

Seeing (or perceiving) difference in multiracial Singapore: Habits of looking in a raciolinguistic image economy

Joshua Babcock 

Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity, University of Chicago, IL, United States

Correspondence

Joshua Babcock, Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity, University of Chicago, IL, United States.
Email: jdbabcock@uchicago.edu

Funding information

Fulbright Association; Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund

Abstract

This article examines the habits of looking that mediate perception in the self-consciously multiracial Southeast Asian island city-state of Singapore. I propose *looking* as a concept for understanding how perceivers work to transform ambiguous, ambivalent encounters with difference into determinate, visibly self-evident encounters with race. I argue that, in Singapore, habits of looking get materialized via a visual epistemology of race: as efforts to know others by knowing their race through multimodal assemblages of signs, with vision located at the apex of hierarchies of perceptual modalities. I examine informal interactions, state-produced media, and online commentary to show how language, race, and perception get co-naturalized (Rosa and Flores, 2017) in an asymmetrically power-laden image economy (Halliday, 2018; Poole, 1997). I show how looking enables perceivers to see through the eyes of authoritative others and track how hierarchies among perceivers get continually reproduced and revalorized despite continual failures on their own terms.

KEYWORDS

image economy, looking, multimodality, raciolinguistics, Singapore

Resumen

Este artículo examina los hábitos de mirar que median la percepción en la autoconscientemente multirracial ciudad isla del Sudeste Asiático, estado de Singapur. Propongo *mirar*, como un concepto para entender cómo los perceptores trabajan para transformar encuentros ambiguos y ambivalentes con la diferencia en encuentros determinados y visiblemente evidentes con la raza. Argumento que, en Singapur, los hábitos de mirar se materializan a través de una epistemología visual de la raza: como esfuerzos para conocer a otros por medio de conocer su raza a través de ensamblajes multimodales de signos, con la visión localizada en el ápice de las jerarquías de las modalidades perceptuales. Examinó interacciones informales, medios de comunicación producidos por el estado, y comentarios en línea para mostrar cómo lenguaje, raza y percepción consiguen conaturalizarse (Rosa and Flores, 2017) en una economía

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2023 The Authors. *American Anthropologist* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association.

de imagen asimétricamente cargada de poder (Halliday, 2018; Poole, 1997). Muestro cómo mirar posibilita a los perceptores ver a través de los ojos de otros autoritativos y rastrear cómo las jerarquías entre los perceptores consiguen reproducirse continuamente y revalorizarse a pesar de las fallas continuas en sus propios términos. [economía de imagen, mirar, multimodalidad, raciolingüística, Singapur]

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji tabiat melihat yang menjadi perantara persepsi di negara Asia Tenggara Singapura yang berbilang kaum. Saya mencadangkan *melihat* sebagai sebuah konsep untuk memahami cara pemerhati berfungsi untuk mengubah pertemuan yang samar-samar dan ambivalen dengan perbezaan ke pertemuan kaum yang jelas dan nyata. Saya berhujah bahawa di Singapura tabiat melihat menjadi kenyataan melalui epistemologi visual kaum: sebagai usaha untuk mengenali orang lain dengan mengetahui kaum mereka melalui pelbagai multimodal tanda, dengan penglihatan terletak di puncak hierarki modaliti persepsi. Saya mengkaji interaksi tidak formal, media keluaran pemerintah, dan ulasan online untuk menunjukkan bagaimana babahasa, bangsa dan persepsi dinaturalisasikan (Rosa dan Flores, 2017) bersama dalam ekonomi imej sarat kuasa yang tidak simetri (Halliday, 2018; Poole, 1997). Saya menunjukkan bagaimana melihat membolehkan pemerhati untuk melihat melalui lensa lain yang berwibawa dan jejak bagaimana hierarki di kalangan pemerhati masih terus diulang semula dan diubahsuai walaupun kegagalan berterusan di atas syarat mereka sendiri. [ekonomi imej, melihat, multimodaliti, raciolinguistics, Singapura]

In June 2019, I was wrapping up an interview with the founder and lead guide of a heritage-tourism company based in Singapore's Geylang neighborhood, a neighborhood with multiple starkly juxtaposed claims to fame. Geylang is not only Singapore's official red-light district but also the area with the highest concentration of Protestant churches in Singapore; it is a place associated with "vice" but also a renowned destination for late-night food offerings, from frog porridge to durian. I had contacted my interviewee, John, after his tourism company was profiled as part of the previous year's National Day celebrations, presented as one among a handful of stories that performance scholar and dramaturg Nien Yuan Cheng (2021) calls "bite-size pieces of consumable lives . . . marketed as authentic windows to the private self" in Singapore (see also Cheng, 2018, 78–81), stories recast by the state as an example of Singaporeans' "Passion Made Possible"—that is, as examples of the ways that Singaporeans live the brand in the Southeast Asian island city-state every day (Babcock and Huggins, 2021).

During our conversation, John and I talked about art, tourism, changes he had witnessed in the neighborhood over the years, and the perennial question of what counts as "heritage" in Singapore. After our formal interview concluded and I turned off the audio recorder, John asked me a typical question about how I would get home: bus or train? After I answered, John immediately followed up: "I'm just curious, **what**¹ are you?"

"What **am** I?" I replied, frowning my brow and tilting my head slightly.

John clarified: "Sorry ah, what is your **race**?"

This wasn't the first or the last time that I would be asked this kind of question, a question about what I "am." The initial casualness of the inquiry, nestled between public transportation and goodbyes, was also a relatively recurrent feature. Throughout my fieldwork, I came to adopt multiple strategies for attempting to evade, challenge, bypass, or answer this question to better understand what was at stake in its asking, as well as the range of default expectations about what could count as a response. Of course, I was not alone in being questioned in this way. In my fieldwork, I also had the opportunity to observe myriad situations where this question was variously asked of others. For example, during a participatory performance-art experience held at a gallery a month later, I was one of seven attendees grouped together, randomly, for the duration of the three-hour experience. Three of the group's members had attended together, two sisters and their childhood friend. Two attendees had attended as a couple, while I and the final group member had arrived solo. I noticed that the other solo member of the group, Pravin, was not speaking much, but

instead was studying the group silently. After an hour or so, he initiated his first interactional turn, addressing the sisters relatively abruptly: “What is your race? Chindian, right?”²

The sisters broke into smiles: “Yes! How did you know?”

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

Laughing, one of the sisters averred: “Yes, our surname is Yuen-Krishnan.”³

Like the casual inquiry from John, the good-natured laughter was important: in contrast to white settler-colonial situations and other settings in which questions about race, ancestry, or migration status are semiotically marked topics, in Singapore, it is not uncommon to be asked, point-blank, about one’s race. Oblique formulations like “where are you (really) from?” are also common, with the expected answer being a racialized category (for a historical perspective, see PuruShotam, 1998). As the laughter indicated, being asked this question is not always taken as a breach. This is not to deny the fact that individuals in Singapore hold a broad and changing spectrum of views on whether and when race-talk is appropriate, nor is it to ignore the unequal effects that are entailed across the asymmetric positions from which these questions are asked and toward which they are directed. And yet, these questions are a recurrent feature of social life in Singapore, both a site and source of experiences of solidarity, (dis)pleasure, and struggle.

