

The sacrifices of migrant workers are written in every inch of Singapore—in the bricks of buildings, ship irons, under the floor of houses. Thousands of years later, someone may hear the story of our pain and sacrifice from the walls of this city.⁶

As one whose labour is undifferentiated and replaceable in Singapore, Sharif's poetry serves to humanize him. He expresses how migrant lives, foundational to the development of the modern city-state, are already inscribed into its infrastructure. After all, it was indentured migrant labour who built the British colonial outpost, and migrants are intrinsic to the unfurling 'Singapore Story.' To (re)make them legible perhaps one needs to read differently; between the lines or against the grain? Or one could simply look: Migrant workers are everywhere in Singapore, on the sidewalks, in parks and around malls, they are weaved into its social fabric.

Aspirational narratives of Singapore often emphasise cosmopolitanism and mobility, imagining future Singaporeans privileged with globalised careers, international relationships and blessed with myriad ethnicities.⁷ Surely, the basis of such worldliness is exchange and mutual respect. Or to speak the language of commerce: What is to profit and what is to be lost? If access to dignity, safety and respect leads to a better appreciation of the human condition, does the devaluing of others depreciate one's own humanity?

The Bureau of Race Neutrality is a proposition made during a time of territorial wars, geopolitical turns, post-COVID economic challenges and with the existential threat of climate change and extinctions as its backdrop. While Singapore seems relatively unfazed—even prosperous—what anxieties strain behind its polished façades? Is it, to paraphrase Sharif, “a dormant volcano.”

Bureau of Race Neutrality Singapore



⁶ Uddin, MD Sharif, 2017. *Stranger To Myself*, Landmark Books, Singapore, p.13.

⁷ See Chan, H. C., & Siddique, S., 2019. *Singapore's Multiculturalism: Evolving Diversity*, Routledge, London & New York.

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Conceived by Community & Education resident Sumugan Sivanesan, the Bureau of Race Neutrality is a participatory artwork, collective think tank and collaborative consultancy that seeks to divest from race as a category of difference.

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Cover photo: “MD Sharif Uddin has published a book about his life in Singapore.” AFP 2019.

Migrant Labour/Artistic Labour

The Bureau of Race Neutrality seeks to deconstruct and dismantle race as a category of difference and identify emergent forms of racism. On 1 June 2024, the Bureau opened its doors to the public at Singapore Art Museum (SAM) during its Residencies Open Studios, prompting patrons with a simple provocation: What would Singapore be like without race? One consultee recalled a trip to a beach on a Sunday afternoon where a group of migrant workers were also enjoying a day off. Socialising, picnicking and singing karaoke, the group was approached by a group of 'white' expats, who were welcomed to join in the merry-making. Laughing and belting out songs together, the consultee described it as a joyful scene, while noting that these expats seemed oblivious to crossing a social boundary that Singaporeans would be most reluctant to do. This (unspoken) divide is of interest to the Bureau.

In April, I met the migrant worker, poet and organiser Ripon Chowdry who disclosed that he rarely socialised with Singaporeans, despite having lived in the country for over 15 years. Indeed migrants holding employment-sponsored Work Permits issued by Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM) have conditions imposed on the types of relationships they can form. They are prohibited from marrying citizens and permanent residents without the permission of authorities and domestic workers who fall pregnant must be repatriated before they give birth.¹

With its aging population and dwindling fertility rate, Singapore addresses shortfalls in its workforce by drawing on a readily available supply of labour in the region for manual and domestic duties; some say to "do the work that Singaporeans don't want to do." Migrants make up around 30% of Singapore's workforce.² While those on Work Permits are not subject to Singapore's Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) racial categories, they are racialised as they are recruited for different roles, for example Filipinas for domestic work, Indians for construction. Contracted labourers, dependent on employees who can fire them at will, face great difficulties asserting rights. They are paid below average wages, are not afforded the same work standards as citizens, nor offered pathways to permanent residence or citizenship as are sought after professionalised 'foreign talent.'

The Bureau is an artwork and artistic work differs from conventional forms of labour. A simple analysis is that value is extracted from workers via the tasks they perform that contribute to the manufacturing of commodities; be they material, informational or social. The Bureau can be thought of as social practice, aligned with dematerialised modes of art that sought to problematise the commodity form by

1 See Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), 2022. "Home and away: Living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Singapore." In: *Brown is Redacted: Reflecting on Race in Singapore*, Ethos Books, Singapore.

2 National Population and Talent Division, "Population in Brief 2023." <https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/population-in-brief-2023.pdf>

producing encounters, situations and experiences, that can nevertheless be commercialised. Indeed, even if the Bureau were to make an art object it may not necessarily translate as value. I'm reminded of a colleague, scholar and poet Astrid Lorange, who quipped: "How do you ruin a perfectly good piece of paper? Put a poem on it!" Proposing that art can devalue a ubiquitous and cheap resource such as printing paper, spoiling its potential.

Curiously, several migrant workers have been recognised as poets in Singapore. These include Ripon Chowdry alongside fellow Bangladeshis, Zakir Hossain Khokan and MD Sharif Uddin. Zakir, founder of Migrant Writers Singapore and active in the local literary scene, was deported on 22 June 2022 after living in Singapore for 19 years. MOM refused to renew his work pass, citing comments he made on Facebook about conditions in migrant dormitories during the COVID19 pandemic that it deemed were "misleading, false or deliberately provocative."³ Sharif was deported on 31 March 2024 following his failure to find work after one month on a Temporary Job Scheme (TJS). His employer terminated his contract on 11 April on the basis of unverified claims of harassment by a 'loan shark' to whom Sharif allegedly owed money.⁴ Sharif had lived in Singapore for 16 years and was honoured with a Singapore Book Award in 2018 for his collection of poems and diary entries, *Stranger to Myself* (2017). I wonder how Singapore figures in the Bangla imagination. Sharif suggests both a shimmering first world "city of dreams" and a punitive state where workers' struggles are "etched on every brick."

How does art work modify "real" work, like manual labour? Despite efforts to professionalise practices, art is often understood as self-expression; a calling or compulsion rather than a legitimate career. It can be difficult to discern artistic labour from leisure, especially if understood as a highly personal aesthetic pursuit with no intrinsic economic worth. Thus art is often thought to be self-gratifying rather than contributing to a broader economic or social good. The Bureau, however, argues that artists contribute to both. Not necessarily for their artworks, but rather by their presence and for the communities or scenes that they develop. Considering processes of gentrification, art scenes are novel and resourceful, attract attention and draw capital. While labourers physically build the places we live in, artists 'place-make' and this adds value.⁵

3 Yufeng, Kok, 2022. "Migrant worker advocate whose work pass was not renewed made misleading public posts: MOM", *Straits Times*, 24 June. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/migrant-worker-advocate-who-did-not-get-work-pass-renewed-made-misleading-false-public-posts-mom>

4 Romero, Anna Maria, 2024. "Activists express "sickening disappointment" as authorities decline to extend foreign worker's special pass after last-minute appeal", *The Independent Singapore*, 3 June. <https://theindependent.sg/activists-express-sickening-disappointment-as-authorities-decline-to-extend-foreign-workers-special-pass-after-last-minute-appeal/>

5 See Gielen, Pascal, 2013. "The Art Scene: A Clever Working Model for Economic Exploitation", *OnCurating*, iss.16, pp 46–50.