

Unit 1: Exploring Race and Identity through Singapore Poetry

Objective: To develop and pilot a poetry unit to explore issues about identity and race in Singapore using poetry from local writers and minority communities



Unit on Exploring Race and Identity through Singapore Literature

Part 1. Who is the other?

In these lessons, students explored the question about who is marginalized in Singapore society through examining advertisements and readings poems depicting heartlanders and minority groups in Singapore. Students discussed ways that marginalization can occur.

Part 2. How are they othered and why?

These lessons focused on ways in which various ethnic groups have been stereotyped and discriminated against. Through reading various poems, students discussed the effects of stereotyping, casual and explicit racism.

Part 3. What are the perspectives of the other?

These lessons focused on understanding and listening to the perspective of various minority groups in Singapore through reading their poems and exploring their various positive and negative lived experiences in Singapore.

Part 4. Negotiating home and belonging

These lessons led students to connect issues of race previously discussed with broader understandings of identity and belonging. Students read and compared various translations of poems about Singapore as home from the voices of minority writers and also wrote their own poem exploring what belonging to Singapore means.

Text Selection

Voices of minority groups in Singapore

Themes: being Othered and Othering, personal identity and national belonging, ethnic and racial inequality, privilege and discrimination

Translated or hybrid texts



This Is What
Inequality
Looks Like

ESSAYS BY

Teo You Yenn

“many Singaporeans take CMIO as demarcating self-evident “races” ... that signal genuine similarities within categories and differences between the categories” (248)

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'Brownface' ad in S'pore in 2019 removed after getting called out for being racially insensitive

Mediacorp has apologised

Source: <https://mothership.sg/2019/07/e-pay-brownface/>

TOC

"Penatlah": Singaporean playwright Alfian Sa'at, on racism and Chinese majoritarianism in Singapore

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Source: <https://www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2019/08/02/penatlah-singaporean-playwright-alfian-saat-on-racism-and-chinese-majoritarianism-in-singapore/>

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POLITICS >

Race categorisation too rigid for increasingly diverse S'pore?

Source: <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/race-categorisation-too-rigid-for-increasingly-diverse-spore>

Living abroad as a Chinese Singaporean taught me what racism felt like

by Patricia Siswandjo on Jul 20, 2018

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Source: <https://pride.kindness.sg/living-abroad-as-a-chinese-singaporean-taught-me-what-racism-felt-like/>

1. What forms of racial stereotyping do you notice?
2. how are the characters and conflicts portrayed?
3. what are the effects of such racial stereotyping?

