

This Is What  
*Inequality*  
Looks Like

NATIONAL  
BESTSELLER

...

New Edition  
*with* Afterword  
by the Author

ESSAYS BY

*Teo You Yenn*

This book is a remarkable rarity—a vivid ethnography of the lives, dreams and disappointments of low-income Singaporeans, skillfully intertwined with the implicit and explicit mental ideologies, social structures and bureaucratic institutions that both bind and separate us from each other. Delivered in slender, evocative prose with insight and empathy, yet informed by analytical distance and infused with theoretical rigor, it shows that the lives of our often-forgotten fellow citizens reveal larger truths about ourselves and our society, and the nature of humanity in our affluent post-industrial state. The highly accessible narrative both touches the heart and engages the mind, and deserves to become the basis for a wide-ranging public discourse on the soul of our nation.

—Linda Lim, Professor Emerita of Corporate Strategy and International Business at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan

With courage, integrity and scientific tools, Teo You Yenn enters the hidden abode of inequality. Immersing herself in the underside of Singapore society, she makes the invisible visible—contrasting the hardships and precarity of family life, schooling, parenting, housing among low-income residents with the taken-for-granted comforts of the middle class. She disrupts widely-held national mythologies, calling attention to the defects of Singapore’s welfare state and how these might be repaired. Sociology at its best!

—Michael Burawoy, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley

*This Is What Inequality Looks Like* is a refreshing, provocative, eye-opening book that is written with passion and insight. Highly readable and accessible, it will make for stimulating reading for anyone interested in the problems of poverty and inequality in and beyond Singapore. Teo’s work is grounded in sociological sensitivity and shaped by three years of intimate interactions with Singapore’s poor. This book disrupts the image of Singapore as merely a place of prosperity and progress and points instead to the day-to-day experiences of Singapore’s disadvantaged residents, the challenges they face, and the embedded presumptions about them that undermine their access to assistance with dignity. Teo invites her readers to confront inequality head on and to consider where they fit into the social matrix. Singapore’s overly-simplistic discourses of “social inclusion” and “the greater good,” she argues, serve in fact to valorize the market and self-reliance at the expense of meaningful and transformative change aimed at reducing social inequalities.

—Nicole Constable, Professor of Anthropology and Research Professor in the University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh

*This Is What Inequality Looks Like* is a masterfully crafted text. Consciously avoiding academic frames, Teo You Yenn's ethically and politically grounded narrative unfolds through vignettes of lived experiences that stand in sharp, stark contrast to the dominant imaginings of Singaporeans as mobile, cosmopolitan, free, agentic, affluent global citizens. Drawing on everyday lives of individuals and families, privileging their voices through the choice of ethnography—the book's chapters communicate the pathos and experiences of being poor and living under conditions of inequality in a cosmopolitan city-state. The book's lens is focused critically on popular, academic and state discourses about Singapore society. The book is a much needed intervention in hitherto un-problematised, taken-for-granted conclusions about poverty (its absence and then its causes), about inequalities, about responsibilities of the state and social structures in Singapore—regnant amongst Singaporeans—academics included. The book will no doubt resonate globally and has obvious analytical reverberations that are delivered through the empirical richness of a veiled segment of everyday Singaporean lives. The book disturbs deliberately, asking difficult questions that demand considered moral responses, highlighting above all the role of institutional structures in producing the context for the unfolding of experiences of poverty and inequality. Teo's voice, heard powerfully and honestly throughout the text, is a provocation; each page is etched with an inspiration and moral compulsion to engage—an invitation that is impossible to resist.

—Vineeta Sinha, Professor of Sociology, National University of Singapore

This is a remarkable book in so many ways. Teo You Yenn encourages all of us who live in Singapore to ask hard questions about the structural and psychic elements of inequality, and to challenge the comforting and yet ultimately self-defeating stories that many of us who have benefitted from Singapore's economic progress tell ourselves. *This Is What Inequality Looks Like* is also beautifully written. It is an inspirational model of how an academic scholar can address a popular audience through a deep reflection on her position as a Sociologist, inviting readers to embark on parallel learning journeys commencing in the often overlooked experiences of people who inhabit other social worlds.

