

# **In Search of “Home” in the Transnational Imaginary: Food, Roots, and Routes in Memoirs by Asian Australian Women Writers** ❖

*Siti Nuraishah Ahmad\**

*Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan\**

## **ABSTRACT**

For many people, food conveys notions and memories of home, community and identity. In a transnational world, these relations have become more pronounced as food is one the cultural goods that travel in the global networks of human migration and mobility. In diasporic and/or transnational writing, the preparation and consumption of food often appear as ways of maintaining or examining one’s ties with “home.” This paper takes the memoirs of two Asian Australian women writers, Beth Yahp’s *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015) and Alice Pung’s *Unpolished Gem* (2006), as the basis for exploring how food is deployed in the writers’ search for “home” and belonging as transnational subjects. Yahp’s memoir sets out how food and memories of eating mediate her sense of “home” as a person who is designated an Other in Malaysia and Australia. In Alice Pung’s memoirs, food acts as metaphor for her unease and anxiety as an Asian Australian growing up in a homeland that does not quite embrace her and in the shadow of another homeland that keeps her under surveillance across time and space. Using Avtar Brah’s notion of a homing desire, and concepts of authenticity and hybridity explored through food in literary and cultural studies, this paper examines the ways that the selected memoirs deploy food to interrogate the practices of inclusion and

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Siti Nuraishah Ahmad, Assistant Professor, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia ([aishah@iium.edu.my](mailto:aishah@iium.edu.my)).

\* Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan, Assistant Professor, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia ([madyramlan@gmail.com](mailto:madyramlan@gmail.com)).

exclusion that are part of the making of a sense of “home,” and how food facilitates new ways of belonging in a transnational world.

**KEYWORDS:** Asian Australian memoirs, Asian Australian women’s writing, food in women’s writing, home and diaspora, transnationalism in women’s writing.

Since family is rarely in one place, where exactly do they “live”?  
(Clifford 257)

“Home” then becomes a moveable feast. (Duruz 47)

## **I. Introduction: the Changing Meanings of “Home” in a Transnational World**

Since the 1990s, scholars and writers of diaspora have written at length on the changing meanings of “home” in a world where human beings cross and re-cross national boundaries, establishing and maintaining networks between “homes” as they go along. Earlier concepts of “home” in diaspora studies emphasised its physicality, such as William Safran’s contention that for diasporic subjects “home” is centred on a physical homeland they could return to, as in the case of the Jewish diaspora (10). However, James Clifford points out that not all diasporas are centred around a homeland, as the case of the African and the South Asian diasporas prove (249). To this he adds that “[d]iasporist discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland not as something simply left behind but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity” (Clifford 256), signalling a concept of “home” that is not necessarily anchored in a single, physical location.

Instead of a homeland, Avtar Brah proposes the quite radical concept of a “homing desire” different from a desire for a “homeland” (16). “Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of ‘origin,’” she argues (193). Like Clifford, she also emphasises the “multi-placedness of home” (197) for diasporic and transnational subjects. Referring to the different degrees and renditions of ideas of “home” in diaspora studies, Robin Cohen has summarised these changing meanings in metaphorical terms as “solid, ductile, and liquid” (4).

In light of ongoing efforts to make sense of diasporic and/or transnational subjects’ relationship to “home,” this paper aims to examine how food plays a role in interrogating and reconstituting notions of homeliness and belonging in memoirs by Asian Australian women writers, Beth Yahp and Alice Pung. Food conveys notions and memories of home, community and identity. In a transnational world, these relations have become more pronounced, as food is one of the cultural goods that travel in the global networks of human migration

and mobility; its preparation and consumption activate the senses and memory that together help evoke “home” across spatial and temporal boundaries (Choo 209). Using Avtar Brah’s notion of a homing desire and concepts of authenticity and hybridity explored through food in literary and cultural studies, this paper examines the ways that the selected memoirs deploy food to interrogate the practices of inclusion and exclusion that are part of the making of a sense of “home” (Brah 192), and how food facilitates new ways of belonging in a transnational world.

