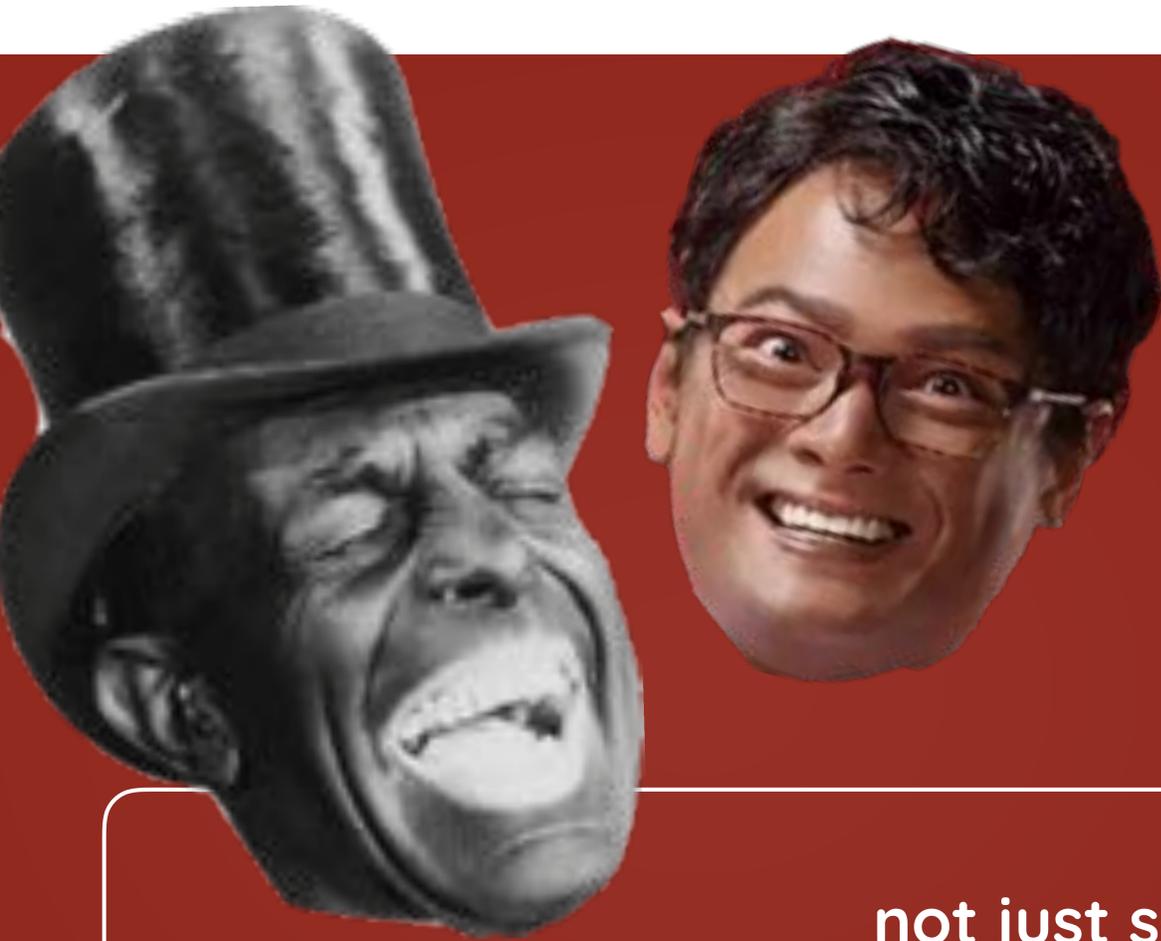


# why brownface IS racist



**Brownface** or **blackface** is the act of a majority ethnic group applying facial make-up to caricature the physical features and behaviour of a minority ethnic group

## not just some american sjw thing

*Beyond the historical context of its use in the USA as a form of highly racist minstrel entertainment during the days of slavery and Jim Crow laws, its use in Singapore is also deeply racist for the factors below, whether intended or not.*

### (1) OUR COLONIAL HISTORY

According to Kenneth Paul Tan, Malays have (since colonial times) been stereotyped by those in power to be lazy or buffoons, Indians as disagreeable and fearsome, and Eurasians as shallow and unintelligent. Brownface is therefore one of many acts done by a dominant ethnic group to reduce and diminish the identity and status of ethnic minorities and maintain it that way.

### (2) DEHUMANISATION

As local scholar Laavanya Kathiravelu puts it, not all Indians and Malays have the same dark skin colour and curly hair or wear a tudung, yet brownface makes it seem as if ethnic minorities all share the same physical characteristics. Another local academic Lim Sun Sun also argues that brownface reduces an ethnic group to the colour of their skin and denies their individuality.

It is ultimately a hurtful act which **reduces** and **dehumanises** the identity and status of minority persons.

# what is racism?

**/'reɪsɪz(ə)m/ - noun**

1. belief in the superiority of one's race over another's
2. ethnicity-based prejudice, discrimination, antagonism
3. **subordinating** a racial group and maintaining control over that group through policies & decisions

Most scholars agree that **intentions are irrelevant** in distinguishing racist actions

## Can we apply “Western” concepts of racism here?

Racism, as a concept, had its origin in western colonialism justifying the superiority of the colonial white race and the inferiority of the colonised non-whites, as was the case in the British colonialization of Malaya. Its most vicious form could be found in Hitler's Nazi ideology that promoted Aryan superiority and Jewish inferiority.

