Engaging Science, Technology, and Society

THEMATIC COLLECTION: PEDAGOGICAL INTERSECTIONS ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Self) Critical Pedagogy: Performing Vulnerability to Teach STS in Singapore

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Abstract

As more and more STS positions open in different regions of the world, there is an increased transnational migration of scholars trained in one part of the world working in another. Yet, there is often little guidance for scholars on how to negotiate their positionalities in different cultural, political, and pedagogical expectations. In this essay, I reflect upon my three years at a major Singaporean institution of higher learning, teaching STS and social theory, by discussing how I articulated a fragmented identity and performed vulnerability through my different intersubjective roles—researcher, educator, mother, employer, Indian, American—to model the kind of critical thinking I wished my students to undertake. I focus on negotiating my American political sensibilities in the Singaporean context, when trying to teach race and technology in Singapore.

Keywords

critical pedagogy; STS; Singapore

Introduction

After giving a talk about how conflict in the Indian Ocean circulated commodities and drove climate change, the renowned author, Amitav Ghosh, convened a master class on climate politics. With the characteristic melancholy exquisitely worn by a certain kind of Bengali intellectual, Ghosh spoke eloquently about how we are doomed to burn and drown. Thinking of Donna Haraway and Black science fiction authors like Octavia Butler and N. K. Jemisin, I asked about the possibilities of transnational solidarities. Ghosh replied that "[s]cience fiction was derivative literature" and then followed it with (and I am paraphrasing)—*from everything I have seen Black people in America do not seem to care about the subaltern elsewhere*.

A week later, Angela Davis loomed behind me, her wan face peeking out of a red turtleneck, and her eyes shadowed by her afro. In front of me, was a wall of a hundred faces in my "Contemporary Social Theory" class, with many of students' glinting glasses multiplying Davis in her rage and grief. On screen was an excerpt from the *Black Power Mixtape* documentary (Olsson 2011), showing Davis's famous interview while jailed in a courthouse outside San Francisco in 1972. The Swedish filmmakers asked Davis if she approved of violence. Her voice rose in disbelief and indignation.

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To cite this article Haines, Monamie. 2024. "(Self) Critical Pedagogy: Performing Vulnerability to Teach STS in Singapore." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 10(1–2): 142–158. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2023.1185.

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> I just find it incredible, because what it means is that the person who is asking that question has absolutely no idea what Black people have gone through, what Black people have experienced in this country since the time the first Black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa. (ibid.)

As she spoke, I looked back to the students, and Ghosh's startling words came back to me. I had found his statement ahistorical, given the cross-pollination of ideas between social movements, such as the Dalit Panthers (Rajgopal 2021), and the transnationalism of Black and Indian thinkers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and the Indian anti-colonial activist, Lajpat Rai, who sought to build linkages with one another (Slater 2014). But still, was Ghosh right that if Black Americans did not show much interest in glocal struggles, Singaporean students would not care about theirs?[1]

I wondered if I, too, were like the filmmakers. What was I doing, showing Singaporeans this documentary? Why should Davis, and other Black lives, matter to them? Did I have any idea of the experiences of Singapore's Indian and Malaya minorities? Did I, as an Indian-American foreigner, have any business talking about race in Singapore, especially when it was considered an out-of-bound topic because of its potential to promote racial discord and enmity? And if I did, how could I go about doing so, especially when teaching STS in Singapore?

The substrate of these questions is the *ür*-question of whether and how to teach and translate critical inquiry of race, technology and their intersections in institutions with political cultural dynamics that maybe quite different from those in which one is trained. Knowledge transfer has historically been, and continues to be, quite asymmetrical with a long and violent colonial legacy of the "West" and "global north" (Kothari et al. 2019) forcibly wrenching social and cultural capital to be seen as the centers of knowledge, democracy and innovation (Chakrabarty 2000). That Singaporean universities have skewed towards hiring liberal arts and sciences faculty trained in Europe, Australia and the United States, preferably from the Ivy Leagues and Oxbridge (Olds 2007) speaks to dominant and arguably neocolonial patterns of garnering academic credibility (Lim 2009), even as such practices are deployed critically to further domestic goals, such as the sudden dissolution of Yale-NUS in Singapore (Anthony 2021). Indeed, Natalie Koch and Neha Vora (2021) argue that the notion of an American-style liberal education is a global discourse, materialized through joint university partnerships in places like the Arabian Peninsula, China, Singapore, and Central Asia, that simultaneously produces the discourse of "illiberalism" and "authoritarianism" that then shores up an idealized image of American education that erases traces of those negative elements within American academia.

