What are the symbolic and practical roles of the English language in Singapore’s understanding of multicultural nationhood? How did these roles come about? This article narrates the historical development of what some scholars have described as “English-knowing” or “English-mediated multiculturalism” in Singapore. The article argues that the history of Singapore’s English-mediated multiculturalism is deeply entangled with social and political developments in Singapore from the late 1930s onward. This entanglement is discussed using the lens of educational reforms during the pre-1945 and post-1945 periods. During the pre-1945 period, English-speaking groups were the first to put forth ideas expressive of English-mediated multiculturalism within the framework of empire. The article chronicles, in particular, a much-neglected episode in the history of higher education in Singapore —their campaign for a local university. Significantly, this campaign saw them arguing for access to university education not as “colonized subjects” but as “imperial citizens” of the British empire. This early version of English-mediated multiculturalism was subsequently appropriated by the British who returned to govern Singapore after the Second World War ended in 1945. Even as popular nationalisms and political movements sprouted to challenge British rule after the war, the British embarked on an ambitious project of “nation-building” as a strategy for decolonization. Education, especially English-medium education, was one of the key instruments the British utilized. That the British possessed a particular imagination of the “Malayan nation” —which included Singapore—and undertook measures to realize this entity is rarely appreciated in the scholarship. This peculiar investment of the colonizer in the nationalist project which some historians have termed “colonial nationalism” has slipped through our analytical understanding of nationalism. It has not been seriously investigated in the scholarship given our preoccupation with “anti-colonial nationalism”. This article expands upon “colonial nationalism”, using this counter-intuitive concept to explore the crucial involvement of the British in the nation-building project during a critical moment when Singapore transited from colony to independent nationhood. One of the key aims of the article is to urge a radical re-
think of the ways language has been racialized in Singapore today. The much vaunted “neutrality” of the English language, for instance, refers specifically to the “racial neutrality” of the language, the fact that it offers ostensibly a means of transcending the “racial” differences of Singapore’s body politic. As this article argues, such an understanding does not do justice to our colonial past since it suppresses long-standing intersections between language, power and authority in Singapore. Instead, the emergence of Singapore’s English-mediated multiculturalism must be traced to shifting colonial priorities, ideologies, and practices of governance as well as challenges to the authority of the British on the island.

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