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The irreducible otherness of desi and desire in Singapore's gurdwaras: Moral boundary-making in the shadows of a multicultural society

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The irreducible otherness of desi and desire in Singapore's gurdwaras: Moral boundary-making in the shadows of a multicultural society

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the emergence of new multiculturalisms taking root in Asia by exploring how value-based frameworks and moral judgements are deployed to create new lines of difference within co-ethnic communities. These frameworks and judgements cause multiculturalism to become a more subjective, and thus splintered construct that is increasingly decoupled from state discourse. Further, it considers how religious spaces are typically associated with the performance of morally "right" attitudes and behaviours, and therefore provide fertile yet underexplored sites through which multicultural subjectivities are formed and enacted. It illustrates these ideas through an empirical examination of how moral boundary-making within Singapore's Sikh community creates new lines of difference that renders migrant workers from the Punjab ("desis") irreducibly other. Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews conducted with Sikhs living in Singapore, the article considers how co-ethnic encounters within Sikh temples ("gurdwaras") create a sense of (in)distinction between desirous and desired subjects.

KEYWORDS: Sikhs, subjective multiculturalisms, moral boundary-making, migrant workers, shadows, Singapore

Introduction

For more than a decade, scholarly debates have considered how the everyday reproduction of difference has become abstracted from the multicultural frameworks through which it is defined and understood. Just as "numerous policies have had as their overall goal the promotion of tolerance and respect for group identities" (Vertovec Citation2010, 83), so too have such "normative categories" of social distinction, and the lines of difference upon which they rest, been shown to "give way to more fluid, relational, and potentially volatile understandings instead" (Woods and Kong Citation2023, 119–120). In other words, as the "multi" of multiculturalism comes to be understood as categorically normative, so too must the "cultural" be recognised as a contingent construct that undergoes constant processes of claiming, meaning making and redefinition. Whilst this premise has so far been explored from the perspective of "new" racisms taking root in Asia (Ang, Ho, and Yeoh Citation2022; Ho and Kathiravelu Citation2022; Raghuram Citation2022), there remains an ongoing need to "shift the focus away from race and ethnicity as primary axes of difference-making" and to embrace instead the ideas that "difference and diversity are dynamic and intersectional" and that "difference is not reducible to ethnicity" (Ye and Yeoh Citation2022, 3246; after Glick-Schiller and Caglar Citation2013). This article builds on these ideas by recognising that in any given context and at any given time, there are often "multiple framings of multiculturalism at play" (Woods and Kong Citation2023, 121). With multiplicity, structural framings of multiculturalism might give way to more subjective interpretations instead, creating space for the narrative of difference to splinter and take on new shades of meaning and political resonance. In turn, these shades can reveal the slippages in state-defined and state-supported frameworks of difference, thus causing multiculturalism to become a more socially defined, and thus partial, construct.

Our argument is twofold. One, amidst situations of co-ethnic diversity, understandings of multiculturalism become subjective constructs that are liable to splintering along new lines of difference. These splinters go beyond the objective characteristics that are often used in intersectional analyses of identity and community, and include the boundary-making practices that arise from value-based frameworks and moral judgements as well (after Barth Citation1969). Two, religious spaces are typically associated with the performance of morally "right" attitudes and behaviours, and thus provide fertile yet underexplored sites through which multicultural subjectivities are formed and enacted. Located in the co-ethnic "shadows" of multicultural discourse, they reveal slippages in state versus societal understandings of how multiculturalism plays out in practice. Focussing empirically on these "shadow" spaces can be analytically useful in that they reveal "novel and important socio-spatial formations as they play out" (Ye and Yeoh Citation2022, 3244) *beyond* the structured space-times of state-defined multiculturalism. The importance of this analytical perspective is that it can go a long way to realising what Saldanha (Citation2006) calls a "machinic geography" of phenotype insofar as it decouples race from ideology and recentres it in the intimate spatialities and placings of the body. The social formations that collective bodies give rise to reveal a spontaneity and volatility to race that cannot be accurately categorised or "known" through the structuring logics of multicultural frameworks. Moreover, these formations reveal how "the environment and social formations [are] already embodied and entwined" as "bodies do not merely adapt to circumstance, but create circumstance, and always together" (Saldanha Citation2010, 2410–2411; see also Price Citation2010; Woods Citation2023a). The shadows of multiculturalism thus look beyond the simplifying clarity of state ideology. They are spaces in which lines of difference become murky, blurred, partial and therefore politicised through the majority-defined, and often unchecked, proliferation of the subjective.

To illustrate these ideas, we explore the multiculturalisms found within Singapore's Sikh community. In 2020, Singapore's resident Indian population constituted 9.0 per cent of the total population. Of this, a majority identifies as Hindu (57.3 per cent), followed by Muslim (23.4 per cent) and Christian (12.6 per cent), with Sikhs (and "Other" religions – the categories are conflated) comprising just 4.6 per cent of the Indian population (SingStat Citation2020). Singapore's Sikh community exists at the margins of the state's framework of multicultural belonging along racial "CMIO" (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) and religious (Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian/Catholic) lines. This framework has been subject to growing scrutiny for "producing an imagined homogeneity" (Raghuram Citation2022, 781) and for giving rise to "new tensions between co-ethnics … [tensions] that cannot be adequately captured through the fixity of race-based categories" (Ho and Kathiravelu Citation2022, 637). Tension stems from the fact that the multiplicity of multiculturalism "creat[es] fissures" (Woods and Kong Citation2023, 121) that go beyond a priori markers of identity. These fissures manifest in the *gurdwara*,Footnote[1] where Singaporeans encounter migrant workers from the Punjab and subject them to moralising codes of conduct that render them irreducibly "other". Understanding these encounters and subjections can, in turn, contribute to longstanding debates in Singapore about the differential "placings" of migrant groups in urban society (Yeoh Citation2004) by revealing the "fragility, relationality and contingency – indeed, the messiness – of diversity in practice" (Ye and Yeoh Citation2022, 3245). This messiness cannot be accurately captured by the ideology – arguably, the *illusion* – of the CMIO framework, and necessitates the need for new understandings of multiculturalism that start with an analysis of embodied spatiality and theorise upwards from there. Doing so can reveal how the conduct of bodies in space are assigned values, and thus codified, through the encounter.