Conversely, knowledge transfer and translation the "Other" way around, from postcolonial sites of knowledge production to inform theory-building in Europe, the United States and Australia is often thwarted (Chen 2010)—and thus, must actively be promoted—as such scholarship is often relegated to the

[1] I would soon find out, as the Black Lives Matter movement washed onto Singapore's shores, indeed Singaporeans did care about American anti-racism, and activists, artists and scholars would tropicalize the literature of Black feminists in Singaporean contexts.

status of interesting but derivative "case studies" and not theoretically innovative (Prasad and Anderson 2017). The work of translation often places asymmetrical burdens of such scholars who must labor to make their work recognized as innovative by cultivating the "right" networks, writing and speaking in dominant languages, trying to get published in "appropriate" journals, all the while facing uphill battles for access to resources (Mormina and Istratii 2021). Indeed, Mills and Robinson (2021) produce a similar argument to that of Koch and Vora (2019) by articulating the discursive production of "predatory" journals by reputable publication venues who act as gatekeepers to academic credibility. These authors are articulating the radical democratic vision of alternative publication venues that might provide actors in postcolonial spaces with little access to credibility and reputational capital with a platform to access international distribution networks.

Within this transnational asymmetry of knowledge production, translation and production, my positionality is enunciated through a personal history of being educated in liberal arts settings in American "state schools" as a person of higher-caste Indian heritage and situated within a broader phenomenon of transnational migration of "EuroAmerican" academics (Bauder et al. 2018), including STS scholars, to East and Southeast Asian countries. In Singapore, I was confronted with whether and how to reproduce academic knowledge hierarchies in which I have been steeped, where I viewed myself as embedding in a more stereotypically "authoritarian," "non-Western" context. Now that I have recently begun work in a Danish university, where Denmark holds a special status in the American liberal imagination as a bastion of socialism (Moody 2016), even as it mandates increasingly rigid anti-immigration policies towards so-called "non-Western" immigrants (Valentine et al. 2009), the same question applies: *How do we translate our politics and positionalities into different contexts when teaching STS that engender "responsible politics as an academic abroad"?*[2]

Recent work has begun to reflect upon STS critical pedagogies (c.f. York and Conley, 2024). This paper continues a small but hopefully growing conversation on transnational pedagogical experiences of teaching STS in new, perhaps unfamiliar homes, where educators reflexively navigate asymmetrical and neocolonial knowledge transmission pathways. In this essay, I draw from my three years of lived experiences as an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to write auto-ethnographically of how I embraced and performed personal vulnerability in the classroom to impress upon students how the personal is always inextricably political by openly sharing how I negotiated my shifting positionality—as an Indian woman, employer of a live-in maid, a beginning public scholar, and an American. Auto-ethnography attempts to convey understandings of broader cultural phenomenon from critical reflections on personal experiences (Chang 2016). Here, I use layered accounts and personal narratives to show how classroom reflection on fragmented identities is part of the unfolding process of building closely connected research, teaching, and personally therapeutic trajectories. Peppering lectures

[2] This phrase was mentioned by a very generous anonymous reviewer, and I have used it here.

with personal stories that connect to the particular theorist we are studying that week is admittedly self-indulgent, but it is also therapeutic, and, as it turns out, a productive pedagogical tool in the classroom.

Through these reflections, I show that even in so-called non-liberal states, there may be unexpected pedagogical opportunities. While I was located in a deeply bureaucratic university governed by "key performance indicators," (KPIs) promulgating ever-changing metrics of good scholarship and requirements for tenure, embracing highly non-transparent and hierarchical forms of teaching and grading, within the classroom there is a tremendous amount of freedom. The face-saving rigidity of the bureaucratic box-ticking allows many spaces to go (intentionally?) unsurveilled. As long as KPI numbers are met and there is no financial malfeasance, one can be dropped in as a naïve American and try to reproduce liberal arts education in a non-liberal context, without drawing much attention.[3] Through these pedagogical experiences, the essay echoes existing scholarship seeking to go beyond diversity and inclusion initiatives. Training to teach in such positions requires far more than diversity training, but a deeper visceral, emotional and intellectual soul-searching to not only understand different cultural histories, epistemologies, and modes of communication, and decentering Western liberal values, but also a willingness to live with and multiply reflect, and reflect on, a fragmented self.

