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The demands of displacement, the micro-aggressions of multiculturalism: Performing an idea of "Indianness" in Singapore

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Abstract:

This paper explores the ways in which state-defined discourses of multiculturalism can unintentionally create a framework through which micro-aggressions are enacted against those interpreted as "other". These definitions cascade down from the state to majority and then minority ethno-national groups, who leverage positions of relative dominance to establish the terms of acceptance and integration into society. By negotiating these terms, ethnicity becomes a performative construct through which difference is asserted and reified. We illustrate these ideas through an empirical analysis of Singapore's minority Indian community, and how Singaporean Indians perform an idea of "Indianness" in response to their Singaporean Chinese fellow citizens on the one hand, and their migrant Indian counterparts on the other. This positioning causes Singaporean Indians to be subject to micro-aggressions vis-a-vis the Chinese majority, and to perpetrate micro-aggressions against Indian non-national minorities. In turn, this causes Singaporean Indianness to be underperformed throughout daily life.

Keywords:

Multiculturalism, superdiversity, micro-aggression, performance, Indianness, Singapore

Introduction

For a long time, communities, scholars, and policymakers have grappled with situations of "superdiversity" that characterize contemporary social life in many places. Superdiversity has been embraced as a construct that looks beyond the distinctions of ethnicity, with "more and more researchers ... moving away from seeing ethnic diversity as exceptional" and seeking instead to "understand social constellations where the everydayness of difference prevails" (Meissner 2015, 557). Through these constellations, normative categories that seek to differentiate between people based on ethnicity, visa and/or residency status, majority or minority position, citizenship and so on have since given way to more fluid, relational, and potentially volatile understandings instead. Notwithstanding, discourses of diversity remain, for various reasons, problematic. One reason, as Anthias (2012, 105) observes, is because the very idea of diversity is "slippery" and thus "elides so much together and speaks with so many tongues". Another is the general lack of sensitivity given to the overlapping yet often disjunctive understandings of diversity that are imposed by policy, lived through social encounters, and understood through scholarship. Meissner (2015, 563; see also Vertovec 2010, 2019) echoes this sentiment and reconciles these two problems in her assertion that "the malleability of superdiversity consequently challenges us to pay particular attention to situations where we might initially discount divergences or overlap, and to find ways of fruitfully linking them". This paper focuses on these linkages. We consider how state-defined discourses of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, whilst intended to create space and conditions for diversity to co-exist, can ironically foreground everyday micro-aggressions against those construed as other. Ethnicity becomes a performative construct *through which* difference is asserted. Thus, whilst multiculturalism has

become a “normative theory of how diverse societies must be governed” (Ortiga 2015, 949), we emphasize its ironical, unintended, and harmful effects.

Our argument is that state-sponsored discourses of multiculturalism can create a structuring frame through which diversity is understood and managed. At the same time, however, this frame can create a totalizing logic through which those that are the “same-but-different” are excluded from the narrative by dominant groups. Positions of relative dominance reveal the contingent nature of one’s subject position, which is performed in ways that reproduce difference through the perpetuation of micro-aggressions against those construed as other. We illustrate these ideas through an empirical examination of Singapore’s Indian community. In 2020, Indians comprised 9 per cent of Singapore’s resident population, constituting the country’s smallest officially recognized minority (SingStat 2020). Sandwiched between Singapore’s majority (74.3 per cent) Chinese population on the one hand, and the country’s burgeoning migrant population – of which “Indian Indians” constitute a significant proportion, observationally, though public data is not available – on the other, many Singaporean Indians carve out a position of negotiated identity. Whilst their citizenship status foregrounds difference from Indian migrants, their ethnicity foregrounds difference from Singapore’s Chinese majority. This results in a position whereby they become both agent and object of micro-aggressions as they live out their negotiated identities. Through these micro-aggressions, “Indianness” becomes a *performative* construct and ethnicity becomes part of the “reproduction of norms” which subsequently “risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways” (Butler 2009, i). Like Ye (2017, 1033) we seek to “disrupt the binary of inclusion/exclusion in the context of migrant-led diversification” by exploring how difference-making is an outcome of multiple forms of (dis)placement. We demonstrate how, in migrant-dependent countries like Singapore, there are multiple framings of multiculturalism at play. How these framings intersect and result in tension can reveal how difference is performed according to the complex contingencies that multiculturalism gives rise to.

Beyond this paper’s theoretical contributions, it also holds empirical value for understanding the management of superdiversity in Singapore. The fundamental challenge Singapore faces is to develop a more fluid model of multiculturalism that goes beyond rigid categorisations of difference. Whilst Singapore was a “multicultural society long before it became a modern nation-state” (Lian 2016, 11), its model of multicultural management remains imprinted with the racializations of the state’s colonial forebears. It has, as a result, become an increasingly anachronistic model when managing contemporary flows of migration, capital and ideas. Despite the state’s “rigorous teaching of coexistence” (Ye 2016, 91), a gap has emerged between its emphasis on racial and religious harmony, and the intra-racial and intra-religious complexities that are now creating fissures within Singapore society. Indeed, Singaporeans have even been shown to “us[e] discourses of multiculturalism to *differentiate* themselves from co-ethnic migrants” (Ortiga 2015, 947, emphasis added), which reveals the extent to which migrant-led diversification can be seen to challenge the normative model of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) multiculturalism. This is a model that “sustain[s] the idea of being situated within one’s nation or ethnic group” (Seah 2016, 113), yet it is also one that presumes the coherence of inter-group boundaries and intra-group affinities. Where these boundaries and affinities are incoherent, however, is where tensions emerge from alternative expressions of everyday multiculturalism. Whilst this may appear to reflect the shift to look *beyond* ethnicity – one that has come to resonate in Singapore and has also gained scholarly attention and traction in recent years – so too does it foreground in more subtle, nuanced, and performative ways the enduring power of ethnicity in structuring the performance of inclusion and exclusion (Chua 2003, 2009; Goh 2011; S. Ang 2018; Frost 2021).