Needless to say, not every encounter in Singapore involves someone asking overtly about “race,” using the English lexical item. Yet, as decades of scholarship in and about Singapore has shown, “race” still serves as a tool for navigating encounters with difference, even when it is not explicitly focalized or invoked (Chan and Siddique, 2019; Chua, 1998). I was struck by this, in September 2019, when the Singapore Bicentennial Office began releasing a series of short videos on its Facebook page and YouTube channel titled “My Roots Are—?” Modeled on the genre of the “DNA ancestry reveal” advertisement made (in)famous by direct-to-consumer genetic testing companies like 23andMe®, the series comprised six videos in which six Singaporeans’ genetic ancestry test results revealed previously unknown facts about their “roots.” Most immediately, as part of the Singapore Bicentennial commemorations, the videos were part of a broad interdiscursive network produced by the state and its affiliates as a way to represent a long-durée Singapore history, with genetic ancestry, or “roots,” as an entertaining proxy for the patterns of historical migration that had resulted in a “uniquely Singaporean DNA” in the present—“DNA” being invoked as synonymous for “national culture” or “-identity.” At the same time, the videos implicitly relied on viewers’ ability to recognize and find entertainment in a mismatch between the viewers’ assumptions and the depicted individuals’ revealed DNA ancestry. This participation framework did not explicitly invoke “race,” yet, as online and offline commentaries showed, “race” served as an overdetermined and overdetermining category through which the videos were interpreted.

This article starts with a puzzle that, for many in Singapore and beyond, likely does not seem like a puzzle at all: Why and how does race become a thing at which one looks—particularly given that the signs taken to point toward racialized personhood exist in a range of perceptual modalities beyond sight? In light of hegemonic modern-colonial constructions of race as a self-evident and self-evidently visible feature of bodies and persons (Obasogie, 2014, 2), I examine what becomes visible when we turn our attention not to vision as such but to the habits through which vision gets deployed and reflected on as a privileged site for navigating encounters with difference in Singapore. Though language choice, accent, register use, skin color, clothing, names, hair, phenotype, and more come to variously serve for interpreters as signs of racialized difference, these myriad evidentiary resources and complex, dynamic processes get collapsed into vision when interpreters are called on to account for their interpretations. That is, social actors project and construe images of personhood from an array of historically, institutionally, and interactionally dynamic positions, but are ultimately able to fall back on assertions that the only thing they have done is *look*. The aestheticization of racialized perception thus comes to be rendered apolitical in ideological perspective, not grounded in colonialist-modernist histories but simply in the perception of what was always-already there, waiting to be seen.

In this article, I give an account of the habits through which perceivers navigate a raciolinguistic (Rosa, 2019; Rosa and Flores, 2017) image economy (Halliday, 2018) of difference in multiracial Singapore. I argue that race-talk and racialized perception get mediated locally via habits of looking, through the activities that mediate between sensation and aesthetic categories to project and construe both image tokens and their regimented types. In Singapore, this takes the form of a *visual epistemology of race*, an ocularcentric ideology according to which nonvisible phenomena at various scales, from the category of “race” as such to the particular status of a single racialized subject, get rendered as knowable in and as visually perceivable signs (Drucker, 2014, vi; Jay, 1993). By “epistemology,” I index the status of race-talk in Singapore as refracted through knowing and the justification of beliefs in the first instance, not on being as such.

Far from a generalized, abstracted activity, the visual epistemology of race in Singapore shapes habits of looking through recourse to hegemonic, multiply institutionalized structures—most notably, state-led discourses, policy instruments, and storytelling practices through which the Singaporean polity is constructed as a nexus of discrete races, each with their own language, culture, and personality, all of whom live together in harmony due to the influence of the state’s guiding hand (Goh, 2010; Kathiravelu, 2017) and the English language (Babcock, 2023). My goal in this article is not to advance a theory of vision or a theory of race but rather to propose looking as an activity that takes place in moments of interactional encounter. Drawing an analog to voice and voicing as they have been developed by linguistic anthropologists and other critical scholars of language (Agha, 2005; Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Harkness, 2014), I develop the concept of looking to show how perception is habitually shaped, ideologi-

cally, out of the movement between sensing and giving order to that sensing, of making specific image-texts in events of interaction out of a broader array of aesthetic textures (Nakassis, 2019). As I seek to show, aesthetic textures are an inextricable part of the ways that race and language get co-naturalized, as the imputed naturalness of race takes recourse to language, and vice versa (Rosa and Flores, 2017, 627). Habits of looking in Singapore (and beyond) mediate the ways that raciolinguistic images get projected and construed onto actually existing aesthetic phenomena and the ways in which this projection and construal generates symbolic capital through processes of circulation and accumulation (Halliday, 2018, 68–70).

In the examples that follow, I explore how “looking like a race” (Rosa, 2019) precipitates out of both the listening and looking practices of racially hegemonic perceiving subjects (Inoue, 2006; Rosa and Flores, 2017, 627–28), inquiring after who looks and what it does for them when they look—as pleasure, power, and/or self-positioning. I trace out the multiple institutionalizations of standardized, state-backed models for constructing race in Singapore, as well as the pedagogies of difference through which individuals learn to look at “race.” I follow this by examining situations in which individuals were encountered as troubling or ambiguous due to the particular expressions they gave—or gave off (Goffman, 1959). I show how, in the end, the default status of the visual epistemology of race continues to structure habits of looking at difference in multiracial Singapore despite its continual failure on its own ideological terms. At the same time, I suggest that the significance of this inquiry extends beyond Singapore. This is because the structuring of racialized perception through habits of looking is continuous with other raciolinguistic image economies, at once locally particular and globally distributed (Robinson, 2000; Trouillot, 2003). I examine what results when the assumed unambiguity of a habit of looking runs up against the chronic experiential ambiguity of navigating a world of others. I track the ways in which, despite their continual failure, hierarchies among perceivers get reprojected as hierarchies among not only perceptions but also perceptual modalities—hierarchies that often end up with vision at their apex.

CMIO AND PEDAGOGIES OF DIFFERENCE IN MULTIRACIAL SINGAPORE

Virtually every description of Singapore begins with its “multi”-ness: multiracialism, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multireligiosity. As myriad scholars and public commentators in and of Singapore have shown, these multi-nesses are not equal. Multiracialism is constructed as an encompassing, predominating frame: in other words, race in Singapore is always multirace, and multirace encompasses multiculture, multilanguage, and multireligion. Yet this condition of multiple multi-ness is also multiply constrained. Officially, race in Singapore is regimented according to a standardized raciolinguistic model known as CMIO, an acronym referring to the four official races: Chinese (as of 2019, 76% of the citizen population), Malay (15%), Indian (7.47%), and Other (1.53%). Each of the CMIO “races” is assigned an official “Mother Tongue”: for Chinese Singaporeans, Mandarin; for Malay Singaporeans, Malay/Bhasa Melayu; for Indian Singaporeans, Tamil (though Singaporeans officially categorized as Indian can also select from five “non-Tamil Indian Languages” [NTILs] as their “Mother Tongue”; Cavallaro and Ng, 2014, 40–41).

Emerging out of British-colonial technologies for disciplining difference in Malaya (PuruShotam, 1998) and entrenched by the independent state as a putatively necessary means for maintaining “harmony” among Singapore’s races, CMIO is a pervasive feature of public life today. Social data, from school-examination results to marriage and birth rates, are publicly circulated according to CMIO categories. CMIO classifications are listed on an individual’s identification card and determine their access to housing (Haila, 2016) and social security benefits (Lim, 1989; Yeoh, 2004). One’s racial classification determines one’s official “Mother Tongue”—most proximally, the “Mother Tongue” subject one studies in school, which has implications for future employment and other prospects. As the opening vignettes show, institutionalized racial conceptions are not just a fact of bureaucratic life but are routinely invoked and inquired about in interaction, either as a question whose answer is already presumed known or in the form of casual assumptions, schoolyard taunts, and overt humor.