Self-Critical Positionalities and Performing Vulnerability[4]

The two pieces of advice I received before teaching my first class at NTU, "Contemporary Social Theory" for third-year sociology undergrads, was to not "be American" and inflate grades, and that I should adopt a "scary" and "intimidating" demeanor to maintain my authority and earn students' respect. While I did not give out A's for effort, I failed to perform the god-trick of disembodied expertise (Haraway 1988). Instead, I wrote to my first class an essay of my life journey, of my simultaneous privilege and tokenization, of my continuous grappling with how to live a more ethical and conscious life, and how this kind of personal-political learning was worthwhile. Performing vulnerability through this narrative essay set the tone for how I would engage students the following three years.

In Singapore, I experienced constant intersubjective whiplash. Depending on with whom I was interacting, I was disaggregated into various parts of my already-fluid, ever-becoming identity. The Singapore government hailed me as Indian, complete with the penalties this ethnicity incurs. I was required to pay a tax every month to support the broader, marginalized Indian community.[5] Indians consistently fail at receiving permanent resident status because the quota for Indians is already filled. Indians have experienced significant difficulties in finding housing because Chinese-majority landlords fear Indian

[3] This freedom, of course, is arbitrary. One colleague is in the process of navigating high professional repercussions for speaking about taboo subjects in the classroom.
[4] People who I have read and take inspiration from include: Deboleena Roy's *Molecular Feminisms* (2018); Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021); Laura Foster's *Reinventing Hoodia* (2017); and Juno Parreñas' *Decolonizing Extinction* (2018).
[5] See the SINDA Fund (2024).

smells and possible violence (Cheung 2014). At the hawker centers, tea stall workers automatically assumed I wanted add to more sugar in my drink, and national diabetes campaigns target Indian and Malay eating habits (Tan 2017). But in my division, I was more American than anything else. But with several other Indians living on campus, I was often not Indian enough or nationalistic enough ("Do you teach your kids about your culture?"), and with White Americans, I was seen as too Indian. Outside of NTU, if I wore my Indian clothes, I was sometimes assumed to be a maid. In my circles in faculty housing, I am a mother of twins.

Living and working in Singapore as an American woman of Indian ethnicity has precipitated a deep desire to know myself, why certain kinds of frustrations, joys and disappointments course through well-worn psychosomatic grooves. In short, I wanted to better understand the divided sociopolitical worlds from where I enunciate my identity that structure my feelings and responses of how to teach in this country. In the following paragraphs, I trace how I examined the different ways I was hailed by the institutions around me, and how I attempted to use them to teach students, while simultaneously learn about my ever-changing self.

Indian

To help students think critically about society and their relationship to it, like most STS instructors, I assign the well-worn teaching tool of personal reflections. But I also write one or two reflections with students in my attempt to enunciate a self-critical, personal-political Self that performs vulnerability, with the intent of modeling the kinds of wrestling and thinking I want my students to undertake. Teaching gender, race and technology to students at all levels necessarily requires drawing on Western and American case studies, as there is hardly any study of their intersections in Singapore. Thus, when I was hospitalized with heart arrhythmia troubles and later had to have surgery, I seized upon the chance to write about my experiences, and specifically my experiences with medical racism, which is something many believe does not exist in Singapore. I wrote an unfiltered account of my experiences, such as when during surgery, the anesthetic wore off early on, and I was left feeling like an X-man-like burning inside my chest. My doctor and the nurses assumed I "love to drink alcohol"—an unfortunate stereotype of Indians—and assumed I was inebriated prior to surgery and did not follow the prescribed pre-surgery fasting schedule. I wrote about how I tried to cut through my Indianness by leveraging and amplifying all my American loudness and professorial gravitas to receive better treatment, and how it was only successful half the time. I described how Chinese nurses frequently had trouble finding my veins on my dark skin to take blood, but Tamil nurses always found them in one go. From what my students have conveyed, such reflections had a profound impact on them. In a place where "racial harmony" is gospel (Huat 2003) and talking of racism is a taboo topic (Ibrahim 2018), such a reflection opened their eyes to the mundane workings of medical racism in Singapore.