These codes, we argue, are rooted in divergent understandings of the place of desire in Singapore, and the freedoms it evokes. For many decades, the Singapore government has "attempt[ed] to control the population through mechanisms of moralization" (Ang and Stratton Citation2018: S63) that are rooted in Singaporeans embodying "Asian values" that have come to be seen as "significant ingredients in the country's successful capitalist development and, as well, important 'cultural ballast' against the 'corruption' of western, liberal individualism" (Chua Citation2003, 67). Thus, whilst Singaporean morality is cast as being typically "Asian" – itself cast as distinct from "Western" im/morality – it is also internalised and deployed by Singaporean Sikhs to position themselves as morally superior to

their migrant Sikh counterparts, colloquially referred to as *desis* (literally, "from India"). For *desis*, the *gurdwara* is a place of belonging where the mobile self is asserted, and desires can be pursued. Desire, then, becomes a deeply embodied, morally charged, and publicly performed analytical construct through which boundaries are drawn according to one's position as either a desir*ous* or desir*ed* subject. The importance of identifying and understanding these boundaries lies in the assumption that co-ethnic migrants "can be absorbed with relative ease, both racially and culturally, into local ethnic communities without intensifying existing ethnic differences" even though "Singaporean citizenship and status are privileged over any possible racial connections, affinities and identities" (Chua Citation2003, 69). Whilst this sense of hierarchy is well-established within discourses of Singapore's multiculturalism, the novelty of our argument stems from the moralising framework it gives rise to. Desire is problematic in that it causes the "interpersonal dichotomy of Self and Other [to become] endlessly reversible" (Van Pelt Citation2000, 140). Locating desire in religious space can therefore reveal situations of moral tension and perceived incompatibility through which new multicultural subjectivities become manifest.

This paper makes three key contributions to the study of "new" multiculturalisms in Asia and beyond. The first is the focus on desire as an analytic through which new forms of multicultural subjectivity, and new patterns of moral boundary-work, can be studied and understood. Despite Green's (Citation2008, 597) assertion more than a decade ago that "desire is an elephant that sits upon the scholar's desk, seen by all but addressed by few", it remains peripheral to debates around social complexity, encounter, and diversity. An exception is the study of homosexual desire in Muslim majority contexts (e.g. Boellstorff Citation2007), although such work does not help us understand the moral boundary-work that takes place when heterosexual desire is enacted both within sacred spaces, and within new multicultural contexts. The second is theoretical, and gestures towards what such moralistic boundary-making practices tell us about the state-society nexus. Arnal (Citation2001, 1) argues that the "conditions of postmodernity, which have altered some key modern values, have impacted the appropriation of fantasy and the political utility of religion simultaneously, largely by commodifying and fetishizing both". Whilst these processes of commoditisation and fetishisation can be observed at multiple levels within Singapore's multicultural matrix, what matters is how they implicate everyday understandings of the desirous subject and the controlling state. In many respects, this sense of control can be seen to represent "the deepest and most insidious penetration of the social order at the level of the unconscious" (Green Citation2008, 599) and reveals how Singapore's governmentality extends not just to thoughts and bodies, but emotions and urges as well. The third is this paper's contributions to understudied social groups in Singapore and beyond, especially the nexus of migrant workers, the performance of gender, and (hetero)sexuality (Ang Citation2019; Kitiarsa Citation2008; Ye Citation2014). Altogether, this paper traces the new lines of subjective differentiation that emerge from situations of multicultural complexity.

Moral boundary-making in multicultural society

The funny thing about multicultural dialogue is that as a framework of classification, the "multicultural" is singular, rigid, and static, whilst the people implicated in and by its categorical constructs are resolutely diverse, contingent, and partial. Whilst rarely articulated as such, it is this observation that underpins most critiques of multiculturalism. Emerging from the premise that racially and ethnically prescribed differences tend to coalesce around a normative "white-other framing" (Ye and Yeoh Citation2022, 3244), criticism is rooted in the fact that multiculturalism "provides a much prettier fig leaf for politics of *laissez-faire* vis-à-vis continuing racial exclusion and inequality" (Winant Citation2000, 171, original emphasis; see also Price Citation2010). However, the socio-cultural complexity that emerges from the fact that "more people are now moving from more places, through more places, to more places" can be seen to render "obsolete the older models of multiculturalism" (Vertovec Citation2010, 86, 83). Indeed, Antonisch (Citation2016, 470) echoes this sentiment in a different way in his observation that "multiculturalism got it wrong because it has worked with an idea of culture as temporally and spatially fixed, while the world has long pointed to

complex and multiple patterns of cultural formations". Embracing these critiques, recent scholarship has sought to look beyond the "old" and identify "new" patterns of multiculturalism taking root in the world, and the new patterns of racialisation that underpin them. Efforts like these often reveal, however, an objectivist interest in what are the new lines of differences that lead to contemporary patterns of social sorting, classification, and othering. Whether it is the national imagination supplanting racial, religious, or ancestral belonging (Ang, Ho, and Yeoh Citation2022; Chua Citation2003), or one's "differential political and economic statuses" (Raghuram Citation2022, 783), or even more complex "polysemic immigration hierarchies" (Ho and Kathiravelu Citation2022), often overlooked is the question of how moral frameworks provide a fundamental grounding that can shape the subjective interpretation of difference.