Like other locations in which nation and state do not neatly coincide according to a modernist model, the fact of racial “multi”-ness in Singapore positions race-talk along a fine ideological line between disavowal and hypersaliency. As sociologists Chua Beng Huat and Laavanya Kathiravelu have argued across the last two decades, each “race” must be publicly presented under the hyphenated formula of “race-plus-Singaporean” (Chua, 1998). Otherwise, communalism and threats of racialized “faultlines” rear their heads (Kathiravelu, 2017; see also Goh, 2010). While Singapore is recurrently described as a racially harmonious place, “racial harmony” is both a tool for constructing essential difference among raciolinguistic communities and for asserting that raciolinguistic difference has been transcended; “harmony” is framed as both an always-already achieved condition and a fraught terrain in need of policing (Pak, 2021).

In state-led and other hegemonic formulations modeled on and backed by CMIO, race in Singapore is not taken as a local phenomenon but as a self-evident fact of group-based difference continuous with other global locations. This is not itself surprising: as Cedric Robinson (2000) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) have argued, the historical construction of race was (and is) always context-dependent and historically particular to a given situation or locale, even as it was globalizing in its hierarchizing ambitions. Yet, against the assumption of the self-evident, universal, and globally continuous nature of race as such, state and parastate actors in Singapore have developed an elaborate tool kit for enacting pedagogies of difference in the Southeast Asian island city-state, pedagogies that are not often understood as pedagogies, as such, but rather as straightforward descriptions and depictions of the ways that race manifests in Singapore.



FIGURE 1 Singapore Media Literacy Council, 2018 Racial Harmony Day Advertisement (screenshot by the author) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

CMIO is incessantly talked about and implicitly oriented to as an institutional and broader knowledge structure, but it is also incessantly visualized. Graphic design—materialized through banners, posters, advertisements, ritualized performance, and more—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” (Chan, 2011, 63). In other words, the socialization to racialized looking practices is partly achieved through *visualization*: through making forms of information that would otherwise exist in a nongraphic and nonvisual channel visually perceivable (Drucker, 2014). Visualization practices have historically been common in public contexts like annual National Day Parades, where “pictorial depictions, even effigies . . . further hammer home the message that the population of Singapore comprises four ‘racial’ types” (PuruShotam, 1998, 51–52).

Although effigies have fallen out of favor, techniques for presenting conventionalized, racialized images continue to appear today in genres like advertisements. The ad in Figure 1 was posted in honor of Singapore’s annual Racial Harmony Day by the Media Literacy Council (2018). It depicts four figures that correspond to the CMIO racial types: from left to right appears a Chinese girl, a Malay boy, an Indian girl, and an Other. The colors representing skin tones range from very fair for the Chinese girl, darker for Malay, darkest for Indian, and once again fair for Other, with the depiction of traditional clothing in the case of the CMI children serving as a further cue for what “race” each character is supposed to be. The light-colored “Other” dressed in Western clothing is also most likely intended to depict a Eurasian Singaporean, the mixed-race descendants of European and Asian intermarriages (Pereira, 2006), not a foreigner, even though the “O” of CMIO itself encompasses a broad range of others from across both ethno-racialized and citizenship groups. Like other cartoons, it does not aspire to aesthetic realism per se, but through its simplification serves as a projective ground and interface for animating hegemonic images (Silvio, 2019, especially chapters 1 and 3)—here, the “races of Singapore.” This includes the fair-skinned “Other,” itself a simplification: needless to say, the standardized image of Eurasian Singaporeans as fair-skinned, “ambiguous” (but still decidedly “Asian”-looking) subjects does not encompass the Eurasian raciolinguistic community, let alone the spectrum of official and unofficial “Others.”

Crucially, for a Singaporean perceiver (or anyone familiar with the Singaporean context), the depicted subjects stand as a representation of “racial harmony” materialized in and as the coming together of children of all the races of Singapore. Put differently, images like this are designed as images of Singapore, with color and “cultural” sartorial signs offered as emblems of Singaporeans’ individual race-cultures in combination. As was repeatedly told to me during my fieldwork research, images like these were designed to be maximally inclusive—and in many cases, were interpreted as such. In images like these, Singaporeans are invited not only to see themselves but also to see Singapore writ large.

I start from CMIO broadly and from this cartoon in particular to emphasize the ways that pedagogies of difference in Singapore—both institutionalized and, as we will see in later sections, informal—become a key mechanism through which modern subjects learn to look. As Charles Goodwin (1994) elaborated in his now-classic linguistic-anthropological account of “professional vision,” learning to see *as a professional* involves socialization

to “interpretive frameworks” (606) that allow for the technologically mediated, expert-technical transformation of perception across categories. In graphic representations like the Racial Harmony Day advertisement, enactments of expertise (Carr, 2010) by the “storytelling state” in Singapore (Cheng, 2021; see also, Cheng, 2018) draw together discursive practices, pedagogies, and technologies to produce an image of Singapore as “a relevant object of knowledge . . . through the interplay between a *domain of scrutiny* . . . and a set of *discursive practices* . . . being deployed within a *specific activity*” (Goodwin, 1994, 606; emphasis in original). Perceivers in Singapore are repeatedly presented with naturalized, essentialized hierarchies of distinction (Silverstein, 2004, 640–44 ff) that circulate as a mere depiction of reality rather than a motivated, value-laden stance toward it. Professional visions embodied in state-produced advertisements—as well as in state-sanctioned curricula and other reflexively nation-building genres—serve a didactic function, overtly and implicitly instructing perceivers what to look at, how, and why.

As should be clear, learning to look (like a professional) is always also learning to listen (Inoue, 2006, 25–26; Rosa and Flores, 2017, 627–28 ff). Goodwin (1994, 608–15) shows how archaeologists learn to interpret a patch of ground not as mere earth but as a bundle of archaeological features through forms of talk that guide subsequent perception as a member of a profession; he further shows how attorneys verbally instruct a jury on how to look at Rodney King’s brutal 1992 beating by four white Los Angeles Police Department officers so as to see not anti-Blackness and police brutality but a series of expert categories, tools, and judgments (615–16 ff). Elsewhere, E. Summerson Carr (2011, 90–92) shows how clients at an addiction treatment facility learn to “look (at themselves) before they lea[p] (into sobriety)” through talk and talk-about-talk that is thoroughly mediated in and as expert interpretive frameworks. Learning to look also requires learning to voice and to recognize voices.

As it has been developed by linguistic anthropologists and other critical scholars of language, voice refers to the ways that recognizable kinds of social personae get performed. Whether scaled as large, small, or otherwise, *voice* and *voicing* describe processes by which language gets used to enact speakers’ social attributes. Importantly, as much as voices get constituted through their determinate features, they also always exist contrastively: a social persona or voice exists not just by virtue of what it is but by what it is not. This can be witting or unwitting (Agha, 2005, 39) and can be effected as a function of either the congruence or the gap between a voice and the speaker who animates it (49). In a case described by Agha (2005), two boys, Ben and Josh, play a game of table tennis, narrating their activity using the prosody, pitch, pacing, and grammatical features recognizable as verbal signs of a social persona, the sports announcer. Neither of the boys is a professional sports announcer, nor is this the performance’s intended effect. Rather, the result is a “turn-by-turn noncongruence” between the verbal performance and the speaker’s biographical identities that gets used to reconstruct each boy’s actions “in a voice more authoritative than his own” (50).