Employer

In separate lectures on decolonization (for my social theory class), and domestic labor and technology (for the gender, race and tech class), I included a few minutes about the relationship of critical intimacy I shared with my live-in Filipina domestic maid, and how she traverses being friend, employee, and family, and is neither all at once. When lecturing on decolonization, I spoke about the power dynamics between us, and the displaced reproductive care she did for my twins—leaving her children behind in the Philippines to work, so

she can look after my small children so I can work. I reflected on how my own self-congratulatory feelings of being a "good" employer who tries to practice social justice, even as I recognized the political economies of cheap labor that forecloses the realization of such justice. I observed how perhaps I should ask my maid to speak to my class, but how this flies too close to minstrelsy, and perhaps the best thing I could do (at least to assuage my guilt) is ensure I paid her an extremely good wage, and decent living conditions—we had given her our third bedroom, so she was not confined to the closets that pass for maid's quarters in faculty housing. And indeed, she was able to afford concrete houses for her family. I spoke to students about how alternating between self-laceration and self-regard forms part of the affective atmospheres of our household. In the graduate version of the social theory class, I paired my reflections with chosen readings on the work of care by low-income migrants (Boris and Parreñas 2010).

In the gender, race and tech class, when introducing Ruth Schwartz Cowan's piece on the domestic industrial revolution (Cowan 1983), I used it as a lens to reflect on the relationship between domestic labor and technology in Singapore, self-branded as the "Smart Nation," where a high-tech digital transition in financial, transportation, energy, and pandemic management, among other sectors, will ensure efficiency, convenience and better data for decision-making (Smart Nation Singapore n.d.). Yet, such an image stood in stark contrast to the materiality of dustpans, mops, blunt knives, and torn gloves. It seemed in Singapore, unlike Cowan's essay, the industrial revolution might not be a domestic one. The histories and contemporary dynamics of the political economies and cultural politics of labor were quite different in Singapore and the United States. I speculated to my students that in Singapore, most employers I knew had little incentive to participate in the Smart Nation through exhortations to create a Smart Home and get plugged into the internet-of-things. Domestic technological innovations such as the washer, dryer, vacuum cleaner was not needed if someone already hand-washed dishes, bucket-washed clothes and scrubbed floors. While domestic workers were very much hailed into being through the Smart Nation through a network of security and surveillance protocols in the immigration regime, how did the pail-carrying, broom-wielding domestic worker figure into the Smart Home, as envisioned by say, Samsung? Singapore's approach to smart residences has been configure selected public housing developments as "Smart Enabled Homes" with built-in monitoring of elderly relatives and utility management (HDB n.d.), but not the kind of high-tech smart homes with an all-sensing refrigerator.

I spoke to students of how I purchased a washing machine and dryer and a vacuum, which my employee seemed to appreciate, but how, when it came to kitchen appliances, she seemed to prefer low-tech solutions, such as grinding coconut by mortar and pestle instead of a food processor or using a single knife for everything instead of making use of different size knives or peelers. After asking about her preferences, she spoke about how she saved time, as she did not have to clean multiple implements. Such reflections extended beyond the place of domestic workers in the Singaporean home and prompted discussions about solar cookstoves being innovated for use in developing countries, and why some innovations seem to fail, and reiterate the lie in technology-driven progress. A few students took on the inherent incongruencies in such imaginations of smart homes in their final projects and developed alternative advertisements to the commonplace ones of Smart Home appliances that invoke a male domesticity, by figuring domestic workers into these sanitized and hyper-techno-optimistic spaces of efficiency. I also spoke of observing her sweeping the rug instead of vacuuming them, and how I did not raise it as an issue, although I viscerally felt

the rug was not clean enough. If I said something, was I imposing my will on her? But as an employer, should I not impose dictates on the household should be run? But the power dynamic between us was so skewed, perhaps I should let her do things the way she wants, and adapt a little to her way of cleaning, and subsequently shift my norms of cleanliness. The students and I had a discussion of the cultural production of hygiene norms, and the difference between tolerating such differences and more authentic forms of decolonization. Through this personal example of self-critique, I endeavored to show students the messiness of knowing the "right" thing to do.

Mother

Motherhood discussions are staples in a gender, race and tech class. But here, I want to flag the kind of vulnerability I *do not* perform for my students. While my recent technology-mediated reproductive horror stories would be quite illuminating to students, I cannot bring myself to draw attention to the excesses of my body.

