

# **Brown is Redacted**

Reflecting on Race in Singapore

“Being brown in Singapore is complicated by a hierarchy of differences in status, by citizenship, non-citizenship, gender, class, sexuality and disability. It is this complex, troubling situation and experiences that are explored in this thought-provoking book by a diversity of individuals. To tell a story, your story, the individual story, is to claim agency and a place as an equal citizen. *Brown is Redacted: Reflections on Race in Singapore* is a welcome addition to our conversation on race and racism.”

—**Constance Singam**

Author and Activist

“Many older minority Singaporeans have grown comfortable with the presumed safety of the state’s essentialised racial model. This makes them prone to internalise false stereotypes and cultural narratives, thereby perpetuating the very power structure that dictates, in its most exalted expression, that only one Malay can be president, that a non-Chinese can never be prime minister. *Brown is Redacted*, through its ambition and lyricism, liberates us from the multicultural straitjacket stitched in the 1960s. On every page is a voice that has risen from the interstices of overlapping traditions and generations. Together they lay bare the complexities of the brown experience: the rawness of the struggle, the absurdity of the ignorance, the radical agency of choice, the ecstasy of solidarity. We can transcend. To be brown in Singapore is to dance between anguish and joy.”

—**Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh**

Editor-in-Chief, *Jom*

“Once in a blue moon, a book is unleashed unto a people to give its members pause. For a self-professed multicultural nation still struggling with race relations, *Brown is Redacted* is that book. The book’s treatment of brownness is nothing short of illuminating.”

—**Nazry Bahrawi**

Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Literature and Culture,  
University of Washington

“*Brown is Redacted* is an extremely important addition to Singapore literature. It speaks to the brown experience, something that has always been dismissed and forgotten when talking about being Singaporean and living in Singapore.”

—***Beyond the Hijab***

*Stories of Muslim Women in Singapore*

“This gem of a book will navigate you through a roller-coaster of emotions. It will also deepen your critical consciousness of racialised identity in Singapore—where the Chinese constitute a majority but are very much a minority in Southeast Asia. The book deftly empowers us to move beyond the rigidities of racialised identity, narratives, policies and structures. I am humbled by the race whisperers driving this engaging book project. They make me proud to be Singaporean.”

—**Lily Zubaidah Rahim**

Honorary Fellow, Georgetown University, Washington DC  
Author of *The Singapore Dilemma* and *Singapore in the Malay World*

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## Reflecting on Race in Singapore

edited by  
Kristian-Marc James Paul  
Mysara Aljaru  
Myle Yan Tay

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# Contents

<b>Brown is Redacted: Introduction</b>	11
<i>Kristian-Marc James Paul &amp; Mysara Aljaru</i>	
<b>Directing <i>Brown Is Haram</i></b>	19
<i>Myle Yan Tay</i>	
<b>Brown Is Haram</b>	23
<i>A Performance-Lecture by Mysara Aljaru &amp; Kristian-Marc James Paul</i>	
<b>Brown Is Haram: Genesis, Gesture, Gestalt</b>	53
<i>Nabilah Said</i>	
<b>within.</b>	
<b>the sound of rain</b>	69
<i>Wint Shwe Sin</i>	
<b>Beauty in Me</b>	71
<i>Laika Jumabhoy</i>	
<b>Tok</b>	75
<i>Firdaus Sani</i>	
<b>Memory Lane</b>	79
<i>Mary Gomes</i>	
<b>Tendrils</b>	83
<i>Madhu Vijayakumar</i>	
<b>Excerpts from <i>Third World War: Covid-19 Diary</i></b>	89
<i>Saif Tamal</i>	
<b>Doubly minoritised:</b>	
<b>Indianness in Singapore and xenophobia as racism</b>	97
<i>Laavanya Kathiravelu</i>	