As should be clear, even such canonical instances of voicing are also about looking: when learning to speak like or to listen for the voice of the sports announcer, one is also learning to look at unfolding sporting activity, to both look for and aesthetically experience the things that a sports announcer looks for and feels—to feel the anticipation of a player about to score, or to see what a play or strategy is likely to be. As should also be clear, this is not limited to the professionals: as one among many varieties of looking, through pedagogies of difference, many professional visions can become gradiently available to anyone. To draw a parallel to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 294) formulation of the dialogic character of art and life, when we speak, our words are never “neutral and impersonal”; our words are always drawn from the mouths of others, from “other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (294). To speak is to engage in acts of voicing, to act not as an individuated, phonosonic voice but *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 presocial, precultural, or presemiotic apparatus, but involves looking through the eyes of others, of looking through “socially identifiable perspectives” and their entailed “worlds of significance” (12). This involves looking at—and *as*—structured positions within raciolinguistic image economies. I elaborate on this in the next section.

CONTESTING RACIOLINGUISTIC DEFAULTS IN A SINGAPOREAN IMAGE ECONOMY

In this section, I consider situations in which the overdetermined, presumptively self-evident default status of race in Singapore gets troubled through encounters with ambiguity. Like elsewhere, cases of ambiguity are often treated as marginal aberrations from a norm or as logically secondary, even as they are experientially and existentially primary. As legal scholar and bioethicist Osagie K. Obasogie has argued, dominant modernist constructions of race represent it as a self-evident, and self-evidently visual, feature of bodies and persons. Obasogie refers to this formulation as “*race ipse loquitur*”: the idea that “race speaks for itself” in and as visible difference (Obasogie, 2014, 2; emphasis in original). Obasogie’s research was the first of its kind to investigate how blind Americans organize their ideas about race in and through talk. In Obasogie’s study, blind people referred to visual tropes of racialized difference as often as did sighted people, showing how, for participants, racializing ideologies that focalize vision as a privileged modality for perception do not require vision in the narrow sense of sight. Further, Obasogie’s analysis involves a cross-modal representational move. That is, his definition of the ideologically self-evident *visual* quality of race takes recourse to a verb of speaking: *race speaks for itself*. This indexes a tension at the heart of my argument: like the US situation, learning to see race in Singapore requires real acts of perception in a visual modality or channel, by someone, somewhere, at some time. And yet, as the art historian Nicole R. Fleetwood (2011) has argued, it takes further ideological work (Gal and Irvine, 2019) to look at visual signs as signs of race. As Fleetwood (2011) demonstrates in her analysis of the articulations of Blackness in, as, and against American culture, embodied tokens of racialized Blackness always exceed the individuated bodies and

narratives to which signs of Blackness get fixed (6, 83 ff). That is, race does not speak for itself, but requires others to speak on its behalf, to speak through (or as) it, and to construct the fragmentary qualia—or structured, materialized qualities (Chumley, 2017)—that subsequently serve as its totalizing evidence.

My use of *image economy* to describe these dynamics draws on theorization by gender and African American and Africana studies scholar Aria S. Halliday (2018), who builds in turn on work by anthropologist Deborah Poole (1997). Extending Poole's conception of the image world—the “relationships of referral and exchange among images themselves, and the social and discursive relations connecting image-makers and consumers . . . through which representations flow from place to place, person to person, culture to culture, and class to class” (6–7)—Halliday (2018, 68–70) directs our analytic attention to the making of symbolic capital through circulation and accumulation both within and across image worlds. Crucially, for Halliday, this requires that we also turn our attention to systemic articulations of spectularity and objectification as they are constituted in and as anti-Blackness, and that are constituted in and as articulations among the technologies, representations, bodies, and ideologies that get drawn together to create representational, symbolic power (70–72).

Like the circulation of professional visions as a particular habit of looking, the mediating infrastructures of image economies are structured raciolinguistically, at once historically, institutionally, and interactionally grounded (Rosa and Flores, 2017, 634–37). This grounding is always material and often entangled in commoditized practices of physical making and doing (Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014; Shankar and Cavanaugh, 2012). Shalini Shankar's (2015, 90 ff) analysis of the contested, commoditized production and circulation of “aspirational imagery” in multicultural advertising provides a case in point. As a multimodal, interdiscursive, intertextual, and contested category, the “Asian-American consumer” gets materialized by advertising professionals out of both linguistic and visual practices, and yet the professionals are not isolated from the image economies through which aspirational imagery is designed to circulate in and as pedagogies of difference—among other things, in the form of advertisements whose aim is to not only differentiate, communicate, and accrue value to corporate brands but also to inspire consumers' self-fashioning through identification and consumption. Like Racial Harmony Day imagery, aspirational imagery targeting “(the) Asian-American consumer(s)” is materialized out of selective inclusions and exclusions along lines of ancestry, consumption class, (multi)cultural (dis)affiliations, and linguistic practices (265; see also Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014, 61). Despite the images' ideologically unitary construction, they run into trouble when used to navigate encounters with actually existing difference.

In Singapore, I encountered numerous moments in which my interlocutors found themselves compelled to navigate ambiguities of race, language, and belonging in various ways—and with various stakes—whether imputed to themselves or to others. During early 2020, I began attending a class for heritage learners of Kristang (alongside other language-pedagogy settings). Kristang is a critically endangered minority language variety associated with a group known as Portuguese Eurasians (Wong, 2019, 38), descendants of sixteenth-century intermarriages between Malay residents of the archipelago and Portuguese colonizers in Melaka. As members of a micro-minority group in Singapore, many officially Eurasian people are routinely mistaken as foreigners, and the Eurasian Singaporeans to whom I spoke all have numerous stories of being asked the questions “What are you?” and “Where are you from?” Kristang is not an officially recognized “Mother Tongue” language, so many members of the community learn Malay or Mandarin as a subject in school (Tan, 2014; Wee, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the topics of identity, race, and language came up often among class participants.

The Kristang class I attended involved approximately 15 participants. The class atmosphere was relaxed, and many of the participants arrived early to chat—sometimes more than an hour early. During the class, I sat at a medium-sized modular table with five women aged 40–55. While we waited for the class to begin, they talked about a range of topics, but focused most on their jobs, children, and churches. Inevitably, the conversation gradually shifted to the topic of linguistic practices in Singapore, as attendees began recounting interlocutors' linguistic misfires—misfires that resulted from cases of racialized misidentification. Two participants, Bingqian and Claudia, were especially eager to share their experiences with the group:

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

C: “[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.’¹⁴ I give them a shock.”

As was the case with the Chindian sisters earlier in the article, this sharing was punctuated by laughter and knowing nods from the group. In the semi-fictionalized reported speech here, Bingqian interprets the act of speaking Mandarin as a sign that their interlocutor has assumed that she was not just a Mandarin *speaker* but a Chinese *person*. This is not only due to the close connection between race and language (a multiply institutionalized connection naturalized through CMIO). It is also because, by default, people of unknown racialized identity in Singapore should be addressed in English; any deviation from this is marked in various ways—as an intentional exclusion, as a racist act, etc. Here, Bingqian's report was framed as a case of mistaken identity—of looking like a race (Chinese) and therefore being presumed to understand a language (Mandarin). At issue was not whether Bingqian had not understood but rather with the racialized assumption that was taken to back the interlocutor's language choice, an assumption that was contested through an appeal to appearance: “Look at the color of my skin!” In the final turn, Claudia evaluated the assumptions of a meat shop proprietor. This shopkeeper's assumptions about diet (avoiding pork) reflected an assumption about religion (Islam) that in turn reflected an assumption about race (Malay), an effect that projects from the close historical-institutional and present links between Malay and

Muslim identities in Singapore (and throughout Southeast Asia). However, Claudia did not overtly contest or challenge the shopkeeper's assumption but rather turned it into a semi-playful opportunity to subvert the assumption: a Malay (Muslim) Singaporean who eats pork was presumed to give the shopkeeper a "shock," a subversive act performed for Claudia's amusement at the shopkeeper's expense.