@NotOKsg



It's

#NotOK

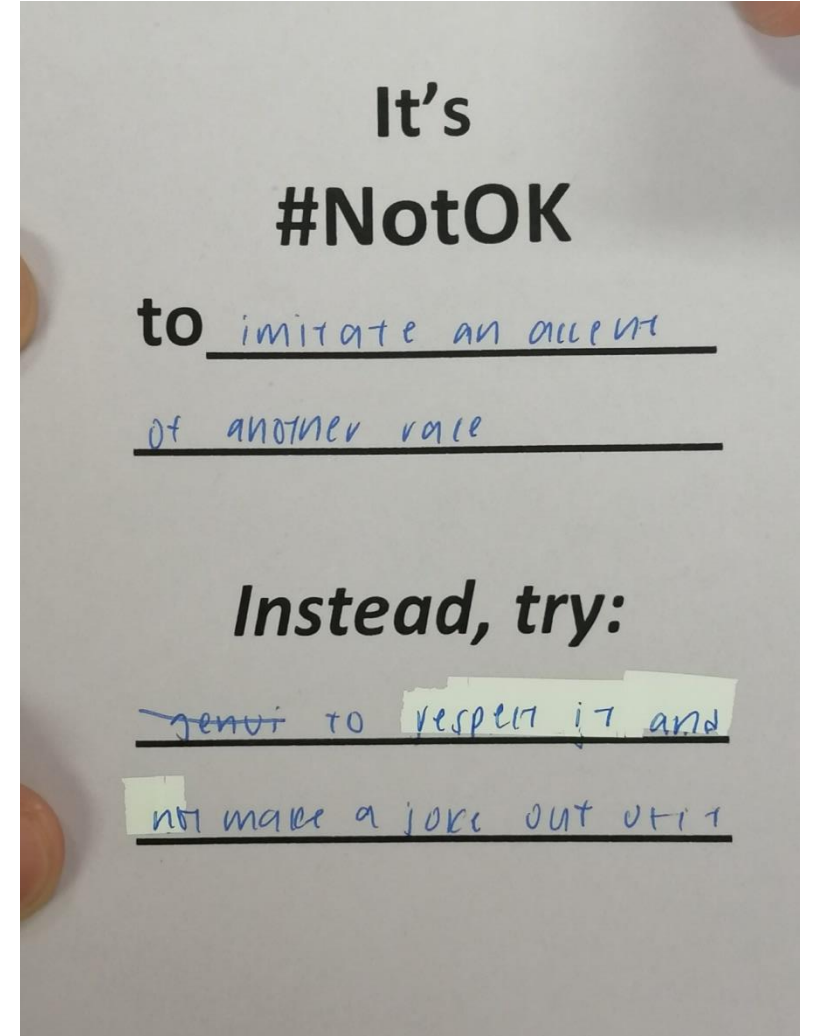
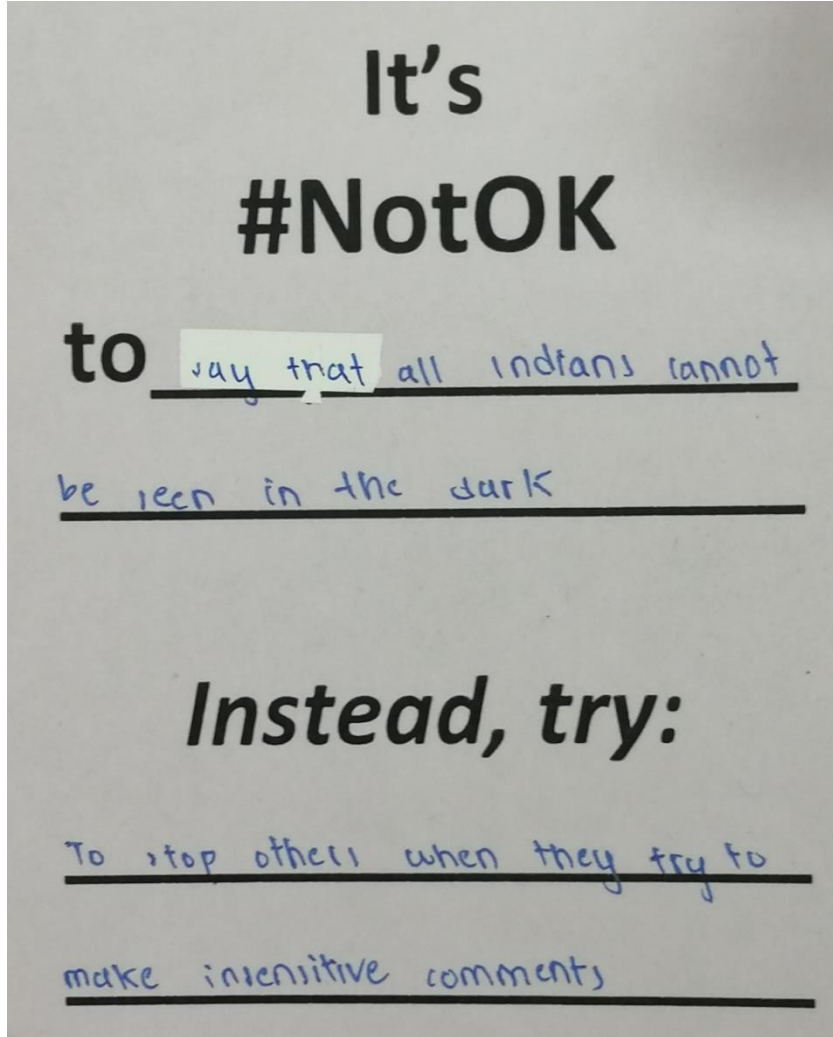
to tell me how I should or should not feel when I share an experience of prejudice or discrimination.

Instead, try: listening with empathy, open-mindedness and respect.



54 likes

notoksg Have you shared an experience of prejudice or discrimination that you've faced, only to have your feelings invalidated, dismissed or disbelieved? How do you cope; what or who do you turn to for understanding and/or comfort?