Public Scholar

In tentative attempts to "try on" the costume of public scholar, the vulnerability I experienced (and performed in the classroom) stemmed from the felt uncertainties that came with critically studying the technological surveillance of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore from a race and technology perspective. When I blithely agreed to do a podcast for *New Naratif* with P. J. Thum on contact tracing apps in Singapore (Thum 2020), little did I consider that appearing on the show of a well-known activist who was a perpetual thorn in the side of the leading People's Action Party of Singapore would clearly mark me out as a scholar who "has made a choice"—the choice being whether to speak out and begin the journey of becoming a public intellectual-cum-activist, or, to remain a traditional academic. More activist-oriented colleagues told me that early on in academic careers in Singapore, scholars must choose how they navigate a political climate that encourages self-censorship, and whether they inject themselves into public discussions. Having come from the States where many scholars burnish their activist credentials, I never experienced the reticence some other colleagues feel to directly engage a state without a free press and an expansive punitive apparatus. My perception of risk was drastically different from colleagues, particularly Singaporean colleagues, who felt they had too much lose if their activism went awry, even as they pressed on speaking out. But in experiencing the pandemic in Singapore and watching the worsening situation in the migrant worker dormitories, I felt a response-ability to write for broader audiences, and contribute to place-based public scholarship, even as I resented being strong-armed to work on Singapore as my primary area of scholarship through the requirements and availabilities of public grants.

The narrative of Singaporean exceptionalism has been globally reproduced in how the country has successfully managed the Covid-19 pandemic (Stevens and Haines 2020a). The international perception of a compliant Singaporean citizenry who quickly adopts social distancing measures and "circuit breakers" (i.e. lockdowns) under penalty of criminal charges, along with an extensive digitalized apparatus of app-based contact-tracing (e.g. Safe Entry and TraceTogether), pervasive temperature checks, and infection maps (Govtech Singapore 2020) and crowd maps (Singapore Government Developer Portal 2024), as well as an active "snitching culture" (Wu 2021) have all supported Singapore's self-branding of a model managerial

SmartNation for others to emulate. For example, the locally-developed "TraceTogether" app and wastewater surveillance are two such technologies intended for widespread adoption. TraceTogether, which detects the proximity of users through Bluetooth, was considered by international leaders for domestic implementation, and has sparked a worldwide debate on how various governments culturally balance privacy and public health. Singapore has also piloted all forms of surveillance technologies, including wastewater surveillance, in "high risk" migrant dormitories to act as an early warning system through the mass analysis of viral loads in wastewater to achieve a clearer picture of disease.[6]

As foreigners, Hallam Stevens and I have written both academic and general audience pieces about TraceTogether and contact tracing (Haines and Stevens 2020a; Haines and Stevens 2020b; Stevens and Haines 2020b). And I have given a couple of public talks about migrant dormitories and surveillance in Singapore.[7] On the former, there was virtually no academic voice in the public sphere to speak about tech and equity, and it took at least one ignorant and bumbling American (myself) to draw attention to how tech was being shaped unbeknownst to Singaporeans. Nothing we said was novel, but our pieces helped fill an absence in the activist circles, where tech was never considered political. Now, conversations in the activist sphere are taking a life of their own, although we are happy to speak to journalists if they ask (c.f. Han 2021a; Guest 2021). Still, it is unclear what personal risks we have incurred, as there has been little fallout from our essays. As some of my previous work has focused on "credibility economies," I have spoken to students about what kinds of reputational capital I have received after intellectually capitalizing on the pandemic by submitting and winning grants, and writing about the suffering of others (Haines and Kathiravelu 2020). Still, judging from personal conversations, students view our efforts and that of other activist-oriented colleagues as (imperfect) models of public scholarship, with some students writing their own Op-Eds and beginning their own social initiatives. Our public scholarship also demonstrates that a foreigner can practice citizen-scholarship in Singapore, and that perhaps the state is not so punitive as one believes.

American

I do not believe I am more or less self-loathing a person than most other academics I have come across. But the compulsion for self-criticism has become a productive pedagogical tool in Singapore, particularly in negotiating less centrist Left-wing American political identities with discussion of race and racism in Singapore.

In May 2019, I sat in a large seminar room at the National University of Singapore (or NUS), attending a symposium called "Invisible Privilege" (ARI 2019). One of the organizers told me that they wanted to call the event, "Chinese privilege," but were told by Singapore's Ministry of Education that the title was too inflammatory and risked upsetting the statute of "maintaining racial harmony."