Of course, interactions that focalize participants' ethno-racial identifications also occur in informal interactions outside of settings like a heritage-language classroom, where identities and identifications are less overtly focalized as a topic of conversation. In February 2022, I observed an encounter involving strangers who contested the identity of my Chinese Malaysian friend, Heng. Following a heritage tour in Singapore's Geylang neighborhood that Heng and I attended together, participants were divided into small groups of four to five to discuss what we had seen and learned during the tour. As my small group's members began self-introductions, one of the two other participants—both of whom were young Chinese Singaporean women (participants A2 and B2, below)—turned to my friend (H) and asked:

A2: "Where are you from?"

H: "Malaysia."

B2: "Ah you are Malay is it?"

H: "No, I'm Chinese"

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

In this interaction, myriad intersecting dynamics can be seen at play. In the initial line of questioning, B2's follow-up to Heng's answer about citizenship and birthplace—Malaysia—was reinterpreted via a presumed isomorphism between a nation-state territory and a race: Malaysians, that is, are Malay, at least by default, when they look like Heng. Heng's Malay identity was framed as a question by B2, but she was later incredulous. It was here that B2 used an appeal to skin color as a kind of negative evidence. The grammatical underspecification of A2's Mandarin aside does not indicate that A2 had decided what Heng's race was, but she had judged what it was not.

At this moment, B2's choice of language further emphasizes the duo's disbelief. Throughout the evening, the duo had spoken to one another in English, which is typical for many ethno-racially Chinese Singaporeans of the duo's professional and educational status (both reported later that they held white-collar managerial jobs). By switching into Mandarin and exclaiming "但这么黑;" ("but [he is] so [lit.] black," i.e., "dark"), it is likely that B2 presumed that neither I nor Heng would be able to understand. Given that English had been the prior interactional default, and given that, unlike many Singaporeans of older generations, young Singaporeans are often hesitant to use adjectives like 黑/hei ("black," i.e., "dark") to refer to skin color for fear of being interpellated as a racist, the switch to Mandarin takes on new significance. In B2's concluding turn at talk, she switched back into English⁵ and demanding Heng's surname. The demand that my friend furnish a stranger with his surname to prove his race demonstrates a hierarchy of modalities at work—not only among the perceptual modalities that regiment racialized signs but also among the positions occupied by perceivers and questioners.

After having had his Chinese-ness called into question in this way, Heng kept quiet for the rest of the event, but he 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." And yet, he reassured me, he would not waste his energy with people he knew he would never see again and relished the ability to "make them feel their racism" in the instances where he did choose to speak Mandarin to "prove" his identity. As I hope is clear, despite the trouble that ensued when A2 and B2 attempted to apply ideologically overdetermined interpretive frameworks to Heng, the interaction was still structured by a habit of looking through a visual epistemology of race: the assumption that race ought to be transparently knowable via simplified, institutionalized structures like CMIO. I explore this further in the next two sections, examining troubled constructions of raciolinguistic defaults in state-produced media, together with its ambivalent, multivalent uptake in online commentaries.

ENTERTAINING DEFAULTS, REVEALING UNEXPECTED "ROOTS"

This section returns to the "My Roots Are—?" series, which I referenced in the article's opening. As a series of state-produced media, the six videos emphasize the flexible interplay between ideological assumptions of race as a self-evident, visible phenomenon and the ambiguities that get materialized in and as attempts to look at real, biographical people. As I will show, in the videos, "roots" are not necessarily "race," and to have an unexpected "root" does not shift the ways that a character gets subsequently looked at. In this way, I attempt to show how, like voicing, looking materializes contrastively—contrasts that are regimented by the selection of written and visual content in the videos, though this selection does not limit the ways that online commentators enact and comment on their acts of looking (a dynamic I explore in the final section).

The videos in the "My Roots Are—?" series were released weekly on the Singapore Bicentennial's Facebook page and YouTube channel between September 12 and October 17 in 2019. In each video, a character discovers previously unknown details of their "roots" through genetic ancestry test results. Each of the 45-second-long videos featured a different character appearing as themselves—that is, they were not actors performing a separate character within the diegetic world of the videos. In their design, the videos implicitly orient a structure of looking in which viewers

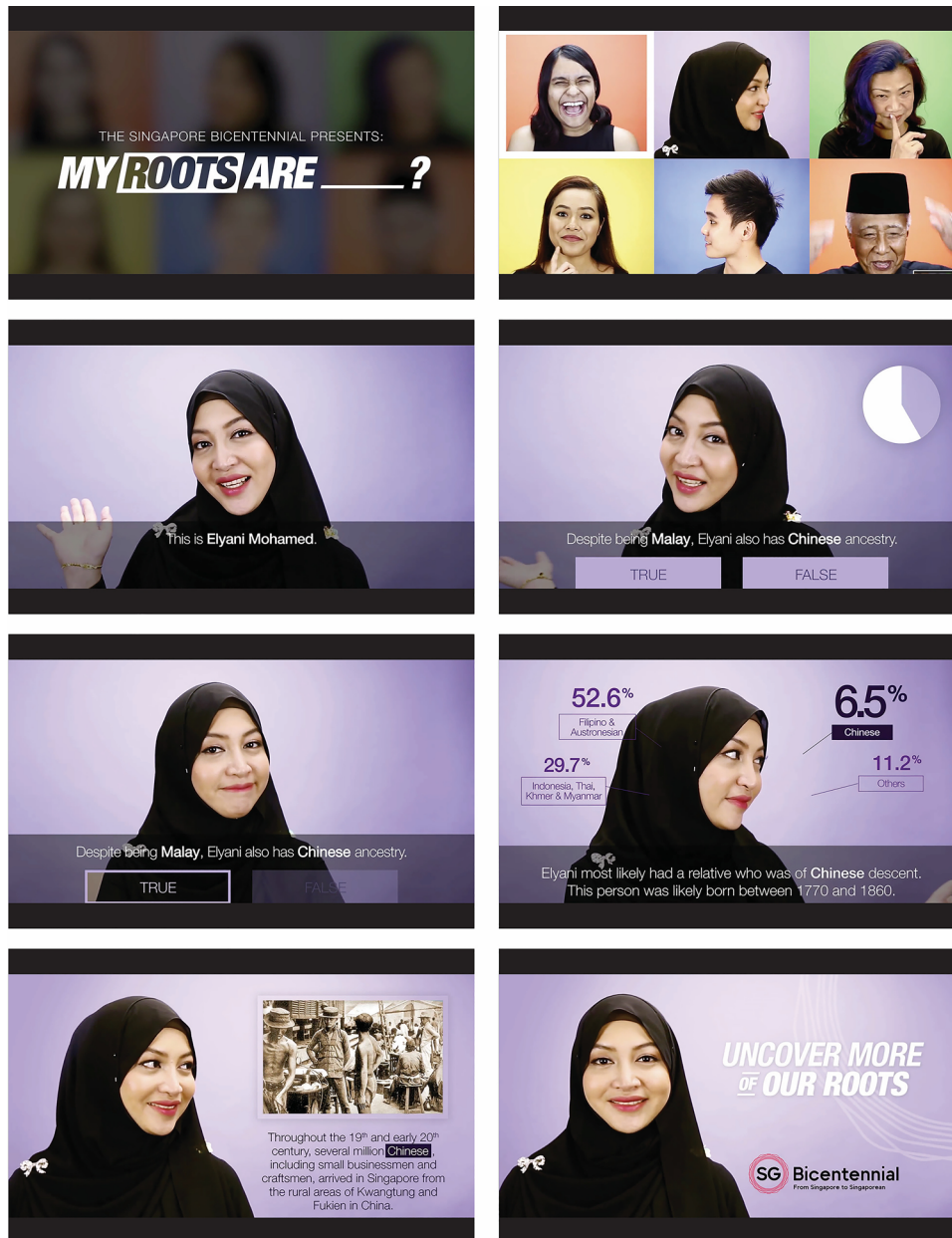


FIGURE 2 Features of the “My Roots Are—?” video series, Singapore Bicentennial Office 2019 (screenshots and layout by the author) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