Two subsections explore these ideas further. First, we make the case that any multicultural framework is liable to splintering, thus giving rise to a plurality of multiculturalisms at play in any given context. Then we consider how Asian "morality" has come to define what it means to be Singaporean, and how such definitions paradoxically provide an othering logic that positions Singaporeans not just in opposition to their "Western" counterparts, but also their Asian counterparts, and more generally anyone that is *not* Singaporean. Morality provides, in other words, a novel framework through which multicultural difference plays out.

Splintered multiculturalisms

This subsection argues that the subjective interpretation of multicultural frameworks imposed by the state can cause them to splinter. Splintering troubles the assumption that the management and enforcement of multiculturalism through legal-regulatory frameworks are a "neutral and objective set of rules" (Price Citation2010, 150) that establish the parameters of social inclusion and exclusion. When these frameworks splinter, their original purpose is undermined or weakened, thus causing them to become more volatile constructs that are implicated in the outcomes they are designed to avoid. This inherent paradox that underpins state-sponsored multiculturalism is context-agnostic and validates the fact that "we need to learn to live with the 'variable geometry' of multicultural citizenship, in which different groups belong to the state in different ways" (Kymlicka Citation2019, 973). Yet, whilst the idea of a "variable geometry" emphasises the importance of recognising the multifaceted forms of state-society relation, there is another part of this equation that has been hitherto overlooked. That is, the transference of state's logic to society, and then *between* social groups as well. These lateral transitions are where the subjectivity of multiculturalism is most evident, and arguably most divisive, as they can be seen to permeate the socio-spatial practices of everyday life. Thus, whilst the danger of state-sponsored multicultural frameworks is that they might lead to the racialisation of people and places, and their ensuing "eras[ure] from the official landscape" (Price Citation2010, 150), the danger of multicultural splinters is that they exist in the shadows, beyond the purview of "official" regulation, and are therefore always-already erased from the "official landscape".

The processual nature of these splintered multiculturalisms – cascading from state-to-society and then society-to-society – is clearly evinced in Singapore, where three main ethno-racial groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian), plus a fourth catch-all category of "Others", have long provided an intuitive and largely predefined framework around which social and cultural policies are organised. That said, the long tail of Singapore's multiculturalism predates the formation of the Republic, harking back to colonial narratives of racialisation that subsequently "naturalized the categorization of phenotypes" (Ang, Ho, and Yeoh Citation2022, 586). Whilst the "totalizing logic" (Woods and Kong Citation2023, 120) that underpins such a framework has been criticised for "flatten[ing] local diversity" (Ortiga Citation2015, 951), recent debates explore how co-ethnic immigration reveals cleavages between "old" and "new" waves of migrants; or, more simply, between Singaporeans and Chinese/Indian (in particular) nationals (Ho and Kathiravelu Citation2022). Bringing these ideas into conversation with the heuristic of splintered multiculturalisms can reveal not only a diversification of migration management – one that starts with state-imposed immigration and visa regimes, but which

then reaches down and is reinforced through socio-spatial praxis – but also a subjectiveness to such practices as well. By imbuing a sense of subjectivity into both the framing and management of multicultural diversity, we can begin to see the imposition of new regimes of people management that can render "otherness" an *irreducible* condition that can never be escaped or reconciled.

These latter observations about Singapore's multiculturalism are by now well-rehearsed within the literature. However, more nascent, and arguably more generative understandings of what happens when social groups internalise and then project these state-led framings onto their co-ethnic counterparts are beginning to emerge, revealing the drivers and effects of multicultural splintering. For example, subjectivity is found in both Ortiga's (Citation2015, 947) observation that "individual discourses transform discourses of multiculturalism, creating a counter discourse that challenges state immigration policies" and Ye's (Citation2016, 91) observation that multiculturalism is a framework through which the state's "rigorous teaching of coexistence" can come undone. Offering a more lateral, society-to-society perspective, Woods and Kong (Citation2023, 119) argue that in Singapore there is 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" and which lead to micro-aggressions being perpetrated against co-ethnic others. Whilst all these contributions identify the effects of the splinter, less is known about the drivers. In this sense the moral geography of acceptance and inclusion establishes the subjective grounds by which multiculturalism is interpreted and understood. Moral geographies can reveal ideas of control and exclusion in both public and private settings, and foreground "judgements as to whether certain practices blend in to, or transgress, the landscape work through an appropriate moral geography of *what belongs where*" (Matless Citation1995, 397, emphasis added). Moral geographies have a spatial specificity, but also a scalar flexibility to them that can help us look beyond the rigidity of state-led multicultural frameworks. For our purposes, their value is that they can be scaled up to the national level or scaled down to an individual building or place. We return to these ideas later.

"Asian" morality in a globalised world

To be Singaporean involves much more than just possessing the rights of citizenship. Rather, it involves being implicated in a complex web of values and moralising discourses that are shaped by the state, and passed down to society through its policies, institutions, and public communications efforts. This high degree of state intervention has been attributed to a variety of reasons, all of which reveal efforts to try and distinguish Singapore(ans) as different from, and perhaps better than, other countries. One purported reason is because it suffers from an "original identity deficit" which in turn has always granted the state a significant degree of leeway to construct Singapore as a "national imagined community" (Ang and Stratton Citation2018: S72). Another is Singapore's ambiguous position within the world system, given that it is an Asian country that is "both non-Western and always-already Westernized" (Ang and Stratton Citation2018: S63). A third stems from this latter observation: that such ambiguity spurs the state to establish and uphold an East–West binary that is rooted in a distinction between the "moral East fighting hard to slow down the penetration of the moral decay of the West" (Chua 1990; cited in Ang and Stratton Citation2018: S63). A fourth and final reason identifies the link between the moralising discourse and Singapore's multicultural framework, both of which are state-defined, and both of which are seen to provide "'cultural' security for members of the three racial groups who are concerned, or perceive, that their race-culture is being threatened by modern/Western values and eroded by ever-expanding hedonist consumerism" (Chua Citation2009, 245–246). When interpreted together, being morally grounded and morally *right* becomes a cornerstone of the Singaporean habitus, thus permeating the nexus of "social structure, subjectivity, and the unconscious" (Green Citation2008, 607; after Bourdieu Citation1977).