<b>A letter to my father</b>	109
<i>Poorva Maithani</i>	
<b>without.</b>	
<b>They asked me to write about brown joy</b>	113
<i>Sharvesh Leatchmanan</i>	
<b>Stay at Home</b>	117
<i>Mohar Khan</i>	
<b>Home and away: Living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Singapore</b>	121
<i>Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME)</i>	
<b>misnomered</b>	133
<i>Durva Gautam Kamdar</i>	
<b>Illegitimate</b>	135
<i>Danielle Kaur</i>	
<b>Curry Corner</b>	137
<i>Prashant Somosundram</i>	
<b>being.</b>	
<b>Senang Diri</b>	143
<i>raihan</i>	
<b>“Thank you for sharing this”: Social media pages as a pedagogical tool for anti-racist activism and critical consciousness</b>	149
<i>Paul M. Jerusalem</i>	
<b>The History of Whales</b>	165
<i>Jaryl George Solomon</i>	
<b>three-chord</b>	171
<i>Mish’aal Syed Nasar</i>	
<b>Shovel and Trolley</b>	175
<i>Bhing Navato</i>	



<b>look into the mirror</b>	177
<i>Misha Ghosh</i>	
<b>choice.</b>	
<b>Do I Really Want to Change?</b>	181
<i>Ashwin Ram Saravanan</i>	
<b>Am I the Odd?</b>	183
<i>Roshrin D/O Abdul Azees</i>	
<b>Kita dah cukup manis? (We are sweet enough?): Resisting the bitter pill of racialised health framing on the Malay community</b>	185
<i>Hazirah Mohamad</i>	
<b>Pleasures</b>	199
<i>Chand Chandramohan</i>	
<b>“A better tomorrow”: An interview with ashisdead, the rapper, the reject, the reflection</b>	203
<i>Muhammad Ashyur, Interviewed by Femi</i>	
<b>What You Want?</b>	211
<i>nor</i>	
<b>A Poem and Chu Ange</b>	215
<i>Zakir Hossain Khokan</i>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	217
<b>How to Organise Your <i>Brown is Redacted</i> Book Club</b>	219



# **Brown is Redacted: Introduction**

Kristian-Marc James Paul & Mysara Aljaru

IN 2019, as part of The Substation's residency, the Concerned Citizens Programme, we sought to explore what it means to be Brown in Singapore. More specifically, we sought to explore what brownness means to us, and the different identities and communities we inhabit. What social scripts have we internalised? What shared—and diverging—experiences do we have? What does brown solidarity look like between us? This exploration ultimately manifested in *Brown Is Haram*, two performance-lectures with The Substation in 2020 and 2021. The first was a small-scale, interactive piece; a work-in-progress that was a little more academic in register. The second was more fleshed out, with a clearer narrative structure; in no small part due to then co-Artistic Director, Raka Maitra, inviting us back to grow the piece, and having Alfian Sa'at, Tini Aliman and Myle Yan Tay come on board as Dramaturg, Sound Designer and Director respectively. Yan is now an editor for this anthology alongside us. *Brown Is Haram* was staged at—what was billed as—The Substation's last-ever arts festival for its anniversary, SeptFest, before it permanently closed its doors at 42 Armenian Street.

This anthology is borne directly out of that second iteration. It is not merely a reproduction—even though the script is reprinted in its entirety at the start of this anthology. Instead, this anthology serves not only as an evolution of our performance-lecture, but also as a reflective exercise: What questions were not addressed in our script? What questions should be re-examined? In other words, this anthology sets out to ask the following: How do we define brownness in Singapore? Who is brown? And how is brownness experienced?

By no means is this collection meant to be an encyclopaedic text detailing all the contours of the brown experience in Singapore. We're also not attempting to equate Singaporean minority-race experiences with those of minorities in other parts of the world. Instead, we hope that this work catalyses local discussions of race by exploring race and racism through creative nonfiction. More importantly, we see this as an opportunity for a more creative intervention into the conversation on race, which is often pathologised, rationalised and abstracted in our technocratic nation-state. Hence, the updated title to this anthology: *Brown is Redacted*. We want to resist textbook answers, palatable, mainstream narratives and reductive images of the 'model minority'. In this anthology, the answer to the fundamental question—what is brownness in Singapore—is obscured, censored but also, ephemeral and expansive. The aim of this title is to demonstrate that there is no one, true answer to the question of brownness.

Undeniably, there are nuances and stories that we did not manage to acknowledge in this anthology. But we look to others to expand the discourse and we wait excitedly for these works that will only deepen and enrich our understanding of race-relations in Singapore.