The demands of (dis)placement, the micro-aggressions of multiculturalism

As much as migration entails the arbitrating of opportunity, so too do its displacements foreground often unknown challenges to those who move and those who receive. These displacements are cumulative, and over time form placements of people that might in various ways be identified as different. Whilst the enduring tension between placement and displacement leads to diversity and the

ensuing need for its active management through strategies of multiculturalism (Joppke 1996; Vertovec 1996; Parekh 2006), it is the dialectic of (dis)placement that can lead to the undoing of normative, often state-led and structurally entrenched, discourses of multiculturalism. (Dis)placement brings with it its own set of demands, some of which speak to the ideals of citizen-formation, others to the need to belong. Where these demands start to intersect, we can see the emergence of “multiple migration-related differentiations” (Meissner 2015, 558) that can trigger emotions like the “unspoken fear[s] and aversion[s]” (Ho 2009, 792) of the perennially displaced. As Peterson (2020, 1395) puts it, the (dis)placement of individuals – whether first generation migrants or fourth – can serve to “accentuat[e] senses of (national) identity and belonging as (un)settled and (un)done in a relational fashion, in moment of ‘placed’ encounter”. It is these encounters that can cause micro-aggressions to manifest as an instinctive response to diversity. With this conceptual framing in mind, the two subsections that follow offer, first, a critique of pre-existing understandings of multiculturalism, and second, an indication of the value of exploring its performative dimensions. Taken together, they can be read as a response to Vertovec’s (2019, 125) call for researchers to find “better ways to describe and analyze new social patterns, forms and identities arising from migration-driven diversification”.

Multiculturalism and its discontents

Whilst situations of multiculturalism may have arisen organically through the movement and intermixing of people, the idea itself is a construct used to define, understand and manage unfolding shifts in society. In itself it holds no inherent value – its value stems from its strategic application through the mechanics of policy, education and scholarly discourse. Indeed, it is through its applications that problems arise. By and large, these problems are not necessarily unique to multiculturalism, but speak to any theoretical framework that is imposed from above in order to understand a situation that emerges for reasons that may – or may not – be explained by such impositions. Compounding this is the fact that much research has focussed on western contexts like the US, UK, Canada and Australia, and the influx of Muslim migrants thereto (e.g. Jones 2015; Hopkins et al. 2017; Nayak 2017; Mansouri and Modood 2021). There remains a western bias to the discourse that reproduces the assumption that “migration is ‘new’ and nationhood is ‘old’” (Ortiga 2015, 948; see also Ye 2016, 2017). These observations underpin Vertovec’s (2010, 83) lament that ethnicity, as the basis by which diversity is studied and understood, serves to reproduce the assumption of “difference between an ethnic ‘other’ and a majority”. Indeed, this privileging of the majority in setting the terms of difference has actually been shown to both *block* the integration of minorities into mainstream society and to foreground the racialization of the discourse in ways that have caused difference to be determined in relation to a normative category of “whiteness” (S. Ang 2018). Accordingly, it has been recognized that the policies that may appear to embrace multiculturalism, can actually “gloss over the structural and systemic issues that create racial and ethnic inequality” (Ortiga 2015, 949).

These issues have fuelled the agendas of multiculturalism’s critics. They have given rise to what has been termed a multicultural “backlash” (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), the multicultural “challenge” (Mansouri 2015) and even the “death” of multiculturalism wherein the very idea of diversity is seen to fuel anti-immigrant populism (Kundnani 2002; Modood 2014). Drilling down, these criticisms see multiculturalism’s integrative potential being compromised by the privileging of “difference at the expense of commonality, separatism rather than mixing, groupism rather than national identities, relativism rather than a defence of democratic value” (Modood 2014, 202). Many of these problems stem from the drawing of the boundaries around groups, communities, and identities. Boundaries bring to life multiculturalism’s inorganic nature, but in doing so they also render it a rigid and potentially polarizing construct. Accordingly, it has been argued that there needs to be efforts by majority groups to “expand the boundaries of ... the ‘civil sphere’ in a manner that permits heretofore marginalized and excluded groups to move from the periphery to the centre” (Kivisto 2015, 18). Doing so would, we contend, serve to change the parameters of the problem rather than directly addressing the problem itself. Indeed, as much as “‘race’ continues to have consequential effects in most societies, figuring centrally in routine social practices and political administrations”

(Chua 2003, 58), the problem is that multicultural ideals typically lack the flexibility to accommodate these new epistemologies of racial difference. New racisms are typically “entrenched amongst groups who look outwardly similar” (S. Ang 2018, 1178) and are thus indexed to the increasingly sedimented nature of migration flows in immigrant-receiving societies. With it, understandings of “racialization” have evolved beyond the white/non-white binary and are now seen as a more organic and

materially grounded discursive process by which “races” are brought into symbolic existence, which then forms the basis on which racially-marked populations are identified, categorized and governed. This process also promotes the perception of absolute difference between racialized groups, generating the condition for different forms of inter-racial hostility. (I. Ang 2022, 758–759)

