

Ambivalent Images: 'Multi-' Singapore, Racial-Singaporeans, and Trouble at the Hyphen

Joshua Babcock

Date: June 6, 2025

**Time: 17:30-19:00
(JST)**

Format: Hybrid

**Venue: Room 301,
3F, Building 10,
Sophia University**

ZOOM: <https://sophia-ac->

[jp.zoom.us/j/99851934434](https://sophia-ac-jp.zoom.us/j/99851934434)

Meeting ID:

998 5193 4434

**Passcode: singa-
pore**

Colonial images govern everyday life and meaning-making in Singapore, a place commonly narrated as an exceptionally “multi” polity: multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-religious. Yet, in practice, images of Singapore-as-“multi” (Babcock 2025) are never straightforward. This talk examines a controversial 2019 government advertising campaign, Singlish use in Taylor Swift’s 2024 Eras Tour, and reportage on the footpaths that cut across Singapore’s empty lots. I track how commentators debate these events’ meanings: Were the ads racial harmony—or racism? Was the onstage Singlish an image of American appropriation, local Chinese privilege, or Singapore’s star status on the global stage? Are the lines cutting across empty lots a reminder of the Singapore state’s never-ending urban destruction or an expression of citizen desires that exceed state control? I bring these seemingly disparate phenomena together to show how state-led and everyday habits for asserting Singapore’s “multi”-ness shape the events’ ambivalent interpretations without ever totalizing them.

Joshua Babcock is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Brown University and a faculty affiliate in the programs in Linguistics, STS, and the Southeast Asian Studies Initiative. Josh’s current book project, *Image, and the Total Utopia: Desiring Distinctions in Multiracial, Multilingual Singapore*, explores how totalizing colonial images structure the aspirations for belonging in diverse modern societies while simultaneously making belonging virtually impossible. In his emerging work, he studies the Singapore Sling, U.S. school board politics, and a ghost town called Singapore, Michigan. Josh is the Communications Director for the General Anthropology Division of the American Anthropological Association.

This talk is organized by Dodom Kim (Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Sophia University).