are prompted to ask questions about strangers based on their appearance, with additional—limited, and often ambiguous—support from signs in other modalities. Each of the six videos follow a regular structure of eight segments, illustrated in Figure 2 (Singapore Bicentennial, 2019a). These are: (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; 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. Then (3) the selected participant’s name is shown in large text at the bottom of the screen, followed by (4) a question about the individual’s “roots.” The questions are either true/false or multiple choice in their format, though there are only ever two options presented. 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, detailing the component elements of the individual’s “roots.” At the bottom of the screen, a descriptive paragraph offers a speculative guess on the time period in which a given ancestral “root” was established. Videos then (7) offer a 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 Singapore Bicentennial logo.

I focus my analysis on episodes 2 and 4, which respectively feature two characters, Elyani Mohamed and Lorna O'Hara. Released on September 19, 2019, Elyani Mohamed appears in Episode 2 like other characters, with only her head and shoulders visible. She is seen wearing a black hijab, smiling directly into the camera 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 [sic], 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, “despite being Malay” presents Elyani’s Malay-ness as self-evident. A number of co-occurrent signs contribute to this framing, particularly her name—which appears in the video’s title and in the Introduction segment—and her hijab. As a sartorial index whose interpretation is deeply overdetermined by layered raciolinguistic-religious defaults, the fact that Elyani appears wearing a hijab serves for many viewers as a self-evident sign of a racialized identity—that is, Malay is one of the CMIO “races,” and Malay Singaporeans are presumed Muslim by default. As the photographer, researcher, and educator, Nurul H. Rashid (2012, 2013, 2014) has articulated in the photography series *Hijab/Her I–III*, in spite of the range of meanings 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 cultural-racial type.

In addition to treating Malay-ness as a self-evident characterization, the Question segment also constructs the possibility of Elyani’s Chinese “roots” as both surprising and distinct from her racialized identity. That is, although revealed in the end to be only 6.5%⁶ of Elyani’s “roots,” the fact that the question is asked presents Chinese “roots” as a fact that a viewer might doubt. More than this, the grammatical construction of the Question presents “roots” and “race” as separable. “Malay” is what Elyani *is*, “Chinese ancestry” is what Elyani *has*. These formulations index a schema of cultural knowledge where vectors of differentiation of group-based (non)identity get projected across taxonomic (classificatory) and partonomic (hierarchized part-whole) relations (Silverstein, 2004, 633–38): Elyani *is* Singaporean, in contrast with other nation-state citizenship statuses; she *is* Malay, in contrast to other raciolinguistic 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. In other words, what a viewer comes to know about her unexpected roots does not undermine what a viewer is expected to know about—and how they are to look at—what she is.

Similar constructions are found in Episode 4: Lorna O’Hara (Singapore Bicentennial, 2019b), released on October 3, 2019. Here, sartorial signs are less overdetermined in their interpretive defaults: as seen in Figure 3, Lorna appears with dark shoulder-length hair and wearing a black, sleeveless top. In the Question segment, Episode 4 asks, “What other ancestry does Lorna have apart from **South Asian**? Spanish & Portuguese [or] 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.” Even though nearly half (45.5%) of Lorna’s putative genetic ancestry is neither “South Asian” nor “Spanish & Portuguese,” the question only highlights the former two categories; the remaining results are amalgamated into an undifferentiated “Others.” It is also noteworthy that, despite her name—defaults of which might point, for many interpreters, to Irish ancestry—Lorna is described only as “South Asian” rather than, for example, British/Irish *and* South Asian. The choice to highlight some but not other categories points not only toward the categories’ presumed entertainment value but also toward the knowledge viewers are imagined to reliably be able to draw from in answering a question about a stranger’s roots. At the same time, the presence of her surname—O’Hara—changes the way that a viewer with the requisite background knowledge is expected to look at Lorna as a character. Similar to Elyani, the revealed “roots” do not shift the fact that she is South Asian.

Genetic ancestry is relatively incidental to the videos, serving primarily to reinforce existing raciolinguistic category frameworks while also elaborating the Bicentennial’s broader message about the emergence of a “uniquely Singaporean DNA” qua national identity. Though this section has focused primarily on two videos, all six videos in the “My Roots Are—?” series similarly highlight some facts of personhood as self-evident and others as claims to be questioned, with “roots” as distinct from “race.” That is, the act of revealing “roots” is not designed to challenge the saliency of race, nor to undermine the visual epistemology of race as such. Rather, the multiple revealed “roots” serve to transform the token individuals into an image of Singapore—as embodying, through their genetic ancestry, the “multi”-ness of the nation without in the process transforming their racialized categorization. Crucial to this effect is the fact that the characters do not speak, since to be heard speaking—whether in English or in their “Mother Tongue”—would reframe them as members of their respective CMIO raciolinguistic community rather than as *both* a community member and an embodiment of the image of Singapore.

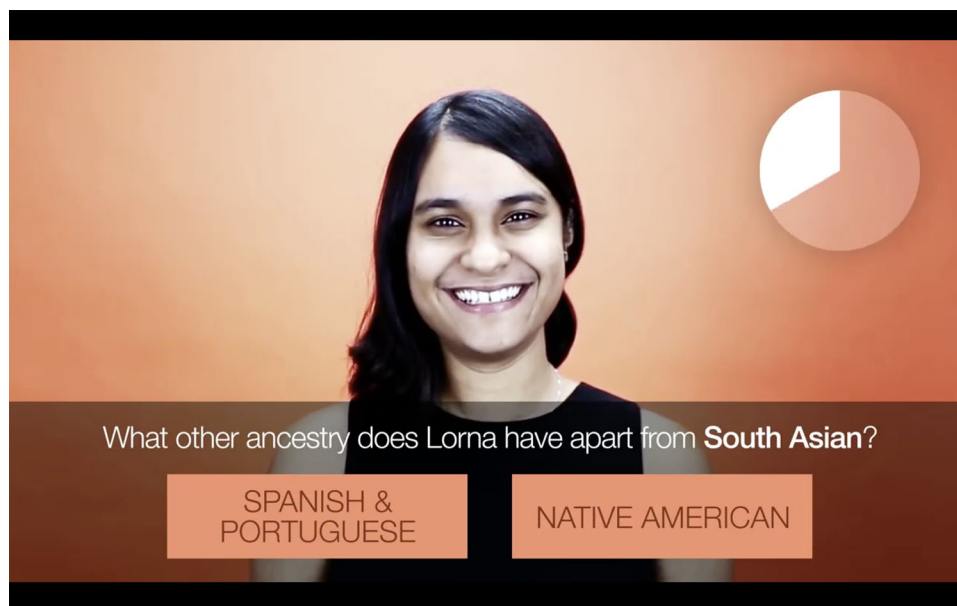


FIGURE 3 Lorna O'Hara, featured in "My Roots Are ___?: Episode 4, Singapore Bicentennial Office (screenshot by the author) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

CONFIRMING AND CONTESTING THE VISUAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF RACE

This final section tracks how videos were taken up, challenged, and transformed in viewer comments. Across the six videos, commentators posted a total of 319 comments, predominantly on Facebook. Among these, 138 deploy the lexical items "race," "multiracialism," or "racial harmony," and 60 comments refer to DNA or genetics, whether to contest DNA/genetics as evidence or assert their primacy over other forms of evidence. Most of the online comments were written as polemics, and few were constructed as direct replies to previous posts, even when using the inbuilt "threading" feature. The genre of the comment thread itself privileged certain voices and discouraged others: comments were written almost exclusively in English (with occasional snippets of Malay and Mandarin).