As a “materially grounded discursive process”, racialization becomes a more performative construct through which the racial subject is “identified, categorized and governed”. This performative dimension is important, as it trains attention on the negotiation of subject positions that occurs throughout everyday life. Becoming “racialised” is to respond to difference in ways that might range from being subtle and innocuous to overt and rebarbative. Where these responses become structurally entrenched – and especially when they stem from majorities and are directed towards minorities – they can be seen as “aggressions”. When these encounters are normalized over time, or when the majority-minority dynamic is reversed through an intersecting category of identification, they can be seen as “micro-aggressions”. The importance of these micro-aggressions is that they encapsulate the banal, every day and otherwise unremarkable forms of racism that are encountered by – *and reproduced by* – minorities, and which over time become “inscribed in institutional structures and everyday spaces” (Peterson 2020, 1394). This sense of multi-directionality is important, as it recognizes the fact that victims can also be perpetrators of the injustices directed at them, and that the very *distinction* between the two can often be reimagined by recognizing the “simultaneity of multiple axes of differentiation” (Meissner 2015, 557). Multiculturalism often leads to micro-aggressions being perpetuated, even if unintended in theory and policy, whilst micro-aggressions can reflect the extent to which “an individual may choose to integrate *or not*” as “a sense of belonging is dependent on how *others* perceive and treat you ... as a member of a racial group or ethno-religious community” (Modood 2014, 203, emphasis added). Increasingly, the limits to integration rest on the performance of difference.

Performing difference, asserting power

Contemporary situations of superdiversity are fuelled by the intersectional complexity of people’s subject positions. This complexity foregrounds the idea that *non*-integration is becoming normative, and that any sort of encounter is an outcome of the dynamic interaction of many intersecting variables (Vertovec 2019). How these intersecting variables are performed through encounters with difference can provide important yet hitherto underappreciated insight into the negotiation of difference in the contemporary world. Indeed, Ye (2016, 91) alludes to the performative dimension of encounters in her observation that “encounters in shared spaces such as schools, markets and bus stations are embedded with banal yet highly nuanced principles of coexisting, with individuals having to negotiate dense spaces with strangers of different backgrounds”. She does not, however, foreground its importance in the reproduction of difference. Nonetheless, the importance of performance is that it can help to “tease out the ways in which the geographies of racialization continue to shape encounters with difference, and how connections between identity and belonging in relationship to nation, place and the local are *drawn* and *redrawn* in moments of encounter” (Peterson 2020, 1397, emphasis added). Going further, whilst performances are often understood to be expressions of agency, so too can they be structured by situations of precarity, materializing as defensive reactions to structuring logics that are often beyond one’s control (Butler 2009). Over time these performative actions and reactions come to define the ways in which we identify ourselves and others, and come to shape the boundaries across which difference is asserted. As Butler (2010, 187–188) suggests:

Acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance ... [They] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means. That the ... body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

Bodies *become* different through their performances. In many respects, this is a logic that inverts the ontological stability of many normative understandings of identity – *especially* those upon which discourses of multiculturalism are based – and can thus offer new insight into the reproduction and management of difference. As Lavi (2013, 698, emphasis added) puts it, “performativity implies that the subjective experience of identity as an internal, authentic and coherent core is *not* the source but rather is the *product* of repetitive performance of a set of practices that match that identity”. Going further, we suggest that such performances do not just “match” an identity; rather, they foreground its reproduction in the first place. Accordingly, ethnicity emerges as the outcome of a series of “repeated acts, lacking an ontological origin” (Lavi 2013, 699). Examples of these “acts” abound, with most stemming from feminist scholars exploring the corporeality of performance. Mahtani (2002, 436) demonstrates how small acts can coalesce to form “unpredictable dissonances” between people and groups, whilst Antonisch (2018, 449) explores how corporeality foregrounds the reproduction of “racially differentiated subjects” that straddle the intersection of who is similar to, or different from, the self. Going even further, Kong and Woods (2019, 2; see also Woods and Kong 2020a) suggest that the “bordering of identity” by Christians that are united in faith but are ethno-linguistically distinct from each other “begins as an attitude, then manifests as a behaviour, and is then formalised through sociospatial organisation” in the church. There is, then, a capitalizing logic that underpins the performance of identity. Performances are everyday articulations of power and (dis)placement that enable the micro-aggressions of multiculturalism to manifest.

Multiculturalism and the management of diversity in Singapore

Two characteristics define the ways in which multiculturalism is managed in Singapore. The first is that state-defined policies that promote multiculturalism are designed to maintain harmonious relations between the country’s three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Malays and Indians, and a “catch-all” fourth category of “Others”. Racial and religious harmony has, since the formation of the Republic in 1965, been linked to national survival, but has also created “political and administrative space for the policing of racial boundaries” and the “suppression [of] open discussion of racial issues” (Chua 2009, 240). As much as Singaporeans are made aware of race as a governing framework for society, so too are they often left unequipped to deal with its complexities. The second is that the boundaries of difference that differentiate these groups are legacies of colonial understandings of race. As such, they are reflective of a number of racialised, and arguably anachronistic, assumptions concerning social differences, which serve to “flatten local diversity, forcing its citizens to fit idealized caricatures of what it means to be ‘Chinese’, ‘Malay’, and ‘Indian’” (Ortiga 2015, 951). As a result, the “myth of the ‘founding races’ provide[s] fixed, limited grids in which the discourse of the ‘multicultural nation’ was allowed to unfold” (Yeoh 2004, 2438). These two factors coalesce, creating a public domain that is structured according to racial differences, and a private domain in which these differences are internalized, reproduced, and then performed through the public domain. The interpenetration of the public and private domains thus puts “pressure on the Chinese to become *more* Chinese, Malays to be *more* Malay and Indians to be *more* Indian” (Lian 2016, 15, emphasis added). Whilst these dynamics are undeniable outcomes of the state-led structuring of difference, they are complicated by recent waves of migration into Singapore.

