic migrant workers, and therefore does not acknowledge potential differences of class status, (para-)legality, gender, sexuality, places of origin, language abilities, and the like, all of which create conditions of possibility for multiple, shifting forms of subordination. Yet the migrant worker is just one figure that anchors anxieties via the frequency and intimacy of its embodied manifestation (Ong 2006; V. Koh, Lim, and Tan 2020): it is a figure that Singaporeans encounter repeatedly when passing Singapore’s ubiquitous construction sites; when observing the cleaning and maintenance of public housing blocks or public spaces; and in the home. But although this figure—and the individual tokens through which it is experienced—is a visible, sensible part of the social landscape and occupies an intimate status as a permanent other, otherness is not an ontological state. It is a flexible resource for creating boundaries in interactions more broadly.

As myriad cases across the dissertation have sought to show, historical and institutional structures unfold in interactions. It is here that various, ever-shifting axes of differentiation get presupposed and entailed to index interactants as members of different groups (however provisional), thereby to locate them in a topology of Singaporean sociological space. This does not always result in an ideologically binary position, with status attributed as either “belonging” or “not belonging” to the image of Singapore. Rather, it gradiently locates others as more or like

oneself in events or encounters, a kind of location-work that changes durationally across an interaction, sometimes thickening, sometimes troubling the statuses that emerged prior; and often, this gradient positioning gets indexically (re)ordered (Silverstein 2003a) as an attribution of a binary status of (non-)belonging.

To put it somewhat differently, (non-)belonging takes both spectacular and subtle forms. It can be seen spectacularly in demands that migrant workers be sent “back where they came from,” that they be housed far from the places where Singaporeans call home (D. P. S. Goh 2018; Loong 2018), or in invectives that a member of a minoritized group in Singapore leave the country if they truly find the status quo so repugnant (whether this is a member of a racialized-minoritized group, or an intellectually minoritized group—say, a public critic or activist). It takes less spectacular, but still palpable forms in the performance of discourse strategies for fixing others in sociological space: in questions about what an individual’s race is, where they are from (no, where they are *really* from), about the language(s) they speak or do not speak. It is performed in expressions of skepticism, whether rank skepticism or outright rejections of the answers one gives, or in persistent, if subtle probing: you’re Singaporean? But you don’t look/sound Singaporean. Where is your Singaporean accent? Why don’t you speak your “Mother Tongue”? So, you are really a Singaporean born *and* bred? Did you study abroad? Live abroad? Where did you go to school? Where do you stay? It does not need to be belonging qua national community that is at stake, though it can be (see Chapter 6). A given mode of address might be motivated by stereotypes projected and construed via a visual epistemology of race—as seen e.g. in an interlocutor’s choice of denotational code (Chapter 3); it could involve half-serious (or fully serious, uninformed) questions about language—“do you speak Indian?” (Chapter 2)—or assumptions about modes of employment: “You work in I.T.?” (Chapter 4). Each of these

encounters involves different scaling projects. From a foreigner addressing a local as a token of a monolithic type—that is, as one geopolitical audience addressing another—this results in different strategies, different simplifications (see “A Confused Society,” above; (Sila Duduk Jangan Lari 2020)). Other strategies materialize when the salient audiences are a state addressing a nation (see Chapter 1 on the Bicentennial Launch), and different still are the strategies employed when the foreigner is present only as an anticipated audience, for instance, as a kind of figure who might be confused by Singaporeans’ English (see Chapter 5).

When I asked, *what kind of place is Singapore, and what does it mean to be Singaporean*, it was my aim to also draw attention to the entailed questions: who asks? Who must answer? What strategies are available to challenge a questioner (or not)? I do not ask these to answer in a biographical-individual sense, nor in a universalizing sense, but in a sociological sense. Who is able to occupy the by-degrees privileged position from which one is able to inquire after another’s belonging, express doubt in response, or offer a dispensation—that is, to cease a line of questioning? I describe this as a condition of *dispensational belonging*. My reference to privilege should be understood as relative rather than absolute privilege; further, one may misfire in their attempts to occupy a privileged position from which to inquire after another’s belonging. Those who are able to occupy this position of interaction privilege—a position that is itself recursive, intersectional, and contextual—can ignore the exclusions and inequalities that are engendered by the social structure that affords their ability to ask in the first place. Conversely, because of the ways in which images of totality are constructed—along with their attendant strategies for indexing raciolinguistic (non-)belonging—some social positions are better able to identify structural inequalities as such. This is not to say that they are in a privileged position because of an essential or fixed marginalized identity, but rather they are implicated in a structure in ways

that do not allow them to ignore the facts of its structuring, nor the particularities of that structuring.