While the videos do not include the term "race," viewer comments used this frame (and the specific term) extensively. On the one hand, this is largely unsurprising since terms like "Chinese" and "Malay" are understood in Singapore (and beyond) as indexing racialized groups. On the other hand, the absence of the term "race" came to serve as grounds for both disavowal and counter-critical accusations (Babcock, 2022; for a parallel case, see Pak, 2021). Put differently, some counter-critics insisted that, because the videos did not literally use the term "race," critics were themselves the ones making it about race. In this way, race-talk that did not start from the presumed condition of "racial harmony" was seen as dangerous, threatening, and in need of policing. Comments that did begin from a stance of "harmony," meanwhile, went uncontested, as in the following comment to Episode 2: Elyani Mohamed: "We are Singaporeans. I'm ¼ Indian and ¾ 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 races and cultures but are distinctly and uniquely Singaporean" (comment by C. Y., September 19, 2019). Here, the commentator makes explicit the video's construction as an image of Singapore, reframing Elyani's "roots" as emblematic of the "unique mix" that Singaporeans share, a "we" constituted out of the "unique mix of different races and cultures"—a mix drawn from CMIO: "Indian, Malay and Chinese."

Across the online comments, Malay identity was recurrently debated as a question of "indigeneity" versus "migrant" status, where "indigenous" Malay-ness was taken on the one hand as a transparent fact of history and geography for which genetic "roots" are superfluous, and on the other as a challenge to the claim that Singapore is a "nation of migrants." This is apparent in comments like the following, posted by M. I. in response to Episode 6: Haji Mohd Seain Bin Madson, on October 17, 2019 (Singapore Bicentennial, 2019c): "If Singapore was formally [sic—most likely 'formerly'] a Malaysian island, then it makes perfect Sense that the indigenous are Malay. And Filipinos are ethnic Malays too. It doesn't take science to tell you that. A little bit of geography revision [n.b.—'review'] will do you a world of good." M. I. asserts the primacy of "geography" over genetic ancestry qua "science"; they also rejected the division of Haji Mohd Seain's "roots" into two categories, "Filipino & Austronesian" on the one hand, and "Indonesian, Thai, Khmer, Myanmar" on the other. Unlike the framing in the video's genetic ancestry results, M. I. asserted these are all "ethnic Malays."

When weighing in on the "indigeneity"/"migrant" debate, many commentators asserted the primacy of visual appearance as the grounds for racial knowing, a move that suggests the commentators interpreted genetic "roots" as claims about race. For instance, in weighing in on a recurrent topic of debate—whether Filipino people are encompassed by the category Malay—commentators both asserted and rejected this division by appealing to appearance as a self-evident ground, whether insisting that Filipino people obviously look the same as or different from Malays in Singapore. The

comment by A. H. represents a common formula in these debates: “U can say what you want but the feature said it all.” A. H.’s reference to features contested the evidence offered by other commenters. Such references to characters’ appearance occurred in response to all six videos, often acting as a sort of rhetorical “last word” (whether they were actually the final comment).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown how the visual epistemology of race serves to position visual perception as an interpretive default for looking at difference, thus to position seeing as the aesthetic modality through which multimodal perceptions get figured. Within a local raciolinguistic image economy that is shaped by histories, institutional structures, and interactional routines for navigating a simultaneously presumed and policed condition of multiracial “harmony,” people in Singapore habitually work to position themselves as hegemonic perceivers capable of authoritatively listening to and looking at racialized others. Crucially, habits of looking are not about abstract structures alone but about the ways that interactants navigate moments of encounter, attempting to transform experiences of actually existing ambiguity into determinate encounters with (a) race, “one participation framework at a time” (Agha, 2007, 321).

As I have further shown, even when the visual epistemology of race breaks down, people in Singapore 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. Heng was still able to identify as Chinese and to benefit from structures of racialized majoritarian privilege (Babcock, 2022) in housing and employment markets, even while being located outside the nation by citizenship. Despite the potential ambiguity of my own appearance, other signs worked to overdetermine the global hierarchies of privilege in which I was situated: my answers to questions about my racialized identity during my fieldwork (and beyond) were inevitably subordinated to my status as a foreigner, and a privileged foreigner at that, with my linguistically audible Americanness taken as superordinate to my potential racial ambiguity. At the same time, even when the visual epistemology of race breaks down, it does not challenge its default status as a structure and strategy for navigating encounters with difference. Even when the features do *not* say it all (to voice both the online commentator in the previous section and Obasogie’s [2014] definition), interactants in Singapore continue to fall back on habits that presume that they do, performing acts of (non)recognition that gradiently confer (non)belonging on others and gradiently repositioning the interpreters themselves as authoritative—as capable of looking through eyes more authoritative than their own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is the result of a truly imponderable amount of engagement and support over the years. My thanks go to Tay Minghua, Naoko Shimazu, and attendees at the 2020 National University of Singapore Asia Research Institute’s Graduate Forum on Southeast Asian Studies, particularly to my colleagues from the Singapore University of Technology and Design who attended the talk that first birthed this idea; to Rob Gelles, Alice Yeh, Kennell Huggins, Samuel Tan, and attendees at the 2020 University of Chicago *Semiotics: Culture in Context Workshop* for their comments on an early version of the manuscript; to Shannon Fie, Leslie Williams, undergraduates, and faculty at Beloit College, whose probing questions and critical, thoughtful engagement greatly strengthened the argument; to Chan Heng Chee, Susan Gal, Ryan Jobson, and Constantine Nakassis for feedback on this idea when it was still a dissertation chapter; to Mysara Aljaru for Malay translation of my abstract; and last but not least, to the generous, close engagement from editor-in-chief Elizabeth Chin, the associate editors, and my anonymous reviewers at *American Anthropologist*.

ORCID

Joshua Babcock  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9264-2873>

ENDNOTES

¹ Boldface text indicates verbal emphasis.

² “Chindian” is a portmanteau of “Chinese” and “Indian,” one of a small number of “mixed-race” groups whose existence is broadly known in Singapore.

³ This is a pseudonym, but the hyphenated formulation was present in the original utterance.

⁴ The utterance can be glossed as “I am Malay but I eat pork”; “lah” and “one” are pragmatic particles producing a softened force to the utterance and strong emphasis, respectively.

⁵ I should note that this switch was likely guided, at least in part, by the fact that I had unequivocally interpreted as a foreigner. That is, I interpret the switch to English as being primarily for my benefit. Though important, this switch implicated Heng’s presence and presumptive identification less directly than the switch to Mandarin had.

⁶ This does not mean that Elyani “has” 6.5% “Chinese genes.” As scholars in STS, medical anthropology, and allied fields have demonstrated, there is virtually no possibility of a valid genetic distinction between, say, “Chinese-” or “Vietnamese DNA” (Smart et al., 2012). However, 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 (Schramm et al., 2012, 9–10)—to say nothing of the myriad habits for talking about genetic difference as if it maps neatly onto “races” or “ethnicities” qua “nations.”