For many years now Singapore has experienced a population decline. The state proactively manages this decline through pronatalist policies and the opening up of channels of migration and pathways to permanent residency and citizenship. Comprising approximately 30 per cent of Singapore’s total population, the foreign workforce has increased significantly in recent decades (SingStat 2020), and,

as a result, has become a divisive social and political issue. The publication of a Population White Paper in 2011, which laid out the scenario where the migrant population is increased, led to widespread opposition and the ruling People's Action Party losing the highest number of seats since independence in that year's general election. Whilst the state's immigration policy has focused explicitly on recruiting migrants from countries like China and India – based on the “assumption that these individuals will *adopt* (and not alter) Singapore's CMIO framework” (Ortiga 2015, 954, emphasis added) – it is these migrants that arguably attract the strongest resentment from Singaporeans (Ho 2006). In this vein, S. Ang (2018, 1178) has explored how “Singaporean-Chinese enact new racism against newly arrived Chinese migrants” thus contributing to what she calls a “racial hierarchy” within the co-ethnic Chinese community. It is the manifestations of difference *within* the ethno-racial sameness of the state's Chinese, Indian and Malay categorisations that highlights the limits of Singapore's model of multiculturalism, and foregrounds the micro-aggressions that stem from difference *within* sameness. Against this backdrop, scholars have called for a reimagining of the state's version of multiculturalism (see Chua 2003, 2009; Goh 2011; Frost 2021) in ways that consider how the salience of variables like occupation, nationality, visa and citizenship status, and the accompanying entitlements and restrictions of rights, might contribute to the formation of co-ethnic racial hierarchies. Over time, these hierarchies have become pervasive throughout Singapore society, as Sinha (2009, 85) observes:

At an everyday life level, one does hear the language of majority-minority groups dynamics, the presence of racial prejudices and discriminatory practices. The sense that specific groups are culturally, ideologically, politically and economically dominant is pervasive. Thus, the classification of individuals into specific cultural categories is not simply a matter of description but also recognition of a hierarchy in place.

The categorization of difference has also come to define the ways in which identity is performed throughout Singapore's public spaces. Singapore's Indian community is notable in that there is a clear sense of performative distinction between Singaporean Indians on the one hand, and Indian migrants on the other (note, however, that this distinction is problematic, and addressed below). Official enumeration presents Indians as a “homogeneous cluster, but this obscures the complexity, multi-dimensionality and internal differentiation that characterizes the group” (Sinha 2010, 253). One important point of differentiation is religion, with a majority of Singapore's Indian population comprising Hindus (57.3 per cent in 2020), but with significant minorities of Muslims (23.4 per cent), Christians (12.6 per cent) and Sikhs (categorized as “Other Religions” – 3.9 per cent) (SingStat 2020). In many respects, religion reproduces such homogeneity, with “Indianness” being closely, but not unproblematically, associated with the Indian Hindu majority, even though the Indian Christian, Muslim and Sikh communities might in different ways be qualitatively distinct from their Hindu counterparts. Given the general conjoining of ethno-religious identity along Indian-Hindu lines, our empirical analysis focuses mostly on Indian Hindus. The point is that both Singaporean Indians and Indian migrants occupy marginal positions in Singapore's social structure (Seah 2016) – the Singaporeans because they are the smallest minority that constitute Singapore's multicultural matrix, the migrants because of their ostensibly “displaced” status. How these marginal positions are asserted, negotiated, and reconciled according to the contingencies of each group's minority/majority status reveals, in turn, the fluidity of subject positions and the performative *idea* of identity.

Performing an idea of “Indianness” in Singapore

The three subsections that follow draw on qualitative data collected from a wide-ranging project on the role of religious groups in enabling, complicating or limiting the integration of migrants into Singapore society. Fieldwork ran from July 2019 until March 2020, when it was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In total we conducted 42 interviews with Indian Hindus living in Singapore. As part of the broader project, we also conducted interviews with Indians who identified as Muslim, Christian and Sikh. Our analysis below focuses mostly on the Hindu cohort, as being the majority

religion amongst Indians, this group is reflective of what a majority subset of Indians experience of what it means to be “Indian” in Singapore. That is not to assume that the findings speak to the other religious subgroups; they do not, especially for the Indian Christians and Muslims, for whom their religious affiliations transcend any one ethnic group. Of the 42 Hindu interviews, 22 were with “Singaporeans”, 14 were with “migrants” and 6 were with leaders representing temples and other Hindu organizations. Our use of quotation marks to differentiate between “Singaporeans” and “migrants” is meant to disrupt the sense of categorical distinction that these two labels represent. In reality, the boundaries between the labels are complex, and often blurred. Whilst these complexities are important to note, we have kept the Singaporean/migrant labels to draw out the distinctive characteristics of how, depending on which side of the multicultural equation you are located, Indianness might be performed in Singapore. The sample was relatively evenly split in terms of gender (23 females, 19 males), age (ranging from early twenties to fifties) and occupation (including low-paid migrant workers, to university students, housewives and working professionals).