—Philip Holden, Professor of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore

In this accessibly written and closely observed new book, Teo You Yenn takes the reader beyond the statistics and into the everyday lives of the less fortunate in Singapore. A timely and necessary book for a city in a hurry.

—Philip Gorski, Professor of Sociology, Yale University

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# Foreword to the New Edition

by Kwok Kian Woon

“MY RESEARCH BEGAN as one of poverty, of the low-income, of *them*. Over time, I have come to realize that the story I have uncovered is one of inequality, of relative wealth and poverty, of *us*.” Thus Teo You Yenn traces the arc of her intellectual journey in writing “an ethnography of inequality rather than a catalog of poverty” in *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*—a journey which she invites us to make with her, on our own, and with others.

A line came to me in contemplating the significance of this book, but I hesitated in using it because it sounded clichéd. Still, the line keeps coming back when I re-read pages of the book—indeed, almost any page—only to be struck again by its unique qualities, which taken together are rarely found in a book written by a sociologist or an academic. *This is a beautifully written book on an unbeautiful subject matter.*

Beautifully written because reading it resembles listening to a musical composition with multiple melodies, overlapping and cascading, and yet interrupting and challenging each other. In particular, there are two major melodic lines in interaction and

tension, springing from contrasting class positions: the professor's constant questioning and her respondents' generous sharing of their lived experiences, both equally important, with the former seeking to understand and amplify the latter. And this in counterpoint to the dominance and didacticism of a singular, louder, mantra drumming repeatedly in the background—the national narrative of meritocracy and mobility, which is also embedded and re-enacted in personal narratives of self-worth.

An unbeautiful subject matter because inequality and poverty exist jarringly amidst progress and affluence, and out of sync with the profound universalist ideals enshrined in the National Pledge: "... to build a democratic society based on justice and equality...." Beneath Singapore's avowed communitarianism lies a deeply individualist core, inscribed in meritocracy as an unassailable and sacrosanct ideological bedrock. You Yenn speaks of "our bifurcated consciousness—greater-good-society-before-self on the one side; survival-of-the-fittest-care-for-my-family-first on the other." To confront inequality is to confront this incoherent ideology, and ultimately to confront ourselves, our incoherent selves.

One senses that the author had to put herself into—and through—this confrontation, and in an environment that is inimical to intellectual confrontation, where critical discourse can even be equated with disloyalty to the nation. Hence the searching and self-reflective, in some parts ambivalent quality of her prose, posing and reprising questions at every turn. Just pages into the book, she asks, as if she feels the need to pull back: "Why am I inserting myself in what I write? This is not typical practice in academic

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writing. It is actually tremendously uncomfortable.” But a writer cannot draw her readers into an uncomfortable conversation if she herself does not carry the discomfort so palpably. She understands that the subject matter engenders emotions, including her own; she speaks of agitation and impatience in working towards change, and even anger when a conference participant kept referring to the low-income as “those people.” Here is a researcher whose own vulnerabilities are honestly revealed and worked through as she makes sense of the precariousness of the low-income, whose inherent dignity as persons are neither recognized nor respected.

Indeed, this book is not conventional academic writing as much as it is based on detailed empirical fieldwork and the critical evaluation of scholarly literature. When narrow “key performance indicators” are used in assessing a professor’s “research output,” questions might be raised about a book’s merit if it is not written for a highly specialized academic readership. An intellectual, however, must make choices about how to live out one’s vocation. This explains the impact of You Yenn’s book and why it has become a publishing sensation in Singapore, and more importantly how a single book—academically rigorous but written for a general audience—could stimulate a widening and deepening public debate on inequality in the country.

This book has reached diverse sectors of the reading public, ranging from those in their late teens to senior citizens—in part because it gave form to ideas and sentiments that many were finding ways to articulate, albeit inchoately. You Yenn’s introspective voice and insightful analysis lead to lucid conclusions for readers to

consider as they reflect on their own society and question what it means to relate to fellow members who face very different life circumstances.