In *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015) by Beth Yahp and *Unpolished Gem* (2006) by Alice Pung, food, its preparation and consumption, and the places where it is consumed, play multiple roles in their negotiations of and (re)constructions of “home.” On one hand, Beth Yahp actively deploys food to articulate as well as interrogate notions of “home,” origins, and authenticity, drawing on her own hybrid identity as a part Eurasian, part Chinese Malaysian with transnational networks extending to Sydney, Paris, Honolulu and Kuala Lumpur. On the other, Pung expresses the latent anxieties of a second-generation Asian Australian searching for a sense of belonging in Australia by way of rituals, processes, and personal battles related to food. Yahp’s memoir displays a stronger attachment to the idea of a “homeland” than Pung’s because she continually returns to Malaysia as part of a quest to make sense of her personal, familial, and by extension, her nation’s history. Alice Pung was born and raised in Australia, not in the old homeland of her parents (Cambodia) or of her grandparents (China). A physical journey or “return” to either China or Cambodia is never discussed or explored in her first memoir; however, what Ien Ang (2001) has termed “Chineseness” is a constant presence during her growing-up years and complicates her efforts at finding a sense of “home” in Australia. These two memoirs are chosen in order to illustrate the variety of relationships that Asian Australian women writers form with the concept of “home” within different trajectories of diaspora and mobility, and thereby avoid generalising the diversity of Asian Australian identities and experiences.

Against a backdrop of recent studies of Asian Australian fiction (Ommundsen “This Story”; “Transnational”; Guntarik 2013; a special edition of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* on Asian Australian writing published in 2016), we feel it is time that attention also be given to other kinds of writing about Asian Australian experiences. In the context of the racism that ethnic minorities face in the West, Pung and Yahp’s memoirs perform an important

role in “prevent[ing] historical erasure as they help attain a sense of group identity, which may serve as a basis for political mobilization” (Davis 23). We also chose to look at Asian Australian memoirs by women writers in this study rather than Asian Australian fiction, because women’s memoirs often reveal their relational selves (Buss 13), the self in relation to the family, community and nation. In the context of these memoirs’ transnational settings, the way women’s relational selves are presented as connected to acts of preparing, cooking and eating meals suggests interesting intersections between food and the roots and routes of/to “home.”

## **II. Food in Transnational and Multicultural Asia and Australia**

Transnational links between various Asian nations and Australia have existed since the early decades of the twentieth century, formed via business and commercial interests, joint security and military collaborations in the region, Australia’s reputation among Asians for quality education, and migration opportunities to Australia. According to census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2016, almost half of the total population were born overseas or had parents/a parent who was born overseas, with India, China, the Philippines and Malaysia being in the top ten countries of birth of Australians born overseas (“Cultural Diversity in Australia”). As in any other multicultural country in the world, in Australia food has been invoked as a symbol of unity in diversity, because of its ability to bring together different communities as well as to celebrate difference. However, this desire to embrace difference through consuming ethnic minorities’ food has also resulted in the homogenisation of Asian cuisine, and thereby Asian identity, in the West (Ang, “Between Asia” 151). Another criticism comes from Robyn Morris, who observes that official multiculturalism in Australia consumes diversity as “a way of diffusing and dissipating the perceived threat to hegemonic whiteness” (500).

This is not to deny the power of food in maintaining a sense of identity, community and “home” across physical or temporal boundaries. Food continues to provide a tangible point of return for people and communities dispersed throughout the world, away from their homelands. For instance, the sensory experience and embodiments of cooking a dish from “home” can take people “from places [they] have come from but never been” (Choo 211) as well as “offer a means of “regaining touch” through sensory (re)location” (212).

Choo spoke as an Australian born to Malaysian parents who migrated to Australia in the 1960s, re-creating a Peranakan Chinese dish from Malaysia in contemporary Australia. Similarly, Jean Duruz writes of a sensory notion of “home” that is increasingly gaining traction in a world of constant travel and mobility:

“Home” then becomes a moveable feast. If Hong Kong can be smelt in the streets of London, stories of travel and migration stories have strong possibilities for happy endings—for re-writing “home” on new countries; across oceans; for drawing fresh nuances from “alien” landscapes as resources for memory and dreaming. (47)

Choo and Duruz show how contemporary concepts of “home” and “homeland” have evolved to incorporate the affective realm of memory and sensory experience; “home” is not just a *place* to return to.