Though the essays in this anthology speak to a larger, kaleidoscopic web, they are fundamentally shaped by one similarity—the lived experiences of being othered in a Chinese-majority country. And these experiences are influenced by certain narratives, structures and policies that are actively reproduced to maintain a specific idea of a 'multiracial society': a society where tolerance and conscientious management are prioritised over inclusion, and where decision-making is based on majoritarianism, instead of true equity.

This collection of works then reflects the consequences of these choices, where certain languages, skin colours, bodies and cultures are marked different against a community—a race—that frequently escapes scrutiny, marginalisation and erasure. To this end, brownness in Singapore, oftentimes, is what you're *not*, or what you're made to feel like you're not.

As Faris Joraimi pointedly states in his Afterword to 2021's *The Food of Singapore Malays* by Khir Johari, "Despite the country's claims to being a diverse multicultural society, however, the traditions of its dominant ethnic Chinese population remain the most visible. Unless a visitor goes off the beaten path, they may spend an entire holiday in Singapore without tasting a single plate of Malay food." It is not a stretch to extend this argument to other minority ethnic cuisines. This is definitely not unrelated to how some foods continue to lose popularity as they are repeatedly condemned as 'unhealthy'. This phenomenon—which especially affects the foods of minority races—is examined in Hazirah Mohamad's essay on Singapore's racialised approach to public health. In the essay, Hazirah argues that this reductive process, where certain (brown) foods are scapegoated as the cause of several health problems, obscures many larger structural factors like socio-economic inequality.

Of course, it is essential to understand that the experience of being othered is uneven, where certain individuals encounter marginality to a greater, more material degree. This anthology acknowledges the interplay between citizenship and ethnicity—where the colour of your identification card also defines to what degree one can belong to Singapore. It even affects one's freedom of movement. At the time of writing, migrant workers still face limitations to where they can go and how they can move, even as the rest of Singapore rediscovers the beauty of physical and social interactions. Poet and community-builder Zakir Hossain Khokan, whose contribution concludes this anthology, was deported back to Bangladesh seemingly for his activism. Even though he has done so much for Singapore—building this nation, growing communities, inspiring other writers—the state decided that he was no longer welcome. The lack of a work pass—the lack of this single written document—can be seen as a lack of recognition and gratitude for the positive impact Zakir and many other migrant worker activists have had on Singapore. As conversations around migrant workers become more unhinged and untethered, it is necessary

that we think about how these conversations are coloured by race and racial hierarchies. Here we must ask: How does citizenship further alienate some minorities? When we fight against racism in Singapore, who fits into our CMIO-shaped<sup>1</sup> conversations, and who does not? Who is even allowed to speak up against injustices and who is not, due to precarity and fear of deportation? What kinds of faces and bodies are easily marked as more Singaporean? These questions underpin several entries in this anthology, including Wint Shwe Sin's meditation on Thanaka, the natural cosmetic paste made from ground bark, central to Burmese culture; Laavanya Kathiravelu's essay on Indianness in Singapore and how it is shaped by ideas of citizenship; Mohar Khan's poem on being locked up and isolated in a migrant worker dormitory due to our state's discriminatory Covid-19 measures; and the Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics' (HOME) abridged report on forced labour issues amongst migrant domestic workers.

While working on *Brown Is Haram*, the two of us had many conversations about our own personal identities. How different is it living as a Malay-Arab woman who grew up in a Muslim household compared to an Indian-Malay man who feels alienated from his ethnicities? Do we even identify with the cultures we grew up in? One particular discussion we kept coming back to was the relationship between brown women and brown men. How have our genders shaped our brownness? And how do other elements such as skin colour, religion and religious garments—like the tudung—affect our brown identities?

Brownness, if it has not been made clear, is not exclusively defined by one's racial identity. Race and racism as phenomena are not easily disentangled from discussions about gender, sexuality, class, etc. We are all multi-faceted individuals who are never just one identity. This is not to discount or invalidate race but to emphasise the importance of

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1 CMIO refers to Singapore's Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others model of racial classification.

multiplicity. If anything, it is to argue that conversations about race are enriched by discussions of how other identities compound, complicate and colour racial discourse.

As will be seen, no single entry is just about race. Rather, contributors reflect on how their racial identity affects other facets of who they are. Laika Jumabhoy, Jaryl George Solomon and Madhu Vijayakumar's creative pieces discuss how disability, body size and intergenerational trauma relate to their brownness respectively—all visceral, evocative examples of intersectionality.