Scholars argue that while there are historically specific racisms, there are also common characteristics that identify them as racism. In addition, the concept of race originated in the West (different from ethnicity). The study of racism in any context therefore must contend with its western origins. Singapore would benefit from its own local scholarship on race. However, there have historically been many laws restricting the open discussion of race.

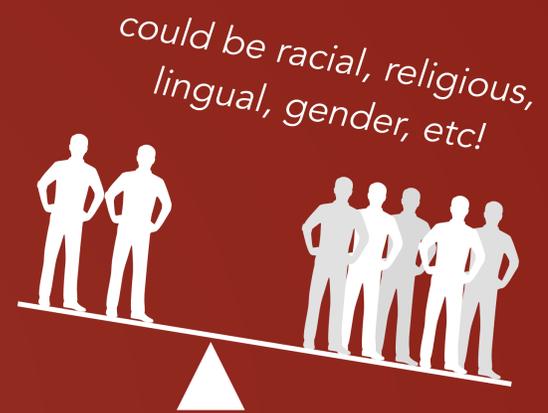


we're nOt raCiSt!  
yOu're jUsT seNsITive!

# minority dynamics

## majoritarian privilege

The **implicit and systemic advantages** that a member of a majority group has in a society. Through **no fault** of both the majority or minority members, there is an implicit and inherent **power dynamic** at play in daily life, as a result of being a majority/minority.



For example, Apu and Muthu, the only significant representations of Indians in *The Simpsons* and local movies respectively, are reduced to a racialised, heavily-accented caricature. In both these cases, the majority-race characters are in contrast of a diverse and complex range.

## examples of how it manifests everyday

- **Being left out:** A non-Mandarin speaking Malay may find herself left out frequently from nearly all office conversations with her colleagues who speak in Mandarin, unaware of her being left out.
- **Stereotypes and caricatures:** Many Indians are not heavily accented, traditionally-dressed, dark-skinned, curly-haired, but yet the single Indian character in local movies, TV shows and advertisements tend to be stereotyped as such. Meanwhile, Chinese characters (because there are more of them) are represented with more diversity, with characters that have many different attributes.

## real consequences

Coupled with frequent cases of racist comments, this daily reality over an entire lifetime creates a **uncomfortable sense of being an outsider**, rather than a fully-fleshed Singaporean.

It is also reportedly common for minority Singaporeans to be **discriminated against in employment and housing**, due to language or racial preferences. The lack of anti-discrimination laws in Singapore reinforces such cases of racism in daily life.

# how NOT to do racial humour

## 1. consider the power dynamics

When majority groups create racial humour to the detriment of minority groups, it reinforces the imbalance in power and real-world consequences upon minorities. Let alone an uncomfortable sense of vulnerability. The reverse is usually of less consequence because of the existing power dynamics of numbers, representation and impact.

## 2. do not "punch down"

A rule of comedy which acknowledges the power differential between different groups (racial or otherwise). "Punching Down" entails making jokes at the expense of marginalized groups. The rule is simple: humour should never be at the expense of those with less power than yourself. If ethnic minorities bear the brunt of your humour, you are "punching down".



*Phua Chu Kang, while played by a half-Punjabi, is not racially hurtful because (1) he is not the sole caricatured representation of a minority character in the TV show, and (2) humour is not made at the expense of his "Chinese-ness". Compare this to Apu from *The Simpsons*, or Mr. Yunioshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.*

# discourse vs. censorship



“

**Prof. Chua Beng Huat says...**

Drawing on instances of race riots in the past, the government constantly warns the population of the 'tenuousness' of racial harmony, thus justifying a need for the constant policing of racial boundaries... **the entire domain of 'race' is considered 'sensitive' and best not raised publicly.** Public voicing of grievances within a discourse of race is **quickly suppressed** and the parties voicing the grievances publicly chastised--if not criminalised--on grounds of being 'racial chauvinists' disrupting racial harmony...

”

- *Multiculturalism in Singapore*, p. 74-75



*Currently, Section 298A of the Penal Code, and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) empowers the state to take action against persons or organisations who threaten racial harmony. The government is currently mulling expanding and revising these laws to also target online discourse and hate speech.*



**can we actually talk about race if we can't talk?**

without substantive cultural exchange  
without understanding frustrations of minorities  
without real, unsanitised conversations

can there still be real racial harmony?

# final thoughts

1. There has been significant frustrations among young Singaporeans and minorities over this incident and perceived unfairness of Preeti's & Subhas' treatment. Will continued state censorship and restrictions worsen this?
2. Can Singapore society engage in mature discourse on race and religion?
3. What are the proposed revisions to MRHA? How will it impact discourse on race and religion in Singapore?
4. How should the state and its laws respond to racism and the palpable frustrations of minorities in our modern day?

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CAPE, or the **Community for Advocacy & Political Education**, a student organisation based in Yale-NUS College, was founded in 2017 by a group of students from Yale-NUS College and NUS Law. We examine local civic affairs, build political literacy, increase access to civil participation, and provides avenues for Singaporeans to contribute constructively. We envision a Singapore where citizens are politically conscious and proactively engaged in civil society, policy making, and social change.