It is through the theoretical lens of habitus that we can relocate these understandings of Singaporean morality from the level of the state to that of society. In doing so, we can start to appreciate how they come to shape Singaporeans' multicultural subjectivities. Habitus often manifests as a form of "embodied disposition" that works to structure "social encounters but which also connote[s] the value

of a person" (Ho and Kathiravelu Citation2022, 640). It shapes the judgements that lead us to recognise the terms and limits of sameness and difference, or of self and other. Often these judgements manifest in different guises. For example, in Singapore Ye (Citation2016, 91) uses the idea of "civility" to understand practices of "boundary-breaking and boundary-making in shared spaces" and how these practices can, in turn, "perpetuat[e] the normativities of acceptable behaviour in public". In Belgium, Clycq (Citation2019) uses the idea of "moral value" to explore how Italian migrants distinguish themselves from each other, with a high moral value ideally comprising a much larger part of one's self-identity. We make two contributions to this body of work. The first is to situate Singaporean morality in places of religion, where, perhaps more than anywhere else, it is expected to be performed or demonstrated to others. Moreover, these are places in which co-ethnic communities interact with each other through the lens of a shared religion, and in which practices of moral boundary-making are used to demarcate the terms of community inclusion and exclusion. The second stems from the use of "desire" as an analytic through which these boundary-making practices unfold. Desirous behaviours "have numerous social implications" (Arnal Citation2001, 4), many of which encourage moralising critiques and judgements of what is (un)acceptable behaviour within multicultural Singapore. Before illustrating these ideas empirically, we first consider the place of Sikhs and Sikhism in multicultural Singapore.

Placing Sikhs and Sikhism in multicultural Singapore

As a minority within a minority, Singapore's Sikh community is a small and distinctive group that, in terms of racial categorisation at least, is awkwardly placed within the broader "Indian" population (Dusenbery Citation1997a; Citation1997b; McCann Citation2011; Shamsul and Kaur Citation2011). Whilst emigration from the Punjab to countries throughout Southeast Asia and North America is longstanding, dating to the era of British colonisation, Sikhs have always played a subordinate role within the "Singaporean Indian" identity due to its primary associations with South India, Hinduism, and the Tamil language. Thus, to the extent that many Singaporean Indians adopt a position of compromised identity that places them at once as a minority amongst Singaporeans but a majority amongst their co-ethnic counterparts, such compromises are necessary if they are to retain a presence in Singapore's multicultural landscape generally, and within the Indian community specifically (after Price Citation2010). Indeed, these negotiations are acutely felt amongst Sikhs, who must manage the uniqueness of their identity alongside "their integration into the social cultural mainstream of Singapore" (Kaur Citation2008, 275). This is a positioning in-between the secular, rationalist logics of the state and its vision for a multicultural, moralistic Singaporean society, and a sense of affinity to their extra-Singaporean religio-cultural homeland. Over the years, as Singapore's Sikh community has become entrenched within the socio-spatial fabric of Singapore, it has increasingly foregone the "myth of return" with links to India/the Punjab apparently becoming "increasingly nebulous" (McCann Citation2011, 1491). This embrace of Singapore as an adopted homeland comes with an embrace of Singapore's national values, to the extent that the Sikhs have "come to be regarded as something of a model minority, praised at the highest levels of government" (Dusenbery Citation1997b, 744).

The "model minority" status is multifaceted. One facet, stated by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1991, is that Sikhs are "better educated, more likely to be employed, and are better housed than the average Singaporean" (Dusenbery Citation1997a, 240). More than elevated socio-economic status, however, is the explicit shaping of the Sikh community to align with Singapore's national values. Since the mid-1980s, Sikh community leaders have encouraged senior politicians to recognise the alignment of Sikh values with Singapore's own Asian/national values. Importantly, this alignment stems from the identification of a small but worrying Sikh underclass "whose existence was conveniently attributed to 'the negative influence of Western culture' and 'an erosion of traditional Asian (Sikh) values among Sikh youth'" (Dusenbery Citation1997a, 241). The threat to the Sikh community was, in other words, the same as the threat facing the Singaporean nation, with clearly defined Asian/Sikh values being a suitable foil against degradation. Since then, the

"cultural ballast", "national values", and "self-help" discourse … has proved quite useful to Singapore's Sikhs, who, through the professional leadership of key institutions, have made a strong case for recognition and reinforcement of their distinctive Punjabi/Sikh heritage as congruent with the national agenda. (Dusenbery Citation1997b, 746)