The beautiful thing about navigating interwoven identities is that we are presented with the opportunity to sit with complexity. We are conveying this point through the section titles: *within.*; *without.*; *being.*; and *choice.* All of these have multiple meanings and simultaneously contradict and complement each other. In *within.*, we look at what is inside and what is inherent: what is inside Singapore, what is inside our communities, our bodies, what is here. In *without.*, we turn outwards. The entries in this section examine what we do not have in our systems, what we are deprived of and what we have lost. *being.* can be both a noun and a verb. Some entries explore the things defining us as individuals. Others negotiate and reflect on existence in this particular geographical and socio-cultural space. Finally, the pieces in *choice.* demonstrate that the act of choosing can be messy and restricted but also radical and freeing.

*Brown is Redacted* then is as much about highlighting brownness as it is about attempting to transcend brownness: we are all more than our minority race, our brown bodies. Though this rallying cry is illuminated through this text, greater society still finds it easier, more convenient and more strategic to confine us within specific positions on the hierarchy. We are the people that shake our heads from side to side, the people who are lazy and the people more likely to contract diabetes. Or the people who succeed *in spite* of these 'natural tendencies'. That is why it is important that we ourselves create narratives actively challenging these reductions.

In the fight for racial justice, it is important to not only talk about brown trauma but also brown joy. If we can centre the moments of love, tenderness and self-actualisation that we have experienced, we take a step towards reclaiming agency over the many stereotypes. Bhing Navato's touching poem tells the story of two migrant workers who create a pocket of space for themselves to love and live, even if it lasts just for a moment. What is important is the staking of our claim, the telling of our own stories with our own happy endings. As Prashant Somosundram declares at the end of his piece on brown queer spaces, "Our brown presence was resistance."

In total, we have spent about three years working on *Brown is Redacted*. We've learnt a lot from our collaborators, family, friends and the wider community. Here, we especially want to highlight the work of the six young writers featured in this anthology. Their works were chosen from an open call we organised, and they have greatly inspired us. All of them are 17 years old or younger. Let their entries be a sobering reminder: their proximity to and intimate knowledge of alienation, trauma and self-loathing clearly indicate that we need to be doing better as a society.

We also have been met with both productive and unfair criticism—the latter being both gendered and personal. However, these experiences only deepened our understanding of what it's like to be brown in this country. We've also learnt from each other. What started out as a project between two strangers eventually allowed us to build a friendship—one built on mutual trust, care and humour. In a society that values competition, having friends who support you through love and encouragement is more important than ever.

At this time, we would like to acknowledge works that have heavily shaped both the performance-lecture and this anthology. *Singa-Pura-Pura: Malay Speculative Fiction from Singapore*, edited by Nazry Bahrawi, Alfian Sa'at's *Geng Rebut Cabinat*, 'Others' *Is Not A Race* by Melissa De Silva and *Angry Indian Woman—The Trial* written by Aswani Aswath, are just some of the many texts from brown writers and artists that have paved



the way for younger minority creatives like us. Their presence showed us that creating such narratives is possible and also desperately needed. They were not only inspirations for *Brown Is Haram*, but also reminders that the next step in this evolutionary process was to amplify other stories in the community.

The great educator, activist and feminist, bell hooks, once said, “I think people are hungry for dissent.” No doubt we live in a world—indeed, in a Singapore—where our understandings of race and racism are changing for the better. People are looking for answers to injustices and seeking openings to shift the status quo. Dissent can be a healthy thing—it can produce accountability and, more importantly, it can highlight what we have been doing wrong. It can be an animating force. That is our hope for this anthology: to set conversations in motion. We hope that one is left with a sense of wondering, a state of mind that is inherently open-ended. Ultimately, this anthology is about the process; the process of collective searching, of dialoguing, of uttering. Because when we continue to utter, we necessarily continue to fight.

—

**Kristian-Marc James Paul** is an activist and writer. He knows he has four first names. He and his dog both love eating pandan cake.

**Mysara Aljaru** is a writer and creative. She is a mother to three cats and cries over movies more than she likes to admit. One day Mahershala Ali will notice her.