(Dis)placement and the undetermining of identity

Movement, settlement and integration are all processes that reflect and reproduce the (dis)placed nature of minority communities. Whilst migrants themselves often overcome the challenges of displacement by replacing themselves in the host society, in doing so they reshape the placements of pre-existing peoples, causing them, in turn, to become displaced from what they might understand to be “home”. Compounding this conceptual picture is the scarcity of space in Singapore, which creates a context in which limited resources must be shared amongst competing groups and is a “source of constant anxiety” (S. Ang 2018, 1179) for Singaporeans. These dynamics are acutely felt through the connective lens of a shared ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other identity. The spatial formations of ostensibly “new” diasporic communities can, in other words, “have a detrimental impact on whether citizens feel that Singapore is home” (Ho 2006, 397). These are place-based feelings that have come to define the terms of Singapore’s multiculturalism. The construction of public housing estates by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) has long been one of the principal place-based mechanisms through which multiculturalism is materialized. Each housing block has ethnic quotas to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves and to enable, at a superficial level at least, the mixing of peoples. As Ye (2016, 93) puts it, the “state’s socio-spatial engineering of diversity in HDB estates precluded ethnic segregation. People are not just thrown into contact, but through state practice forced into contact”. This is less the case for migrants, whose non-citizenship precludes them from purchasing new HDB flats, thus limiting their choices to resale options, while significant financial means among a business and professional class predispose them to more upmarket private housing that is not subject to the ethnic quotas described above for HDB housing.

This can lead to some Singaporean Indians accusing migrant Indians of self-segregating. For example, Gayathri,¹ a Singapore permanent resident (PR) in her late twenties felt that Indian migrants “form their own community, their own clan. They’re not integrating with the locals and the local cultures ... they *want* to create home here itself”. Gayathri’s assertions are interesting for a few reasons. One is that “form[ing] their own community” is a strategy of buffering themselves from local influences, which in turn enables them to manifest a socio-spatially specific form of Indian identity. Another is that “they *want* to create home here”, but, importantly, *not* according to the state’s (and, relatedly, Singapore society’s) vision of what a multicultural “home” in Singapore is or should be. As Gayathri went on to lament, “even in HDB apartments ... they don’t really interact with their neighbours or anything, Chinese or Malays, they just mind their own business” before going further to bemoan the fact that “they don’t even have the curiosity to try out different cultures ... they’re just stuck by their own taste”. Others echoed this sentiment. For example, Nikhita, another Singaporean PR in her mid-twenties, suggested that “they want to continue their own practices ... [it’s] a way to distinguish themselves”. For migrants not socialized into Singapore’s multicultural norms, creating home can lead to the fracturing of co-ethnicity rather than its consolidation. To the extent that

¹ All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

multiculturalism has become “commonplace in the everyday living spaces of Singaporeans” so too has it prompted the “emergence of conduct and behaviour ... as a social organising principle in shared spaces” (Ye 2016, 93). Indeed, our Singaporean interviewees believed that migrants became precluded from the multicultural ideals passed down by the state when they chose to exclude themselves from these shared spaces.

Unsurprisingly, the migrants that we interviewed saw the situation differently. They see “Indianness” as diluted in Singapore, and/or observe a lack of mixing among cultures in the island-state despite assertions otherwise. Geetika, a migrant in her fifties who has lived in Singapore for over twenty years rejected the dilution of Indian culture that Singaporean multiculturalism promotes, asserting that “it’s a fusion culture here, they [Indians] copy from the Malays”. The implication here, of course, is that by virtue of being Singaporean Indians, Indians have become less “Indian”. Similar sentiment has been observed amongst the Singapore Chinese community, who, when compared to their mainland Chinese counterparts, are at once “less steeped in what is considered officially as authentic, true, Chinese culture” but also “in a much stronger position ... in the Singaporean nation-state” (I. Ang 2022, 769). A seemingly diluted ethno-cultural identity is (sometimes over-) compensated for by a dominant national identity. Broad-based logics of *displacement* are therefore at play in Singapore. These are logics rooted in the *feeling* of being “outside” or displaced, whether through deliberate socio-spatial behaviours of exclusion or cultural-historical displacement through the adulteration of Indian ancestry. That said, the displacement and sense of “outsideness” is not only a dynamic between Singaporean Indians and Indian migrants. It is felt by Singaporean Indians in relation to the rest of Singapore society. For example, Preeti, a Singaporean in her sixties, lamented that “I feel left out ... I’m minor”, which suggests a struggle to find a sense of belonging in *either* her status as a (minority) Singaporean, or as an Indian. Multiple and complex displacements thus exist across social groups that are differentially defined and delineated along the axes of migrant-local and local-local.