Here I would like to make an observation about readers in their twenties and thirties, either studying in tertiary institutions or working in the public and private sectors. In other words, these are the beneficiaries of Singapore's meritocracy, the majority of whom are first-generation graduates experiencing upward mobility and, perhaps along with that, a mixed sense of security and insecurity in the face of a highly competitive job market and rising costs of living. I have personally witnessed their responses to the book in public discussions; they were learning to frame their questions in new and nuanced ways, not divorced from the shape and substance of human lives. Many reflected on their work in social service, housing, education, technology, and finance; and it seemed that they too were searching for ways to better understand the experiences of low-income families as persons with human needs, and not as clients and recipients of help and charity. Their idealism defied the stereotypes of millennials as apathetic, cynical and self-entitled. Yet, it may also be summarily dismissed as naïve, impractical, softheaded or, worse, unpatriotic because it is anathema to the hard truths that underpin Singapore's success.

Who is to say whether this precious idealism will be short-lived or sustained—and what difference it will make to the moral life of a people? I draw a lesson from a few of the many thought-provoking lines in the book: “Dignity is like clean air. You do not notice its absence unless it is short supply. You do not realize how

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much you need it, how important it is to you, until you don't have it." We could also say, idealism is like clean air.

You Yenn invites us to participate in a conversation, an evolving set of interlocking conversations that goes beyond her book and beyond Singapore. This is already intimated when she refers to inequality between and within societies and particularly in cities—"in the contrasts between skyscrapers and slums; in the contrasts between shopping malls and ghettoized migrant worker dormitories." Although Singapore is a city-state without a rural hinterland, it draws hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from its neighbors and the wider Asian region. The phenomenon of inequality takes on greater complexity when we figure in the human needs of guest workers who contribute to the city's economic growth, which is why You Yenn's analysis can be extrapolated to a wider canvas. If a significant level of inequality among Singaporeans is tolerable, what does this say of our regard for more remote *others* in our midst? And if urban inequality is pronounced in the model state of Singapore, the dynamics and perspectives crystallized in this book have theoretical implications for major cities across Asian countries with rising middle classes and growing urban poverty. Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bangkok, Manila, and the many cities in India and China come to mind, each manifesting a specific configuration of human costs.

*This is What Inequality Looks Like* is an exemplar of not just a new and impactful kind of academic writing, but also a mode of public engagement that connects us with each other—across

classes, across cities, across countries. In its abiding concern for recognizing and respecting human dignity across the unequal circumstances that we find ourselves in, perhaps the profoundest question that it poses is: What does our shared humanity look like?

January 2019

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# Preface

A SOCIOLOGIST cannot really begin with the question—is there poverty in contemporary Singapore? The answer to that question, based on what she knows about the world, has to be yes. But a Singaporean, a Singaporean can hear the question and think, hmm, I'm not sure.

I began this project as a sociologist, and also as a Singaporean. In my sociologist's mind, I knew that I only had to look to find. In my Singaporean imagination, I could not picture what I would see if I looked. These two facts underpin the architecture of this book. No matter what it is we know, and regardless of what empirical truths have informed our knowledge, we retain blindspots. These are remnants of some earlier learning; they are deeply embedded prejudices; and they are ways of seeing (or not seeing) that we share with many others in our society.

This is a book written for an audience outside of myself. It has come about partly because I inhabit some of the same mental spaces as the Singaporeans I would like to speak to. I hold in my head some of the same images and assumptions about who we are

and what this place is. This book is like a big torchlight: shining and searching, introducing pieces of empirical evidence so that we can identify blindspots and reexamine assumptions. It is a dialogue externally directed *and* internally conducted. The sociologist is asking the Singaporean: look at this, what do you see?

This is a book about what I found when I looked. It is a book about what a sociologist Singaporean sees. It is about how seeing poverty entails confronting inequality. It is about how acknowledging poverty and inequality leads to uncomfortable revelations about our society and ourselves. And it is about how once we see, we cannot, must not, unsee.

\*

The essays in the book are written to be read individually, but have been arranged to be read as a totality and in sequence. Each piece aims to accomplish two things: first, to introduce a key aspect of the experience of being low-income to the reader; second, to demonstrate that people's experiences must be understood in relation to structural conditions of inequality—in which people of varying class circumstances can do the same things and yet face very different outcomes.