Evidence of the success of such attempts abound. In 1990, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made an official visit to the Central Sikh Temple, during which he was honoured with the "presentation of a ceremonial turban and sword, the purported meaning of which – 'dignity and justice' and 'responsibility to family and nation' – were carefully massaged into congruence with Singaporean National Values" (Dusenbery Citation1997b, 747). In return, Lee Kuan Yew has been reported to express the congruence between Sikh cultural values and Singaporean national identity (McCann Citation2011). Whichever way you look at it, the state-to-society and society-to-society transfer of ideals and values within Singapore's Sikh community appears to be not only "congruent" but also tightly enshrined. Whilst this congruence can be observed in many walks of life, it is arguably most noticeable in the designated "place" of the Sikh community: the *gurdwara*. These are places not only where the Sikh community congregates, but also where the community is policed, and youths are instructed in Punjabi and Sikhism (Kaur Citation2008; Shamsul and Kaur Citation2011). Importantly, they are also places in which Singaporean Sikhs come into close contact with migrant Sikhs, with the interactions between these two communities revealing divisions along class, caste, linguistic, and moralistic lines. These migrants are overrepresented by foreign workers, who are regulated by the state "on a "use and discard" principle to ensure transience" (Yeoh Citation2004, 2439). In many respects, this is a principle that filters down from state-to-society and is used to structure society-to-society relations as well, and thus plays a role in shaping encounters and the outcomes they give rise to. These outcomes reveal a subjective interpretation of state-sponsored multiculturalism, with moralistic judgements forming the "basis from which differences are reified, hierarchies are formed, power is asserted, and people are othered" (Woods and Kong Citation2022a, 2). We now illustrate these ideas empirically.

The irreducible otherness of *desi* and desire in Singapore's *gurdwaras*

The empirical analysis that follows draws on qualitative data collected from mid-2019 through mid-2021. The data are part of a large-scale project on new religious pluralisms in Singapore, which involved extensive qualitative research conducted amongst Buddhists, Christians/Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and individuals identifying as religious "nones" (see Woods and Kong Citation2022a; Citation2022b; Citation2023). Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were conducted with 27 Sikhs living in Singapore, of which 25 were Singaporean and two were non-Singaporean/migrants. The sample was relatively evenly split in terms of gender (12 males, 15 females) and well-distributed in terms of age (respondents were between their 20s and 60s) and occupation (including students, housewives, retirees, gig workers, civil servants, and private sector employees). Interviews were conducted by the first author and/or a Malay or Indian (Tamil/Hindu) research assistant. Nearly half of the interviews were conducted inside *gurdwaras* (12), during which participant observations and, in one or two instances, interactions between Singaporeans and *desis* were observed and recorded. The rest of the interviews were either conducted in respondents' homes, or mutually convenient public places. The skew towards Singaporean Sikhs reflects the fact that the migrant Sikh population is relatively small and dominated by Sikh migrant workers, with a significant minority being professionals. Given that Sikh migrant workers tend to be more comfortable conversing in Punjabi than English, and given that Punjabi was a language not spoken by the research team, this group was relatively harder to access and sample amongst. Notwithstanding, of importance for this paper is the perceptions of Singaporean Sikhs towards their migrant counterparts, as they are very much an interface through which the logics and rationalities of the state shape the terms and limits of co-ethnic encounters.

Co-ethnic encounters in the shadows of a multicultural society

Singapore's Sikh community occupies a position of negotiated identity. The "Sikh" part of their identity positions them as "Indians" within Singapore's cultural matrix, but as visually distinct from their Tamil/Hindu counterparts. Often, these distinctions would become social disadvantages when interacting with other Singaporeans, especially at school. For males, the wearing of turbans provides a point of focus for school bullies, with Ajeet,Footnote[2] an army regular now in his late-20s, recalling how his classmates "would just throw things at my head and they thought it was funny", and Karmjit, a taxi driver now in his 60s, forgivingly recalling how "I think only one time someone whacked my turban off in primary school". However, the "Singaporean" part of their identity foregrounds a need to find and embrace the similarities *within* difference. Gagan, a student in his early-20s, revealed the difficulties in reconciling these two aspects of his identity in his admission that "it's tough to be with other kids, because I look very different. Sometimes I would think there is no difference at all, but sometimes there is that obvious barrier there". Interesting to note is the oscillation from objective, to subjective, and then back to more objective interpretations of multiculturalism. Gagan "looks different" which creates an "obvious barrier", but at the same time he has been taught to "think there is no difference at all". Sentiment like this reveals both the success and challenges of Singapore's model of multiculturalism. In many respects, this framework is inverted when Singaporean Sikhs encounter their co-ethnic counterparts in the *gurdwara*. That is, when objective markers of similarity *should* gesture towards co-ethnic commonalities, but instead the subjective interpretation of these similarities foregrounds the identification of differences and distinctions that separate the self from co-ethnic others (Kong and Woods Citation2019; Woods and Kong Citation2020a).

These interpretations are pronounced in the spaces that constitute what we term the "shadows" of multiculturalism. The shadows are semi-public spaces where co-ethnics come into close and sustained contact with one another, which leads to the undermining and thus undoing of multicultural stability. For Singapore's Sikh community, and indeed for its Indian community at large, places of religion are good examples of shadow spaces, as they are known to act as "community centers" that "incorporate a function of religious socialization and cultural reproduction across the diaspora" (Bertolani, Bonfanti, and Boccagni Citation2021, 424). In *gurdwaras* especially, the community kitchen (*langar*) that provides free meals was recognised by Sarabjit, an undergraduate in his early-20s, as a concept by which "there is no separation of individuals, so everyone eats together, everyone gets to mingle and talk … the temple is a great way for the community, and for the people, to bond and integrate". Despite such claimed equality, they are also places in which the subjective interpretations of Singapore's multiculturalism are reproduced in subtle and divisive ways. Indeed, they are places where the racial categories that underpin Singapore's multicultural framework start to unravel, as they reveal how "racialisation strategically blocks out the everyday practices that are part and parcel of modern capitalism as not integral to the cultures of racialised Singaporeans" (Chua Citation2003, 67). Echoing this sentiment, Himmat, another undergraduate in his early-20s, opined that "Singaporeans are further away from their roots" as there is, by default of being Singaporean, a "dilution of culture". This dilution creates a void that is easily filled by the subjective. Paramjit, a national serviceman in his early-20s, described Singaporean Sikhs as "mostly liberals, because they are first-world, fast-moving, [whereas] most migrants have a third-world mindset". Whilst the effects of such mindset are explored below, important is the Singapore-India division that Paramjit alludes to.