[6] "More wastewater testing under way in Singapore to tackle Covid-19; pilot launched at foreign worker dormitories." (Channel News Asia 2020).

[7] See: Migrations podcast (2021), and the Received Wisdom Podcast (2020).

The organizers viewed this conference as radical—nothing like this had ever been held in Singaporean academia before. And they were heartened by the strong showing of participants. People were thirsting for this kind of discussion. The motivation for the conference was to show what privilege looked like in Singapore, a place with histories intertwined with, but still different from, the violent global histories of colonization, slavery and lynchings experienced by Black and indigenous communities in the States. Earlier in the day, Peggy McIntosh spoke about structural racism in the States. What followed was akin to a stationary waltz. Some participants stepped forward to gingerly unpick the structural manifestation of Chinese privilege (Zainal and Abdullah 2021) in Singapore through housing and education policies, or representations in the media. Others carefully stepped back to provide examples that appeared on its surface to defy systemic articulations of racism. All talks restricted analysis to Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other demographics—what is known as the CMIO model of the racial superstructure of Singaporean multiculturalism.

As I listened to and sometimes participated in these discussions over two days, I became increasingly confused. Why were scholars—most of whom were trained in the United States, in institutions like Berkeley—shying away from connecting Singaporean racism to global structures of anti-Blackness? Why were they not talking about how white and Chinese privileges intersected or departed in Singapore? Why did some reproduce exceptionalistic narratives of American and Singaporean histories of racism by saying they were completely different? Could they not see the analogs between the US and Singapore, especially when Singapore was built from the labor of low-income South Asian migrant workers (LIMWs) and live-in female domestic "helpers" from Southeast Asia? But my questions went unanswered, and as an outsider, I quickly realized my role was to listen and not speak.

Afterwards, some colleagues told me the discourse on race was far more "mature" in the States, indicating that Singapore had to "catch up," as if it was on some linear trajectory towards progressiveness and liberalism. I sat with this a bit. Was I, someone who had never studied race, and only read a little of Fanon, Mbembe, Crenshaw and Wilderson, so advanced and enlightened compared to my Singaporean colleagues? Was I guilty of a kind of "critical race theory" nationalism—akin to Jasbir Puar's idea of "homonationalism" (Puar 2007), where I believed the conversations around race in the US were more advanced, enlightened and "better" than elsewhere? This turned out to be the central tension with which I grappled in Singapore and continue to do so in Denmark: how to reconcile my very Americanist political leanings when it came to race, with the kind of discussions, public and private, that seemed to be taking place in Singapore and, and now Denmark. A senior colleague provided me with a hint of an answer when he said to me at the end of the meeting, "You can say anything, but you need to be able to hang them properly so others will hear."

With my sociology students at NTU, I devoted some time to this personal struggle on how to appear credible and legitimate when it came to discussing racial and ethnic dynamics in Singapore, as a foreigner. While I assigned theorists largely drawn from the American context, I push students to draw their personal experiences to interrogate whether and how Chinese privilege is couched in global colonial discourses of anti-Blackness and whiteness. But this has been difficult. Most of my Singaporean-Chinese students in the first year I taught have said the fissures of inequality they see are about class, not race. I have asked Malay grad students guest lecture on their research showing how Singapore's eugenics policies have shaped

contemporary policy on education, housing, media and military service. Yet students reproduce many of the behaviors as white fragility, claiming that they are not personally racist. If I was Chinese-Singaporean, I would likely have the credibility to have meaningful discussions, but as an Indian-American, my interventions can be—and have been—read as importing liberalism. In response, I speak about my personal discomfort of decolonizing and decentering critical scholarship on anti-Blackness, as there maybe glaring invisibilities such decolonization might reproduce.

In my upper-level seminar on Global STS, I struggle with my conviction to demonstrate anti-Blackness as a globalized structure, with the Singaporean academic discourses that call for "nuance." The academics attempting to debunk Chinese privilege call for nuance in understanding the heterogeneity of Chinese history, identity and language in Singapore (Goh and Chong 2022), even as minority scholars, activists and allies attempt to underscore the structural and institutional discrimination faced by Indians and Malays (Zainal and Abdullah 2021). Most scholars, no matter which political affiliation, seek grounded theories of racism that depart from those developed in the West (Bahrawi 2020). Indeed, nuance—where nuance and complexity are invoked, and where it is not—is something, I bring up in lecture. I draw on Tim Choy's words in *Ecologies of Comparison* (2011) of how argumentations based on uniqueness and specificity on one hand, and generalizability on the other implicate different political commitments in how one makes meanings and practices of environmentalism. If analogizing this conclusion to the "Invisible Privilege" conference, one might read the discussions as an open debate between the structural and the particular. Such a debate is explicitly taking shape in Singapore to discuss to what extent Singaporeans can and should form a vocabulary of their own that adapts, undermines and mobilizes Western concepts as they are interrogated through Singaporean and Southeast Asian reflections on their experiences.