Questions on @NotOKsg

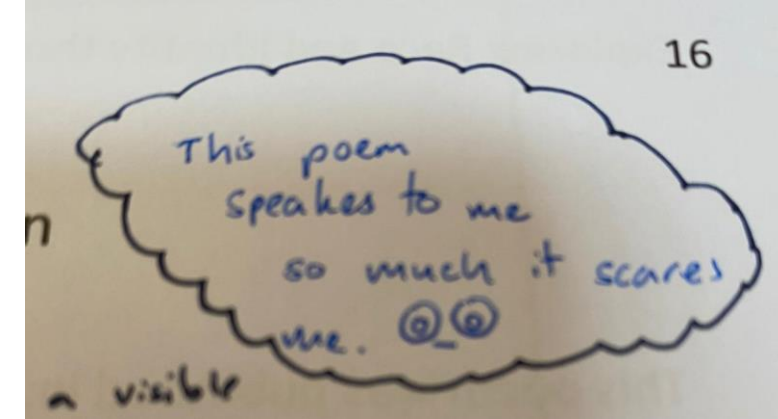
- Q1. What do you think the account @notoksg is trying to achieve?
- Q2. Do you notice any patterns and trends in the posts by your friends (e.g. particular race, behaviours being highlighted more often)?
- Q3. Choose one of the posts in your class and discuss the underlying stereotype. How are the 'Others' stereotyped? What is the effect of this?

Translation activity

Focus on diction and connotation

- Select 3 examples of differences in words, phrases or lines across the 3 translations.
- Consider the similarities and differences in what significant ideas are emphasized or left out.
- Using the 3 English translations as a guide, consider the mixed feelings the persona expresses, and how that creates a sense of tension.

Student Responses to the Unit:



Reflecting on “What’s it like being Malay?” by Riqi Hanzrudyn

- “it just made me empathize ... I have close friends. I, myself, have experienced it being the one person to represent a whole race. I do know how it feels.”

Reflecting on “F.A.Q.” by Luke Vijay Somasundram

- “It does expose a side of society that we've never seen before.”
- “Many of [us] used to think that casual racism was fine, even me personally. I used to think that when people make casual racism remarks, I do not really take them very seriously.”

Reflecting on having open discourse on sensitive SG issues in classrooms

- “I just wanted to say that we should be more open in discussing these issues like racism in our own classroom ... I think that we should be able to establish a safe and comfortable classroom where people can discuss comfortably and share their views on racism”

Reflecting on how local literature can make students feel represented

- “The text in the folder for the reading made me feel represented ... I haven't faced discrimination, racial discrimination at least directly, but I have had family that faced it. We just kind of pushed it under the rug because that's all we can do. If we try to explain to these people, they don't acknowledge that it's wrong. So these texts really help me feel a sense of comfort that I'm being heard and also help me hear the ones that I didn't know existed.”

Challenges in Implementation

Emotional Response vs Analysis of Response

- “[Once] the class got so agitated and emotionally trapped in that poem that they couldn't analyze it as Lit students. They were so completely invested, they couldn't discuss the poem anymore. Instead of just talking about the poem that day, we had a talk about what it meant to be a Lit student ...That is a conversation that I've never had with previous students before.”

Racial Dynamics of Teacher and Classroom

- “I was trying to push them also, but I could sense that they're not comfortable talking about it. [They won't] personally involve themselves or really reveal their feelings. I think sometimes it's because I'm not Chinese so the way they talk to me about it is different.”

Time and direction of discussion

- “How do you manage that process of discovery, constraints of time and resisting the temptation to tell them exactly what to think?”

General advice and guidelines

- **Balance literary skills and the issues**

Discussions initially guided by exploratory questions to unpack the issues then focus on specific aspects of writer's craft.

Crafting O-Level -like questions to elicit written responses (e.g. what makes this disturbing / dramatic / striking / express thoughts and feelings etc.)

- **Allow students to go beyond giving politically correct answers**

“I like how they realize that we don't always have to give politically correct answers. As Lit students, we are really open to all perspectives as far as you're able to give me a justification as to why you feel so strongly about it in this manner.”

“With this unit the critical thinking is a very open-minded one that, as long as you know how to be responsible for your thoughts, you have the evidence for it, then go where your thoughts will lead you.”