These feelings are often expected to be downplayed in Singapore, subservient to the rational determinations of social order and progress, and are therefore largely absent from discourse. Certainly, they are absent from discourses of multiculturalism, and its pervasive effects on the fashioning of citizen-subjects. This does not, however, mean that they are absent from everyday encounters with the multicultural realities of Singapore society. Rather, they have been internalized as part of the multicultural order, and thus serve to structure the terms of encounter in more discreet, yet potentially harmful ways. As Antonisch (2018, 458) asserts, “the micro of the everyday should be read in connection with the macro of societal and institutional structures ... as the latter condition the categories and meanings which can be deployed in everyday social interactions”. Through these “connections”, multicultural ideals – and, importantly, their *effects* – are translated to society. What society then does is internalize them, and use them as frameworks through which they engage with others. For example, Preeti carefully distinguished between Indians who are “Made in India” and those “Made in Singapore”, lamenting that “we already set our mind: if you’re like that [Made in India] I won’t talk to you”. Whilst attitudes like this might appear to be innocuous, and are easily overlooked, so too are they “felt through and on the bodies of ethnically and culturally ‘othered’ individuals and groups” (Peterson 2020, 1394), creating a cycle that does not stop with the “other”, but is subsequently replayed *by* the “other” in ways that lead to the notion of otherness becoming a more splintered, and strategically reproducible, construct. We now illustrate these ideas by exploring how two spaces of multicultural encounter – the school and the Hindu temple – reproduce the minority position of Indians in Singapore, irrespective of citizenship or tenure.

Manifesting micro-aggression through the school and temple

Government-run schools in Singapore largely reflect the integrationist policies of public housing described above. Through their admissions policies, for example, they are designed to enable the mixing of races, and to impart the conceptual ideals through which multiculturalism should be practiced. Admissions to primary schools are in part based on locational propinquity to residence, and given the ethnic quotas in HDB estates (which house 80 per cent of the population) the multicultural

ethnic embedded in public housing flows through to school admission, even if the effect is not total (see, for example, Loh 2019). However, at a micro-level, these ideals are problematized through the everyday performance of identity. Majority cohorts of Chinese students in the shared spaces of the playground, canteen and even classroom are reported to treat Indians differently on account of their minority status. For example, Nyra, a Singaporean in her mid-twenties, recalled how “there is a lot of racialised discrimination and bullying at school ... it’s quite obvious that sometimes you’re treated differently for being brown”. Often, however, concrete examples of racialised bullying are not cited, but insensitive remarks like “you’re so black you can’t be seen in the dark” (Ishita) are passed, or exclusionary behaviours like speaking in Mandarin, which have the effects of negatively reminding Indian students of their ethno-linguistic differences.

Even though schools are structured spaces through which young Singaporeans encounter a state-vaunted multiculturalism and are exposed to the multicultural ideals of the state through curriculum, they are also performative spaces in which these ideals are sometimes undermined. Ishita went on to reflect how “these things make me remember that I’m brown, I’m Indian ... but I wouldn’t say that I have a super strong Indian identity”. The micro-aggressions of the school thus force her to question her identity, her sense of inclusion and/or exclusion as a Singaporean *minority*, and her sense of belonging. She cannot, in her view, ever be as “Singaporean” as a Chinese person could, nor can she be as “Indian” as a migrant can; she is, as she put it, “lost at sea”. Nyra shared the same sentiment, recalling how at school

a lot of people like myself ... tend to push yourself away from anything too brown. Like, ‘no, no, I’m not the *bindhi* wearing [Indian]’. You know, Singapore schools are horrible – the coconut hair,² ‘no, no, I’m not like that, I’m not a coconut hair wearing [Indian]’, you would distinguish yourself and push away from tradition massively.

At school in Singapore, Nyra came to realize what it means to be a *Singaporean* Indian. Whilst she cannot change the fact that she is Indian, but she can change the *type* of Indian she is by “push[ing] away from tradition massively” and forging a representation of herself that fits the mould of what she feels is expected of her as a Singaporean Indian (see Woods and Kong 2020b). However, it is not just Singapore’s Chinese community that perpetuates such micro-aggressions, but the Indian community as well. For example, Idika – an undergraduate in her early-20s, who was born in India but who moved to Singapore when she was three months old – recalled her interactions with Singaporean Indians during Tamil language classes, during which “they would kind of, low key, make fun of you ... Like, traditions, the way you look. It’s not really a particular thing, you know. They’ll just say you’re Indian Indian, you know? Just make it derogatory”. Over time, as these micro-aggressions became normalized throughout her years growing up in Singapore, she started to embrace more of a Singaporean Indian identity. Others, like Ajeet – a Singaporean *Sikh* Indian – chose to reject the Singaporean Indian mould entirely, identifying instead as “Punjabi or Sikh, never Indian ... Because “Indian” also has that connotation that you are from India ... or you’re Tamil”. Being Punjabi/Sikh precludes Ajeet from being part of the Singaporean Indian mould, so he just rejects the totalising *idea* of “Indianness” entirely. Placing himself outside of the idea of what a Singaporean Indian is, or should be, grants Ajeet a certain degree of autonomy. The packaging of identity in Singapore tends to disallow this. Moreover, it delineates the terms of co-ethnicity and the socio-spatial contingencies of a racial hierarchy that is defined in relation to one’s “Indianness”.