This division is reified by the widespread use of the term "*desi*" to signify migrants in the *gurdwara*, with a denigrating "boy" or "girl" suffix used to signal gender. The fact that Singaporean Sikhs use *desi* as an othering term signifies the divisive power of how "Indianness" is framed in relation to "Singaporeanness", with the latter construct transcending the former. As Harpreet, a civil servant in her 30s, explained, "*desi* essentially means from India … but that's not the actual meaning, it has been transformed into an offensive term … A *desi* person is who? Someone of a labour class … they dress weirdly, they behave weirdly". Kartar, an undergraduate in his early-20s, was more specific in his admission that he and his friends also refer to *desi* boys as "*pendus*, village boys … like a villager mindset". A *desi* boy is a dismissive label that suggests Indianness, cultural difference, and tradition.

These characteristics reveal themselves through the ways in which *desi* boys engage with the *gurdwara*. These engagements range from the functional to the emotive. Sarwan, a civil servant in his 30s, acknowledged the fact that "they don't earn all that much, and there is food available here, so they come here for the food" whilst also conceding that "a lot of them miss home, so when they come to the *gurdwaras* … it brings back that sense of being at home again, familiarity is recreated in the *gurdwara*". Linking these functional and emotive aspects is the practice of *seva* ("service"), which all respondents associated with *desi* boys. Paramjit admitted that "the backbone of the *gurdwaras* are the migrant Sikhs, they are the ones who are running the show", whilst Himmat explained how

cleaning, they will just take the initiative … if you need help in cutting vegetables, because we mass cook food, making the chapatti and applying butter, and serving, cleaning, and washing dishes, all of these they do themselves and they don't need to be told … [Whereas for Singaporeans] if you go there, you would be, like, 'why do I have to do this?'

Even beneficent acts of service become points of division. They also raise questions about the morality of exploitative service, which our Singaporean interviewees explained away. Himmat, for example, explained that Singaporeans question the need to do *seva* because "Singaporeans are more sophisticated, so they won't do all this kind of cleaning and cooking". This sentiment was reiterated by Tanvir, a flight attendant in his 50s, who observed how Singaporeans "feel that they are better, and they are upper class". Whilst Himmat and Tanvir both use the relative differences between how *desi* boys and Singaporeans engage with *seva* as a way of establishing (or reinforcing) a morally ambiguous form of social hierarchy, so too do they justify the need for *desi* boys to support the day-to-day functioning and operations of the *gurdwara*. This sense of dependence sits uneasily with some Sikhs, for whom the presence of *desi* boys provides a constant reminder of their minority status within Singapore's social structure. Feelings of insecurity are revealed in the exaggerated view, shared by Arjan, an entrepreneur in his 40s, that in the Central Sikh Temple "the ratio is one Singaporean to 50 *desis* … we are crowded out … it's been taken over". Crowding forces close and sustained contact between co-ethnics, which causes the subjective interpretation of behaviours to become pronounced. The most spontaneously claimed reason why crowding makes Singaporeans uncomfortable was because proximity causes the supposedly desirous nature of *desis* to reveal itself. Desire reveals a sense of agency that does not accord with the subservient place of *desis* in the social hierarchy of the *gurdwara*, or Singapore. Sarabjit asked us to "imagine [how] a [Singaporean] mum is surrounded by 20 or 30 *desi* boys" and in doing so suggests an alternative, if unwanted hierarchy that distinguishes between desirous and desired subjects.

Desirous and desired subjects

In Singapore's *gurdwaras*, the performance of desire is an othering logic that recalibrates the hierarchies of power that distinguish Singaporean Sikhs from their co-ethnic counterparts. Recalibration stems from the fact that the relationality that underpins the expression and performance of desire is in fact a "social relation of domination" that is "constructed through the fundamental principle of division between the active male and the passive female" (Bourdieu Citation1998, 21). It problematises, even undermines, the logic of separation and apartness that underpins the *desi* identifier, and provides a close, even intimate, connective thread that undermines Singaporean expectations of appropriate behaviour. This sense of rejection is captured in Jasminder's assertion that "they don't know how to behave" and the accusation that "they don't come here [to the *gurdwara*] to work, they come here to find relationships". Whilst the search for relationships is polyvalent, it is mostly (but not exclusively) directed by *desi* boys towards both female migrant workers (typically domestic helpers from India, known as *desi* girls) and Singaporean females. Echoing this sentiment, Karmjit expressed his "irritat[ion]" that when they sit in the prayer hall, "instead of looking at the guru, they will be looking and scanning [for girls]. Even in the temple they are scanning! In the prayer hall!" Karmjit's irritation stems from the fact that the sacred space of the *gurdwara*, specifically the prayer hall, becomes a space within which desire can be expressed. Jasminder shared how a "majority" of *desi* boys go to the *gurdwara* "for free food and stare at girls",

before recalling how "when we walk past here, on Sundays, in this part [of the *langar*] … this whole row just stares at the girls … You can *feel* their stares". Going further, Arjan opined that

Our local girls don't come to temples. It's very hard to bring them. You can't tell them to come by themselves, it's just not prudent. Not nice anymore. They will be disturbed, or a [phone] number will be given to them, they will be followed.