In the intervening three years since I first taught at NTU, the discourse on race has shifted dramatically in Singapore, especially with the circulation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the rise of recorded "racist spectacles," (Han 2021b) and young people speaking more stridently about structural racism, and particularly Chinese privilege. When (primarily Chinese) celebrities have stood in solidarity with BLM (Wu 2021), they have been criticized for ignoring structural racism at home. In the classroom, I discuss my own internal grappling with my solidarities of the BLM movement, and my discomfort with how the implications of anti-Blackness have not yet been adequately responded to in Singapore. In particular, I focus on the politics of cheap racialized labor, and the problematics of civility vis-à-vis structural racism.

In thinking about cheap labor, I include the writings of Singaporean scholars, as well as my own research. For example, Nazry Bahrawi, argues in his online essay for making a difference between racism and racialism. He argues:

> Racism is a malicious practice that dehumanizes people based on differences of ethnicity and at times religion. It is often expressed as hate speech, though not necessarily, as it can also come in the form of subtle remarks that can be described as "microaggressions." (2020).

Racialism, however, can appear rational and practical. It posits that races have essential traits proven by empirical evidence, such as education performance and health indicators. Thus, racialism categorizes people neatly into manageable boxes. In Singapore, racialism manifests itself most clearly through racialized data which then informs our social, education and health policies.

Bahrawi goes on to give the example of race-centric data that shows obesity to be a Malay cultural problem. But, if policymakers factored in socioeconomic status, they might not make such cultural generalizations. One can certainly critique positioning racialism vis-à-vis racism, as the dichotomy differentiates the two in a way that divorces the emotive from the rational, the personal from the bureaucratic. Such a separation succeeds in only depoliticizing racism further, and reinforces the idea that racism is a problem of knowledge. With better knowledge and enlightened policy—and perhaps generating ethnically-blind data—one can solve the problem of racism and create a more post-racial society. With my students, I use this division to discuss with seminar students about how racialized the manual construction laborers are, and how it can be considered forms of what some activists have called "modern day slavery" (Yeoh 2019) that not been included into analysis of structural racism. Such labor sits well, definitionally, within the notion of racialism, but of a dehumanizing sort that splits open the binary of racialism-racism.

To discuss the politics of civility, I introduce to students' contemporary contestations around Alfian Sa'at, a controversial, progressive playwright, who advocates participating in and constructing a civil, empathetic and polite conversation of race and other issues. In my view, the politics of kindness are alive and well in Singapore, and to gain any traction with the state or civil society, all must embrace the politics of respectability, where civil, non-offensive discourse is crucial to legitimacy. For example, when military tanks rolled through Singaporean neighborhoods during the National Day Parade, Sa'at expressed his discomfort in seeing tanks in residential areas, and then was publicly chastised by some commentators. In response, he wrote a public post on Facebook:

> If you really love those tanks in your neighborhood, then post about it. Rhapsodize about them . . . But to pick a quarrel because you disagree? I'd rather you try explaining what it is you like about what other people don't like, and who knows, if it's a heartfelt, persuasive post, there'll be many people agreeing with you, or at least making their agreement visible by "liking" your post, and it won't annoy you so much that someone with an opposite view would have other people agreeing with them, to the point where you feel the need to swoop in and register your disagreement in such disagreeable ways. (2020)

Politeness, civil conversations and empathy are the primary anti-racist weapons in Singapore, and as an American who is comfortable with the political and moral value of righteous rage, I am learning to view Singapore's more 'muted'—or at least, different—register of affective politics as doing the political work that needs to be done in this context. But increasingly, more and more youth, minorities and allies alike, are vigorously injecting their rage into discourses normally relegated to academic and professionally activist spaces.