REFERENCES CITED

- Agha, Asif. 2005. "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15(1): 38–59.
- Agha, Asif. 2007. "Recombinant Selves in Mass Mediated Spacetime." *Language & Communication* 27:320–35.
- Babcock, Joshua. 2022. "Postracial Policing, 'Mother Tongue' Sourcing, and Images of Singlish Standard." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 32(2): 326–44.
- Babcock, Joshua. 2023. "(De)Coupling Positional Whiteness and White Identities through 'Good English' in Singapore." *Signs and Society* 11(1): 23–44.
- Babcock, Joshua, and Kennell Huggins. 2021. "Destination Storytelling Singapore: Crazy Rich Asians (2018) and the Constructed Global Audience." *Journal of Southeast Asian Media Studies* 3(3): 53–76.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1981. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 84–258. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bauman, Richard, and Charles L. Briggs. 2003. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carr, E. Summerson. 2010. "Enactments of Expertise." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39:17–32.
- Carr, E. Summerson. 2011. *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cavallaro, Francisco, and Bee Chin Ng. 2014. "Language in Singapore: From Multilingualism to English Plus." In *Challenging the Monolingual Mindset*, edited by John Hajek and Yvette Slaughter, 33–48. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Cavanaugh, Jillian R., and Shalini Shankar. 2014. "Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism: Language, Materiality, and Value." *American Anthropologist* 116(1): 51–64.
- Chan, Heng Chee, and Sharon Siddique. 2019. *Singapore's Multiculturalism: Evolving Diversity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chan, Leong K. 2011. "Visualizing Multi-Racialism in Singapore: Graphic Design as a Tool for Ideology and Policy in Nation Building." *Design Issues* 27(1): 63–69.
- Cheng, Nien Yuan. 2018. "'This Is My Doodle': Non-Participation, Performance, and the Singapore Memory Project." *Performance Paradigm* 14:64–86.
- Cheng, Nien Yuan. 2021. "The Storytelling State: Performing Life Histories in Singapore." Lecture presented at the AcademiaSG Singapore Studies Junior Scholar Seminars, Singapore, February 5. <https://www.academia.sg/seminar-series-2021/cheng-storytelling/>
- Chua, Beng Huat. 1998. "Racial-Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen." In *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand*, edited by Joel S. Kahn, 28–50. Singapore: St. Martin's Press.
- Chumley, Lily. 2017. "Qualia and Ontology: Language, Semiotics, and Materiality; an Introduction." *Signs and Society* 5(S1): S1–20.
- Drucker, Johanna. 2014. *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. 2011. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gal, Susan, and Judith T. Irvine. 2019. *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goh, Daniel P. S. 2010. "Multiculturalism and the Problem of Solidarity." In *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, edited by Terence Chong, 561–78. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Goodwin, Charles. 1994. "Professional Vision." *American Anthropologist* 96(3): 606–33.
- Haila, Anne. 2016. *Urban Land Rent: Singapore as a Property State*. Studies in Urban and Social Change. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Halliday, Aria S. 2018. "Miley, What's Good? Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda,' Instagram Reproductions, and Viral Memetic Violence." *Girlhood Studies* 11(3): 67–83.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2014. *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Inoue, Miyako. 2006. *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jay, Martin. 1993. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kathiravelu, Laavanya. 2017. "Rethinking Race: Beyond CMIO Categorisations." In *Living with Myths in Singapore*, edited by Kah Seng Loh, Ping Tjin Thum, and Jack Meng-Tat Chia, 159–68. Singapore: Ethos Books.
- Lim, Linda Y. C. 1989. "Social Welfare." In *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, edited by Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, 171–97. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Media Literacy Council (@MediaLiteracyCouncilSG). 2018. "Happy Racial Harmony Day from All of Us at Media Literacy Council!" Facebook post, July 20. <https://www.facebook.com/MediaLiteracyCouncilSG/posts/happy-racial-harmony-day-from-all-of-us-at-media-literacy-council/1677045182363664/>
- Nakassis, Constantine V. 2019. "Poetics of Praise and Image-Texts of Cinematic Encompassment." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29(1): 69–94.
- Obasogie, Osagie K. 2014. *Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pak, Vincent. 2021. "(De)Coupling Race and Language: The State Listening Subject and Its Rearticulation of Antiracism as Racism in Singapore." *Language in Society* 51(1): 1–22.
- Pereira, Alexius Anthony. 2006. "No Longer 'Other': The Emergence of the Eurasian Community in Singapore." In *Race, Ethnicity, and the State in Malaysia and Singapore*, edited by Kwen Fee Lien, 5–32. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.
- Poole, Deborah. 1997. *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- PuruShotam, Nirmala. 1998. "Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore." In *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, edited by Joel S. Kahn, 51–94. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Rashid, Nurul H. 2012. *Hijab/Her I*. <https://nurulh.weebly.com/hijabher-photography.html>
- Rashid, Nurul H. 2013. *Hijab/Her II*. <https://nurulh.weebly.com/hijabher-photography.html>
- Rashid, Nurul H. 2014. *Hijab/Her III*. <https://nurulh.weebly.com/hijabher-photography.html>
- Robinson, Cedric J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rosa, Jonathan. 2019. *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosa, Jonathan, and Nelson Flores. 2017. "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective." *Language in Society* 46(5): 621–47.
- Schramm, Katharina, David Skinner, Richard Rottenburg, and George T. H. Ellison. 2012. "Introduction—Ideas in Motion: Making Sense of Identity." In *Identity Politics and the New Genetics: Re/Creating Categories of Difference and Belonging*, edited by David Skinner and Richard Rottenburg, 1–29. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Shankar, Shalini. 2015. *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shankar, Shalini, and Jillian R. Cavanaugh. 2012. "Language and Materiality in Global Capitalism." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41:355–69.
- Silverstein, Michael. 2004. "'Cultural' Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus." *Current Anthropology* 45(5): 621–52.

- Silvio, Teri. 2019. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Singapore Bicentennial (@SGBicentennial). 2019a. "My Roots Are Ep 2: Elyani Mohamed." Facebook post. September 19. <https://www.facebook.com/sgbicentennial/videos/733903657059637/>
- Singapore Bicentennial (@SGBicentennial). 2019b. "My Roots Are Ep 4: Lorna O' Hara." Facebook post. October 3. <https://www.facebook.com/sgbicentennial/videos/515906985863176/>
- Singapore Bicentennial (@SGBicentennial). 2019c. "My Roots Are Ep 6: Haji Mohd Seain Bin Madson." Facebook post. October 17. <https://www.facebook.com/sgbicentennial/videos/399541563953869/>.
- Smart, Andrew, Richard Tutton, Paul Martin, and George T. H. Ellison. 2012. "'Race' as a Social Construction in Genetics." In *Identity Politics and the New Genetics: Re/Creating Categories of Difference and Belonging*, edited by Katharina Schramm, David Skinner, and Richard Rottenburg, 30–52. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Tan, Ying-Ying. 2014. "English as a 'Mother Tongue' in Singapore." *World Englishes* 33(3): 319–39.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2003. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wee, Lionel. 2002. "When English Is Not a Mother Tongue: Linguistic Ownership and the Eurasian Community in Singapore." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23(4): 282–95.
- Wong, Kevin Martens. 2019. "Kodrah Kristang: The Initiative to Revitalize the Kristang Language in Singapore." *Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication* 19:35–121.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3(3): 257–337.
- Yeoh, Brenda S. A. 2004. "Cosmopolitanism and Its Exclusions in Singapore." *Urban Studies* 41(12): 2431–45.

How to cite this article: Babcock, Joshua. 2023. "Seeing (or perceiving) difference in multiracial Singapore: Habits of looking in a raciolinguistic image economy." *American Anthropologist* 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13901>