Coda

In this conclusion, I especially wanted to note my omission of migrant workers in the preceding pages, but I want to also note that I have left out other things, some of which are likely to raise an eyebrow, others less so. I have not discussed food; public housing; national service; the annual National Day Parade and Celebrations (D. P. S. Goh 2011); public holidays; annual festivals; Civic and Citizen Education (formerly known as “Moral Education”) as a key tenet of Singapore’s national curriculum; local media products (especially public television and radio); other raciolinguistic micro-minority groups and their “Mother Tongue” varieties; other “lesser-known histories” embodied in individual biographies, events, material objects, and physical locations—the list could go on. These particular omissions are often pointed out to me when I present this work publicly, both in Singapore and to predominantly Singaporean audiences. To repeat a statement I made at the beginning of this Conclusion: my point is not to belittle or dismiss such reminders, nor is it to concede the premise underlying the call to acknowledge either a specific omission or the fact of omission as such. The questions that framed the research, and which now frame the dissertation, are not meant to suggest that I think it is possible to answer questions about what Singapore, the Singaporean, or Singaporean-ness are or ought to be in an ontological sense. As I said in the dissertation’s Introduction, to propose an answer in these terms would be to analytically presume a thing that underlies the image of Singapore—whether in terms of an assemblage or an essence, which I have respectively called image-as-metasemiotic and image-as-quality. To answer in an ontological sense would further presume the actual

existence of images of totality in the terms posited by the ideological discourses in and through which utopian images of Singapore are produced through myriad, situated processes.

In this dissertation, I have tracked the asking and answering of the questions: what kind of place is Singapore, and what does it mean to be Singaporean? My attention has been on the question of who asks these questions, how they ask them, what the answers look like, the extent to which a given answer is challenged (or not) and, when it is challenged, according to what models for comparison, in anticipation of what kinds of uptake (and from whom), and so on. I have turned my attention to the ways that participants in interaction work to anticipate one another *as audiences*: not as individuals, but as imagined, localized instantiations of larger-scale aggregate entities. In this way, I have sought to bypass the hegemonic categories of the state and its historical conditions of possibility, and to analyze these as audiences as constructed: as indexed in ever-changing events of interaction, rather than as bounded, actually existing raciolanguage communities that can be presumed in advance. The performance and construction of audiences relies on axes of differentiation—whether local–foreign, local–global, Singaporean–not Singaporean, or intra-local, etc.—which are also deployed in creating models for comparison, or scales, that further shape how the ground of an interaction is understood. This gets done for a range of reasons and toward a range of ends: to legitimate state actions, to censure others deemed to be acting in a way that is not sufficiently “local,” to position oneself as an authorized evaluator of the image of Singapore, or for other purposes entirely.

The important point is that, as a site of ideological work (Gal and Irvine 2019), the image of Singapore is always a boundary-making project. The scalar construction of raciolinguistic belonging always indexes the non-belonging of that which gets cast as an outside. As I have sought to show in this dissertation, this is not a univocal or unitary process. Rather, the

(im)possibility of belonging in Singapore gets structured via projects that seek to inscribe the image of Singapore as a figure against the ground of what it is not, but it also gets structured via projects that try to construct the image of Singapore through incompatible, if not outright contradictory models. The ideological work of doing being Singaporean requires that one reflexively perform one's concern for and orientation toward the image of Singapore as a ground for one's own, or others', raciolinguistic belonging. Interlocutors who mutually orient toward the image of Singapore as a site of ideological work thus also try to tether this work to something that is both imagined to be, and *felt as*, real—as existing beyond the work of representation as such, as something that one merely listens for or looks at. Mutual attention to the image of Singapore thus involves inhabiting the gap between the models through which the image gets made, gets made totalizing, and gets used as a space from which to imagine yet-unimaginable alternatives.

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