Singapore’s multiculturalism does not, however, exist in a citizen-defined vacuum. Rather, it exists in conversation with other, non-government-defined groups that both contribute to, but also complicate, the picture of diversity. Singaporean Indians might be on the “wrong” side of the construct by Singaporean standards, but they can turn the situation to their advantage by being on the *right* side of the construct – as citizens – when they encounter non-Singaporean Indians, or migrants. In these

² The practice of putting coconut oil in the hair, which is commonly associated with Indians.

cases, it is citizenship that sets the terms of the construct; the difference between being part of the majority or minority group. The Hindu temple is where the micro-aggressions of Indian multiculturalism frequently manifest, as it is the temple that brings migrants and non-migrants together in space and time, but also – importantly – outside of the structuring logics of the school or workplace (Kong and Woods 2018; Woods and Kong 2022a). It is through shared, and ostensibly less structured spaces, like that of the temple, that we can, then, begin to observe the “implicit principles in which migrants are included [or not] according to normative forms of appropriate behaviour in public spaces” (Ye 2017, 1033). These “normative forms of appropriate behaviour” serve to structure the terms of inclusion and exclusion within temple spaces. Mr Govindan, a member of the management committee of one of Singapore’s Hindu temples, commented how

the local families, we discipline the kids – sit down because it is a place of worship, lots of respect, you need to be quiet. For the migrants, it is let them run around, they roam, sometimes they jump on where the deities are.

He went on to draw out the distinction between Singaporeans and migrants more clearly in his observation that

we [Singaporeans] are very systematic and organised, so what the fear is generally is that [migrants’] habits and practices infiltrate the kind of discipline and the organised way of doing things ... We want to be clean, we want to be systematic, we want to be organised.

Migrants are depicted here as a polluting influence on the sanctity of the temple, but, more conceptually, on the sanctity of the Singaporean Indian identity as well. Not only are they depicted as less clean than Singaporeans, but so too are they less disciplined and less organized as well. More than pollution, however, is the fear that they will “displace” Singaporeans by colonizing the temple space and claiming it as their own (Kong and Woods 2016; Woods and Kong 2022b). This sentiment – which was, we must remember, shared by the member of a temple management committee – can be seen to reflect a racial hierarchy through which micro-aggressions, and even full-blown conflict, can become normalized. Put differently, a sentiment like this reveals an invisible structuring logic that establishes certain codes of behaviour and action that become associated with a “right” – or *Singaporean* – way of doing things in the temple. Transgressing these codes can both lead to, and justify, corrective action. An example shared by Geetika, introduced above, illustrates the point. She recalled how she and some friends sat down in a temple to rest, and next to them were the handbags of some Singaporeans that were left to reserve the space for them. Whilst they did not, according to Geetika, move the handbags, the Singaporeans were nonetheless angry that their reserved space had apparently been taken. As Geetika went on to recall:

They said, ‘in India, in temples, you won’t even be able to sit or stand it will be so crowded. Here you have the luxury to do so, but you cannot even respect Singapore rules!’ She said the people from India can’t follow anything, that we’ll cut the queues ... My friend said, ‘why are you speaking like that? I’m also Singaporean!’ They said, ‘you’re not Singaporean, you’re Singapore citizens! We are Singaporean!’

What started out as a misunderstanding rapidly degenerated into accusations of wilful disrespect and assertions of difference, and then finally into the claiming of what it means to be a “Singaporean”. These micro-aggressions can therefore be seen to define the terms of citizenship; that being a “citizen” is not the same as being a Singaporean, as the latter presupposes a certain set of attitudinal and behavioural logics that non-Singaporeans do not necessarily possess. In many respects, it is these logics that underpin Preeti’s earlier distinction between those that are “Made in Singapore” and those “Made in India”, and it is also these logics that can be used to fuel assertions of dominance, legitimacy, and otherness when they are transgressed. As such, when these logics of “civility, norms

and values” are violated, then “the spatial grammar of coexisting with diversity” is exposed, thus “highlight[ing] who knows how to behave and who does not” (Ye 2019, 487). In reconciling these two examples of the school and temple, we can begin to see how performance becomes a guiding principle through which identities can be managed to suit the variegated, and often disjunctive, demands of Singapore’s multiculturalisms.

Otherness and the underperformance of Singaporean “Indianness”

Navigating the micro-aggressions that permeate Singapore society is an ongoing process for Singaporeans and migrants alike. Irrespective of citizenship, visa status, ethnicity or residency tenure, minority groups are subject to the scrutinizing gaze of others. In response, Indians learn to perform their identity; they learn to relate to their race in ways that are believed to enable them to assert themselves through their ethno-national identities. As Ye (2017, 1038) observes, the “management of citizenship through multiculturalism in the Singapore context relies on the simplification and essentialism of race” in ways that benefit some groups more than they do others. The state can, in some respects then, be seen to subvert the self by blocking the potential for autonomy. Difference is performed in relation to the state-defined discourse of multiculturalism, which, in Singapore, is structured by the terms of how people of different ethno-racial groups should think, act, and behave as Singaporeans. These performative logics have created norms that establish the terms of sameness and difference, of inclusion and exclusion. Prema, a Singaporean homemaker in her fifties, explained the effects of being situated within a state-defined discourse of multiculturalism:

We are put in a cage where these are the rules and we don’t go out of the rules ... Although I grow up with the different races, I can tolerate everything, and suddenly we see somebody as Indian, although we don’t see them as Indian, we see them as migrants.