By the *desi* boys?
Yeah, yeah. Like, they will say 'this my number, call me', they will try their luck. And then, you know, if this is India, we will go and beat up the guy. In Singapore, we don't do that. And they know we can't do it. So, they'll play that advantage.

Arjan's frustration stems from the fact that *desi* boys apparently take advantage of the relative freedoms they have in Singapore to "disturb" girls without fear of retribution. In sharing his frustrations, however, he also reveals his inability to respond in what he feels is an appropriate way: to "beat up the guy". Responses like these reflect a degree of alignment with the state, and its framing of discourses about what is "licit and proper through the maintenance of narrow familial and domestic norms" (Oswin Citation2019, 107). In 2007, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong asserted that the heteronormative family unit was the "basic building block" of Singapore society, what has since been interpreted as a "commonsense" assertion that has become "a pillar upon which [Singapore's] socioeconomic foundation is built" (Oswin Citation2019, 84). *Desi* boys disturbing Singaporean girls in the *gurdwara* is an affront to these ideas, as desire cuts through the layers of cultural othering and social rationalisation that cast each party as distinct. It signals a more fundamental driver of human impulse, connection, and relationality instead. Important for our purposes is not necessarily the potential outcomes that such desirous gestures might lead to – legislation prevents migrant workers from marrying Singapore citizens – but the fact that *desi* boys have the confidence and audacity to direct their desires towards Singaporean females. Doing so brings the desirous and the desired subject into one analytical and performative schema that people like Jasminder and her friends can *feel* through the stares of the other.

Whilst these reactions could be interpreted as visceral responses to unwanted, and perhaps predatory, assertions of desire, so too do they provide a moralistic affront to the sacred place of the family in Singapore society, and the *gurdwara* in the Sikh faith. Many respondents justified their negative reactions to the advances of *desi* boys (and, in some instances, *desi* girls as well) in ways that cast such behaviours as undermining the idea of family. For example, Kartar told us that "most of these people, the *desi* girls who come, they have partners or marriages or whatever arranged for them back in India … They just come here and … I don't know what they are doing! Fooling around I guess". Asha, a service worker in her 30s, asserted that *desi* boys "have got wives and children back home, but they are still doing that shit". The behaviours of *desis* are rejected on moral grounds – their inappropriateness stems not just from their otherness, but also the active undermining of the stability of the family *through* the performance of desire. Whether such assertions are true or not is immaterial – the point is that the narrative fits the need to cast *desis* as morally inferior people that have no right to direct their attention towards their Singaporean counterparts. Arjan was pragmatic, if speculative in his suggestion that "the union won't last" because "the moment they gain [Singaporean] citizenship or whatever, they'll bring their real partner who is waiting back in India". Desire is thus seen as a multi-pronged threat that simultaneously involves the weakening of the Singaporean family and the strengthening of the *desi* population in Singapore. Desire can expose, in other words, the threat of immorality and the vulnerability of the *idea* of Singapore society to "outside" threats.

Seeing freedom and (im)morality in the gurdwara

Encounters in the *gurdwara* – in the shadows of a multicultural society – raise the question of the relative freedoms of individual subjects, and how morality provides a structuring logic that can limit understandings, and expressions, of freedom. Morality shapes, in other words, the parameters of thought and acceptance. It is a way of "seeing" multiculturalism that transcends objective markers of

difference. It is purely subjective, and creates a structuring logic through which otherness becomes irreducible. This irreducibility stems from the "foundational" privileges that come with being a Singaporean Sikh, which in turn gives way to what Van Pelt (Citation2000, 141) calls "foundation difference, because it is preidentificatory and preinterpretive [and] makes a truth claim about the world … allied binaries and binary realignments only build a thicker epistemological foundation". To manifest these binaries, Singaporeans project onto *desis* an understanding of freedom, and thus an understanding of *im*morality, that is rooted in migration out of India, a context which is believed to be more conservative and restrictive than Singapore. Kartar went so far as to suggest that it is because *desis* have the freedom of time in Singapore – relative to Singaporeans who are relatively more accountable to their families, friends, and employers – they can invest time in *seva*, because it is something you do "when you are not restricted". Through contrasting logics of freedom, the differences between Singaporeans and *desis* are explained and rationalised (after Woods and Kong Citation2020b). Paramjit cast the "conservatism" that underpins the expression of desire in the Punjab in opposition to the relative freedoms of Singapore, in which "here a guy and a girl can go out freely, hold hands and be a bit physical with each other in public". Singapore provides, in other words, a context in which *desis'* desire can be realised. Baljeet, a housewife in her 40s, went on to explain this sense of distinction:

I think one of the problems is in India they are very suppressed, especially the girls. So, they get very suppressed, very controlled by their parents or brothers. When they come over to work here, it's sort of like freedom for them to act however they want … They come here and they get to do things they are not allowed to do there. Here there's no, like, government to govern them, like parents or siblings or whatever. So, according to them it's free. I can do whatever I want, I can behave however I want. There's nobody here to control me or stop me … So, I find that's how they behave like that, very contradicting to how *we* behave. We have rules and regulations. So sometimes they go against our culture, our ways, our regulations.