I have also attempted to conduct new research to create better comparisons between the US and Singapore, which seem, at first blush utterly noncomparable except in blunt tropes. That the Covid-19 crisis has centered on South Asian migrants has given me an unexpected opportunity to 'capitalize' on my credibility as someone who knows something about STS and is Bengali. After receiving an SSRC grant on migration and surveillance in Singapore, I began interviewing migrant workers to understand their experiences of surveillance. In the classroom, this incipient research was an opening to discuss the intersections of race and technology in Singapore. It was very easy to show students widespread banal dislike of migrant workers. For example, a widely circulated opinion piece in Chinese stated:

> It is very easy to point fingers and criticize. The number of cases in migrant worker dormitories has increased significantly. Don't the migrant workers themselves have any responsibility? Aren't their love of gathering and lack of personal hygiene also to blame? Instead of blaming the government, it is better to take personal responsibility. No government can be foolproof in fighting the epidemic, and the Singapore government has done a good job (Li 2020).

The supposed filth and lack of hygiene of migrant workers were blamed for high transmission rates within the dorms. Students read about the historical construction of the "myth of the filthy migrant," (Jie 2020) and reflect on neoliberal calls for self-reponsibilization of health that is paired with even more invasive state surveillance. My own work shows that the government was ethically cleared to test drugs like hydroxychloroquine on migrants, and subjected them to downloading three redundant tracing apps that do not work on their Huawei® phones. With these kinds of local and real-life anecdotes and discourses, reading excerpts of Ruha Benjamin's (2019) *Race after Technology*, begin to make sense, and students began to tie so-called liberal vocabularies of race to their observations of the racial "nuances" in Singapore, while simultaneously noting departures.

But in my class as I share my criticisms and discomforts, I wonder aloud if I am performing a kind of "critical race theory" nationalism. Inspired by Jasbir Puar's idea of homonationalism (Puar 2007), where the security state incorporates LGTBQ rights and brings into being queer subjects through the construction of the racialized and backward Other, I wonder if I am performing a kind of nationalistic idealism in valorizing American anti-racist politics and vilifying a non-liberal Other? Am I also complicit in constructing the discourse of authoritarianism and non-liberalism by reproducing an idealized and nationalist narrative of American virtue embedded in anti-racist discourses? Recognizing the colonizing tendencies of even critical American discourses, and my tacit acceptance of them, I implicitly sanction an American exceptionalism, while denying Singaporean exceptionalism. The challenge, then, is to counter both exceptionalistic narratives not only through thorough comparison, but to recognize that there is no innocent place from which to speak, and that well-meaning but deeply uncomfortable and halting conversations must happen. In sharing these spaces of genuine, icky discomfort I inhabit, students are sometimes compelled to write long emails and responses of their own wrestling with personal-political ideas, and how they might draw sustenance from one another.

Conclusion

The takeaway, I hope, for my students is the need to cultivate more unruly, strident and unsurveilled private spaces, to think with and make do together. Without naming anyone, I talk to students about how I have cultivated kinship with scholars in other divisions and within my own. With our very different positionalities, such an invited private space can foster critical discourses and lead to the kinds of solidarities that perhaps neither Amitav Ghosh, nor some of my colleagues believe exist. It is in these tiny places where transnational connections can form between different people occupying overlapping and othered positionalities and extending "hospitality" to one another. Here, hospitality is not in the liberal registers of asymmetrical tolerance between host and guest, where, in the extreme, unfettered hospitality requires acceptance of violence as written by Jacques Derrida (Dufourmantelle and Derrida 2000). Rather, hospitality

is cast as moving towards forming kin and building solidarities between potentially immiscible positions—where hospitality is "both a basic obligation and a source of mutual renewal" (Haraway 2016). It is in these small chosen communities of reaching, searching and mutual self-critical vulnerability, where generous and non-innocent conversations challenge us to see our collective political realities, articulate differences, decenter our nationalist operating logics, and forge a new ethics of learning together. And in those moments of mutual regard and camaraderie in cramped offices, I can believe Angela Davis does matter in Singapore, as I imagine the racial politics of Singapore (or of any other location) matters to Davis. We become each other's transnational Other to whom we each extend hospitality to find shared languages of care and concern borne of mutual, if asymmetrical vulnerability, and with whom we dance, commiserate and fight.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Canay Özden-Schilling, Taomo Zhou, Fabian Prieto-Nañez, and Maja Horst for reading drafts of this essay and providing valuable reflections and support.

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Data Availability

Data published in these article can be accessed in STS Infrastructures at: https://n2t.net/ark:/81416/p4m01t.

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