Singapore’s multiculturalism is based on the paradoxical assumption of being able to “tolerate” difference, but in doing so it denies the assertion of difference in ways that contravene the “cage” of state-sponsored multiculturalism. Self-management is needed to ensure that one stays on the right side of the “invisible barriers” that define the terms of identity, and which become programmed and encoded over time. Ishita, for example, shared how when walking with her father in Little India on a busy Sunday and “people are just walking and crossing anyhow and my dad will be, like, ‘these people need to get back to their countries’, but it’s so strange because he is from there [India]”. These assertions of difference highlight the need to reduce one’s Indianness – or at least to adapt it to shape the expectations of Singapore and Singaporeans – in order to belong. Nyra explained in more detail what is meant by this: “I am Singaporean, it’s a fact. I have the passport and I grew up here. What else is there to say? But I think that along the way, the identity is delegitimised ... not being Chinese inherently makes you *less* Singaporean”. In response, there is a constant need for Indians to assert their “Singaporean-ness”, meaning identity is performed in a way that enables minorities to regain a sense of control and sovereignty over the self. Indeed, these performances “suggest that nationality is not something that people have, but rather something people *do*” (Lavi 2013, 699, original emphasis). In turn, these performances result in a sense of scepticism towards the value of ethnically defined traditions; an idea that is most observable amongst the younger generations. Anish, a Singaporean in his early twenties, explained how

as minorities, many of us are forced to choose our culture or economic opportunities, because we know that we are seen in a certain way, and if we are seen as *too* Indian, employers will not want us ... Four days ago, I got a call from an agent saying that I was rejected from a job because my employer didn’t want non-Chinese people.

Multiculturalism here relates to the need for Anish to perform his Singaporean-ness by *underperforming* his Indianness, the rationale being economic, and the associated ability to secure a

job from non-Indian employers. Identity, then, becomes an asset that can be leveraged in ways that create value *for*, and maximize the value *of*, the self. Alternatively, it can also work against the individual and their economic prospects. The same sentiment was shared by others. For example, Preeti lamented that “because of the [skin] colour, you get less promoted ... Even the superiors only speak Chinese, so how [can I get promoted]? I’m being left out”. Whilst cultural practices can be adapted or downplayed, phenotype cannot. It places limits on the effectiveness of a performance, and thus complicates the idea that “the success of the performance depends on the degree of its success in effectively quoting an array of accepted, normative practices” (Lavi 2013, 698). Singaporean Indians are caught between not being Singaporean enough, and therefore “less Singaporean, less established, less powerful” (Nyra) and not being Indian enough, with Aliya, an international student from New Delhi, observing how Singaporean Indians “are not even Indian anymore, they have completely transformed into Singaporeans”. In this sense, citizenship has come to be understood as a “constantly negotiated performative process” (Spinney, Aldred, and Brown 2015, 327) that leads to the troubling of any notion of perceived fixity. Indians in Singapore need to make their Indianness work for them: whether as citizens, minorities, friends, employees, or others.

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the complexities of state-defined multiculturalism, drawing attention to the contingencies that underpin the construction of the citizen-subject within and through multicultural discourse. In the Singapore context, multiculturalism has been used as an “instrument of social control” (Chua 2003, 58) that has paradoxically yielded apparently uncontrollable effects. Whilst promoting a superficial level of harmony between state-defined racial groups, so too can the essentialising logics that underpin Singapore’s multicultural framework be seen to create space for new forms of racialization and othering to perpetuate. Frameworks of multiculturalism that attempt to simplify, but also structure, the terms and limits of difference have long provided a sense of “comfort [that is] derived from an absence of knowledge and understanding of each other’s cultures and practices” (Chua 2003, 75). For various reasons, however, this sense of comfort is increasingly being undone through everyday interactions with both the *ethnic* other and the *co-ethnic* other. This dynamic is pronounced amongst Singaporean Indians, who are positioned in-between the majority Singaporean Chinese community on the one hand, and the Indian migrant community on the other. Betweenness leads to compromises; it leads to ethnicity becoming an increasingly performative construct that both responds to the micro-aggressions that come from them being one of Singapore’s ethnic minorities, but also directs them towards, and reproduces them amongst, non-Singaporean co-ethnics. To be an Indian in Singapore, then, is to be constantly searching for a place where one belongs. Those that are successful in forging a sense of belonging are often those that have the means to engage with society on their own terms. Those that do not are more centrally implicated in state-defined discourses of multiculturalism, and socially defined discourses of racial hierarchy.

Whilst our empirical analysis draws on the Singapore case, the ideas raised hold broader meaning that can help to understand other situations in which superdiversity prevails. Similarly, whilst we focus our attention on Singapore’s Indian communities, the idiosyncrasies that define them do not detract from the commonalities that define *all* ethnic groups. Indeed, it is often the contingent nature of one’s majority/minority status, and how such status might position an individual in relation to others, that causes multicultural fissures to emerge, micro-aggressions to materialize, and identity to become a performative construct. Whilst multiculturalism is an idea that readily lends itself to abstraction – through the definitions of the state or scholarship – this paper has emphasized the slippages that occur when the abstract materializes as a structuring force of everyday life, and the encounters with difference therein (Woods 2021). The point is that whilst policies promoting multiculturalism might stem from the perspective of beneficence and inter-cultural harmony, they can also become reductive solutions that obscure the lived complexities of superdiversity. Understanding these complexities can be a first step towards managing them, even if overcoming them requires subtler solutions that often exist outside of the policy frameworks of the state. Whilst the state can change the framework through

which difference is constructed and understood, it cannot change the sedimented nature of racialization that comes to structure the ways in which difference is encountered and engaged with on an everyday level (Kong, Woods, and Abdul Wahid 2020). Memories, grievances, and injustices cannot be undone. They can only be recognized and embraced through open and honest dialogue. The sooner this reality is recognized, the sooner societies like Singapore can work towards a sense of cosmopolitan becoming that works to expand, not fragment, the notion of what it means to contribute to Singapore's evolving socio-cultural milieu.

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