The essays draw on data from three years (2013-2016) of conversations, observations, and in-depth interviews with people who live with very limited income, as well as a decade of research on family, social welfare, gender, and public policy in Singapore. I analyze low-income persons' experiences in order to shed clearer light on the logic and principles embedded in Singapore's

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structures of care, its welfare regime, its school system, and its labor conditions.

In situating the lives and experiences of a group within the larger social context, the book is an ethnography of inequality rather than a catalog of poverty.

Why ethnography? Studies of inequality often treat it primarily as a question of numerical trends. It is that of course, but it is also, importantly, experiential. The everyday experiences of inequality are crucial for shedding light on how it is enacted and the price paid by people low on the social hierarchy. An ethnography of inequality informs us of the structural scaffolding that perpetuates and deepens its existence, as well as the dance between the structural and cultural that exists between the scaffolds.

Why inequality and not *just* poverty? Contrary to popular discourses in Singapore, and other cases where inequality is widening, ‘the poor’ are not outside of systems, nor exceptions to dominant trends. Their circumstances are key components of shared social realities; their lives and livelihoods exist in direct relationship to those who are wealthier; their constraints reveal the logics of the broader social landscape and political economy.

To study poverty without inequality leads to tendencies to misrecognize structural issues for individual failings. On the other hand, to study inequality without poverty, particularly through focus only on trends and numbers, is to allow for research devoid of humanity insofar as we merely cite phenomenon without naming the injustices as enacted on real persons.

In the contemporary world, we see crises of inequality, breakdowns of welfare regimes, and deterioration of social contracts and trust. What we have in Singapore embodies key tensions and contradictions faced by highly wealthy and yet highly unequal societies. It brings into view the ecology of issues contributing to the everyday reproduction of poverty and inequality. Ultimately, confronting poverty and inequality means confronting questions of ethics and morality—questions about what it means to be deserving, questions about what a society is, and questions about what the greater good can, or should, entail.

\*

The way we frame our questions shapes the way we see solutions. This book does what appears to be a no-brainer task, but one that I believe is missing and important—it asks readers to pose questions in different ways, to shift the vantage point from which they view ‘common sense,’ and in so doing, to see themselves as part of problems *and* potential solutions.

In the process of working on this project and writing this book, I have sometimes become agitated and impatient. Many of the lacks that I see in our society seem to me to be solvable problems. Yet, I do not see how they will be solved. Like many other Singaporeans, I want to know: what can the government do about this? Like many other sociologists, I ask more generally: what can everyone, but especially people in positions of power, do differently that would lead to different outcomes?

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A wise friend of mine reminded me of the resilience of systems. He told me that often people who appear to sit in positions of influence feel powerless. He gave an analogy: do you ever take the MRT, he asked. You know how sometimes the train jerks really suddenly and yet no one falls and somehow everyone is still standing? Systems are like that—individual persons cannot change it.

I have spent many years of my research life talking about how people have limited agency—that we make choices and live lives in specific conditions in which we have little control. This is a fundamental starting point for sociologists. But after my friend finished speaking, I reminded him: that's a great analogy, but there are important differences. The laws of physics do not care for considered action. Molecules, atoms, gravity, force—these are not moral actors. But we are.

This book is an invitation. If you are reading it, you have your reasons. I am audacious enough to write about what I saw but not so audacious as to think I know how you will interpret these essays and what value they will have for you. This book is an invitation to everyone interested in reading it—an invitation that in the years to come, we will open up the conversation, we will deepen it, we will turn words and ideas into action. We may choose to act or we may choose not to. But both are choices, because we are not just molecules.

## About the Author

TEO YOU YENN received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California at Berkeley. She is currently Associate Professor and Head of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She has published journal articles, book chapters, and op-eds, and is the author of *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How family policies make state and society* (Routledge, 2011). She has received awards for her teaching and for bringing her research into the public domain. In 2013, she was winner of the Nanyang Education Award, and in 2016, she won the American Sociological Association Sex and Gender Section's Feminist Scholar Activist Award.

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