

This Is What
Inequality
Looks Like

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

This Is What Inequality Looks Like

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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

Preface

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?

Preface

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.

Step 1: Disrupt the Narrative

WHEN I THINK about my research, a memory that often returns, and which evokes complicated feelings, is an image of myself driving away from the blocks of HDB¹ rental flats where I do my field work. I have done this countless times—got into my car at the end of a few hours of hanging out at various field sites, turned on the ignition, taken a sip of water from my bottle, and driven home.

Home is a comfortable apartment, barely half an hour away, a world apart.

When I get in the car, I am usually still thinking of the people I just met, recalling the stories they've shared. Sometimes I am sweaty from walking around for a few hours; if the topic of bed bugs had come up, I feel phantom itches on my arms and legs.

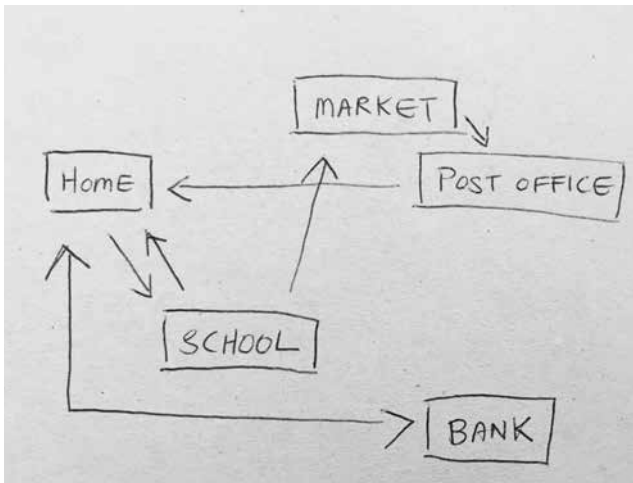
As I start driving, I transpose myself back into a radically different reality—one where my profession brings me status and recognition; where I can easily say to my family, “I’m too tired to cook tonight, let’s eat out”; where I can walk into any shop,

1 Housing & Development Board.

THIS IS WHAT INEQUALITY LOOKS LIKE

museum, or restaurant, and be greeted as a potential consumer. It is a reality that fits into the image of Singapore as Global City and I its global citizen—footloose, cosmopolitan, mobile.

The first time I drove away was after a group conversation in which several women charted for me their movements through space on an average week. It looked something like this:



Big island or small island?

That afternoon, as my car entered the highway, it dawned on me that what was for me just another drive, a journey I could take whenever I wanted, was for the people I had just met, an irregular occurrence. It was a surprising revelation.

When I speak with people who are not from Singapore, one of the things that comes up is how small it is, how it is *just* an island. I often perpetuate this truism when I describe Singapore

Step 1: Disrupt the Narrative

to friends who have not been here. Yet here I was, meeting people for whom the island is in fact large and rarely explored beyond a few must-go places—the schools their kids attend; the market to buy food; the bank to deposit money; the post office to top up their pre-paid utilities cards or pay other bills. While people in my social circle go wherever they wish on a regular basis and complain about running out of things to do on weekends, I was meeting people whose experiences of space in Singapore was limited to a radius of a few kilometers. If they traveled longer distances, it was to get from home to work and not necessarily to use leisure or consumption spaces.

Soon after my initial visit, I would meet many others who have lived in Singapore their whole lives and yet not been to many of the places I give little second thought to.

Mobility and immobility are at once spatial and temporal—they are about movement through places and also changes over time.

Mobility/immobility are lived realities as well as imagined states of being. They describe our everyday movements. And they shape how we think about where we have been and where we can still go.

When I present my work on poverty in contemporary Singapore, I sometimes encounter audience members who respond to what I say about material hardships by launching into stories about the hardships *they* grew up or are familiar with. At one workshop, I talked about a woman whose family was homeless for a few months. Her children had to shower in public

bathrooms at 4am every day, in preparation to go to school. As I spoke, a person in his 70s quipped that *he* takes cold showers every day too. He cheerfully pointed out that it is nice because the weather in Singapore is hot. At another event, I spoke of bed bugs keeping kids up at night, leading them to miss school when they overslept in the morning. Someone then countered that he experienced bed bugs as a child too.

The remarks were made partly in jest, but their speakers aimed to soften the impact of my claims. What they were essentially implying is that taking cold showers is not so difficult; and bed bugs are not such a hardship. But they are. What these two people imply to be quirky habits or everyday phenomena of a romantic past are, for the people I have been meeting these recent years, uncomfortable conditions of an everyday present. It is their everyday reality to see that everyone else appears to have ‘moved up’ and established some semblance of comfort while they alone are ‘left behind.’

Narratives of the Nation, Stories of the Self

When the two men spoke of their ‘hardships,’ it is rendered legible by a specific narrative. Each year, more material is produced to bolster this narrative: more exhibits, more posters, more movies, more declarations and slogans on websites, more news articles. Layers of a story build on each other, strengthening its overall structure and brightening its ‘common sense’ veneer. For a Singaporean, even a critical-minded one, it is a story that gets under the skin. It is a story that seeps into one’s emotions,

Step 1: Disrupt the Narrative

and becomes so deeply a part of a story of the self that it is hard to externalize and articulate.

This is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: Singapore became in a matter of a few decades a shining Global City. We were poor and now we are rich. We had no natural resources and now we can eat whatever we want, buy whatever we want, right in our own city. We were uneducated and now our children score among the highest in the world on standardized tests. We are safe, we are clean, we are amazing. We are amazing. We are amazing.

To remain amazing, we must keep moving. Movement, motion, mobility—these are not cosmetic; they are about survival. If we stand still, we are doomed.

How does this narrative matter? When the two people listening to my talk brought up their ‘hardships,’ it is this narrative—so taken-for-granted it does not need uttering—that renders their experiences dignified rather than shameful. One can proudly talk about choosing to take cold showers because one knows that one is accepted to have climbed and arrived. One can recall bed bugs fondly rather than with shame because one is assured that one has moved up and is beyond those dark days of being poor. With the national narrative of miraculous progress serving as backdrop to their personal stories, these persons can lay claims to a kind of dignified triumph.

Which then leaves us wondering: what about the dignity of those who have not been and are not mobile? What of those who have, within the structure of this narrative, stood still?

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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