Tied to the notion of “home” is the notion of belonging, and naturally, of identity. As a marker of ethnic identity, food can be used to verify or discredit one’s claim to be a part of a community or nation. The experience of preparing ethnic food in Australia supports a feeling of belonging but also reveals the irony of the same food being used as a tool to exclude Asian Australians as Others (Choo 210-11). In multicultural Asian societies, the “homelands” of many Asian Australians, food has also been deployed as a means of determining questions of identity and belonging when combined with discourses of authenticity based on racial classification systems. Racial politics and race-based policies in Asian nations can homogenise hybrid or creole communities and ethnic minorities even as their cuisine represents the integration or assimilation of difference. For example, Singapore’s attempts to market its hybrid and creole cuisines (such as the Peranakan Chinese and Eurasian cuisines) to tourists displayed its limited understanding of hybridisation, one that defers to the standard racial classifications inherited from the British colonisers (Chua and Rajah 163-64).

It is in this context that we explore Beth Yahp and Alice Pung’s memoirs of “food, family and home” (Yahp) as narratives that seek alternative visions of “home” mediated through descriptions, memories and experiences of preparing and eating food across multiple locations and generations. Yahp and

Pung's narratives of their personal relationships to families, friends, lovers and homelands exemplify how the "story of food and its travels [acts] as an imaginary of exchange within and between cultures, as a challenge (however partial, imperfect) to the rigidity of boundaries and the fixity of identities" (Duruz 48).

### **III. Homing Desire and Culinary Citizenship**

In examining the various functions that food plays in reconstituting fixed notions of "home," origins and "belonging" in Beth Yahp and Alice Pung's memoirs, this study deploys Avtar Brah's concepts of diaspora, the "homing desire," and the multi-placedness of "home" in the diasporic imaginary. Concurrently, Anita Mannur's concept of "culinary citizenship" (29) will come into play as we look at the ways food in Yahp and Pung's memoirs are used by the writers to take certain positions on their identity in relation to a nation and/or a homeland.

As we note in the introduction to this paper, scholars of diaspora have questioned William Safran's initial formulation of diaspora as revolving around the return to a physical homeland. Instead, Brah proposes "a homing desire, as distinct from the desire for a 'homeland' . . . because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of 'return'" (16). The diversity of the diasporic experience across the world means that different diasporic subjects will have various kinds and degrees of affinity with the homeland. It is also important to remember that there are diasporic subjects who experience multiple displacements that "were required or compelled by the structures of colonial expansion" (Davis 70) or, as in the case of Yahp and Pung, multiple displacements caused by decolonisation and post-colonial nation building in Southeast Asia. For the multiply displaced, the location of the homeland can be elusive and the concept of the homeland a slippery one.

In theorising how diaspora has transformed fixed notions of "home" and "belonging," Brah also observes that "processes [and experiences] of inclusion and exclusion" (192) shape the diasporic subject's feelings of being at home. For those living in diaspora, challenges to making a place home and saying one "belongs there" can come from discourses (e.g., racism), official policies, or social practices designed to exclude rather than include them from belonging; "[i]t is quite possible to feel at home in a place," Brah states, "and, yet, the

experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home . . . ” (193). In Yahp’s case, as a Eurasian-Chinese in Malaysia and as an Asian in Australia, both homes could exclude her by labelling her an “immigrant.” Exclusions can also be practised within the family and the diasporic community, as Alice Pung’s story shows. As a second-generation Asian Australian born to a Cambodian Chinese family, she constantly had to struggle with fitting in both as an Australian and as a Chinese, and was often found wanting in the latter by family and community. Instead of “home” being in a single, fixed location, Brah proposes that it could be multiply located, transcending boundaries (geographical, cultural and psychic); it is nonetheless possible for diasporic subjects to feel at home, to be rooted in this context (197).