"Culture" here is something that is rationalised through the enactment of rules and regulations. It is something that is neatly defined so that it can fit within the framework of *multi*culturalism that underpins Singapore society. One of the clearest ways in which these culturally defined rules and regulations become manifest is through modes of dressing, especially when visiting the *gurdwara*. Jasminder shared how "when we come to the *gurdwara* we have to dress according to certain rules. Cannot wear jeans and shorts" whilst *desi* girls "come wearing jeans, wearing shorts, or inappropriate clothes, to a point where members have to come up with posters and whatnot to inform them, like, you cannot wear this and that". Karmjit echoed this sentiment, recalling how "our head priest will always give reminders [about how to dress] because some of them will come in very high skirts and miniskirts and all that". For Isha, who is unemployed and in her 30s, dressing in such a way is motivated by the desire to "tackle the local boys here", suggesting that the performance of desire is not just male-to-female, but female-to-male as well. Arjan reiterated this sentiment, explaining how: The *desi* girls who were not behaving appropriately in the temples, you can see from the change in dressing, you know. They come here and they suddenly find themselves very safe, and they can also dress as they want, go as they want. Nothing happens in Singapore … In India, if you're a girl, right, you can't go anywhere you want, do anything you want. There's no law there, basically. Here they have certain rights, sometimes they push their luck too. They stretch. It's not that Singaporean boys will do anything to them, it's their own kind that will do to them.

According to Arjan, Singapore is implicated in the performative freedoms of *desis* by providing a context in which they feel safe to "push their luck". The relative freedoms of Singapore translate into styles of dress, and such "inappropriate" styles of dress map onto the desirous behaviours that *desis* exhibit in the *gurdwara*. Going further, it is these behaviours that bring *desis* and Singaporeans into close and uncomfortable contact with each other in ways that subvert the assumed social hierarchy of Singapore's multicultural society. Living in Singapore gives otherwise marginal subjects that "freedom of space to assert [them]self and [their] identity" and to embrace "the potential you can realise about yourself in our environment" (Sarwan). Yet there remains an invisible moral boundary that is constantly reinforced to distinguish Singaporeans from *desis*, right from wrong.

Sarabjit shared how his mother did not like him interacting with *desi* boys as she assumes they "are spreading bad values", whilst Namrita, a housewife in her 40s, shared how "I don't ever want my girls to mix with a *desi* girl … the ones that do shameful things". Sentiment like this reveals a concern that stems from proximity and contact with the other, and a suggestion that *desis* are, perhaps, not quite as distinct as many Singaporeans would want to believe them to be. Isha was candid in her acknowledgement that "it's very obvious from the way that they dress, the way they move, the way they behave … But our forefathers, our ancestors, were also like that", whilst Harpreet went one step further in admitting that "our local girls are no better … it's not right to categorise and say that because they got their freedom, they are behaving this way or that way".

In many respects, the moral boundary-making that is used to construct difference between Singaporeans and *desis* stems from their co-ethnic similarities. Being part of a multicultural society, Singaporean Sikhs are mindful of being seen as Indians *within* the "Indian" category causes them to be subjected to the gazes of both their Indian co-ethnics, but also their non-Indian co-nationals. Jasminder shared how the association of *desi* boys and girls with Singaporean Sikhs is "quite embarrassing for us. I mean, Indians, there are so many of them in Singapore, and they don't really bother [other people] and whatever. But for us, other Singaporeans, they identify us together with those *desi* boys". Jasminder's friend, Meena, echoed this sentiment in her admission that it "brings down our image, the way they behave. They associate with us … [but] they don't know how to fit in". Namrita too shared these views, but used them as a reflective mirror to better understand her own subjectivity. She candidly shared how "when I think of them coming from India, I think that they are better than us, better cultured than us", which is an admission of the cultural dilution that comes from embracing a Singaporean identity. "But" she went on to share, "when I got to know them, I start to rethink, and I found that I was very wrong. I found that we are much, *much* better". The moral boundary that distinguishes Singaporeans from *desis* is also used to reassert the hierarchy of Singaporeans being "better" than their co-ethnic counterparts. The fact that such practices are played out in the *gurdwara* reveal its shifting position in the social and cultural lives of Singaporean Sikhs, from being a place of community reproduction, to one of splintering along lines of multicultural subjectivity.

Conclusions

As much as multiculturalism can be framed and imparted from above, so too can it be sensed through the subjective identification and consolidation of difference. In this article, we have considered how, in Singapore, the subjective interpretation of difference draws upon a moralising code of behaviour that determines the limits of social acceptability, and then reifies these limits by transposing them onto co-ethnic others. Doing so might be seen as claiming of an elevated social position – elevated by its moralistic overtones – that is in turn deployed as a rebuttal of the idea that "Singaporean modernity is generally derided and dismissed as inauthentic, synthetic, derivative" (Ang and Stratton Citation2018: S66). It does, however, also raise bigger questions about the role of multicultural discourse in splintering society in ways that might be unintended consequences of being socially diverse. As Chua (Citation2003, 75) put it twenty years ago, "Singaporeans, both in the government and a large segment of the population, are 'too comfortable', even self-congratulatory, about Singapore as a multiracial and multicultural society". Whilst efforts have since been made in both policy and scholarly circles to better accommodate the contemporary landscape of superdiversity, so too is there a need for new understandings that look *beyond* and *within* established categories of difference. As much as "modern capitalism and its attendant liberal political ideology tend to restrict moral imperatives and assertions about the *value* of various goals to the very circumscribed realm of "individual choice"" (Arnal Citation2001, 2, original emphasis), the Singapore case reveals a societal-level logic that distinguishes between morally right and wrong behaviours (after Woods Citation2021a; Citation2021b; Citation2023b). This logic aggregates difference and establishes hierarchies through which individuals are irreducibly othered. In the same breath, it creates a cleavage through which agency can be asserted, the hierarchy subverted, and the

limits of social control revealed. It calls into question the compatibility of multiculturalisms from "above" and "below" and reveals an opening through which new understandings of social complexity can be forged.

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Ethics statement

Data for this article was collected, managed, and presented in compliance with a research protocol approved by the SMU Institutional Review Board (SMU-IRB Approval Number: IRB-19-041-A047(519)).

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Notes

1 A *gurdwara* is a Sikh place of worship and literally means "through our guru".

2 All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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