In her study of food in South Asian diasporic culture, Anita Mannur uses the concept of “culinary citizenship” to refer to “that which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain identitarian positions via their relationship to food” (29). Culinary citizenship—itsself manifested in multifarious forms and inflected by gender, class and sexuality—can be a useful concept to make sense of “how reinterpretations of official and traditional models of national definition are scripted in a culinary idiom” (29). Diasporic subjects’ formation of a sense of being at home or not at home in the nation do find expression in their relationship to food, something with such strong links to notions of “home,” the homeland, memory and nostalgia. Mannur’s critique of how food in diasporic culture can be both a means of preserving “authenticity” (48) and challenging it will also be relevant to this reading of *Eat First, Talk Later* and *Unpolished Gem*.

#### **IV. Finding “Home” in *Eat First, Talk Later***

The title of Beth Yahp’s recently published memoir, *Eat First, Talk Later*, subtitled “A Memoir of Food, Family and Home,” can entice readers looking for a stereotypical Asian story replete with mouth-watering descriptions of exotic ethnic food into picking it up. This is what Tamara Wagner observes in the case of fiction by diasporic Asian writers, which she claims is “specifically vulnerable to, while it also particularly profits from, the growing marketability of any kind of multiplicity” (33); additionally, “food metaphors help to promote the marketability of the multicultural” (32), risking becoming self-Orientalising texts in the process. However, *Eat First, Talk Later* resists the “exotic Asian



writing” label because it strategically deploys food to reveal how personal, familial and national histories intertwine, as well as Yahp’s “political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’” (Brah 192).

*Eat First, Talk Later* follows Yahp on a journey home to Malaysia with her parents to locate the island where they spent their honeymoon decades ago. The narrative of the quest to find this island is interspersed with stories of other journeys in her family’s history, and her own travels, sojourns and personal relationships in Kuala Lumpur, Sydney, and Paris. Yahp’s quest also took place during a momentous period in Malaysian history in the late 2000s, when mass public demonstrations, political scandals and a general election was taking place in 2008. Her memoir thus also charts the history of the country alongside her personal and family histories.

Home for Yahp is multiply located: Kuala Lumpur, Sydney and Paris, all locations where she experiences the “processes of inclusion and exclusion” inherent in the concept of “home” (Brah 192). The homeland is Malaysia, a country that “[she has] never professed to love, and has never loved [her]” (Yahp 34). Sydney, her second home, can accept but also reject her, as when she experienced racism in the wake of Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech at Parliament in 1996 (149).<sup>1</sup> Yahp expresses her “homing desire” (Brah 16) through a belief in the potentially restorative ability of cooking and eating rituals to resurrect the idea and feeling of “home.” Childhood and adolescent memories of preparing meals and eating them together as a family are believed to have the power to bring back this “home”:

I want to be able to conjure up the best parts of our life as a family through re-creating our long-gone kitchen table (which once doubled as a stagecoach drawn by two invisible horses), covered

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<sup>1</sup> In that speech, Hanson said, *inter alia*:

Immigration and multiculturalism are issues that this government is trying to address, but for far too long ordinary Australians have been kept out of any debate by the major parties. I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. Between 1984 and 1995, 40 per cent of all migrants coming into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate. Of course, I will be called racist but, if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country. A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united. The world is full of failed and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa and, closer to home, Papua New Guinea. America and Great Britain are currently paying the price. (“Pauline Hanson’s 1996 Maiden Speech to Parliament: Full Transcript”)

with prepared ingredients about to be transformed into stomach-warming dishes that magically bring “our culture” back to use, and with it, our “home” . . . (Yahp 139)

However, as previously mentioned, this “home” is indifferent to Yahp, and vice versa. This can be traced back to the socio-political changes that Malaysia underwent in the second half of the twentieth century, changes aimed to address unresolved issues in language, education and economic opportunity between Malay and non-Malay communities since the end of British colonial rule. Yahp grew up in Malaysia in the 1960s and 1970s, and experienced being marginalised by national policies on language and education. Soon after the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the country struggled with managing ethnic tensions, due to competing political interests divided along ethnic lines. These tensions manifested themselves most prominently in the issue of Malaysia’s official language (Malay versus English) as well as the position of Chinese-language education (Andaya and Andaya 295-98). The riots of May 13, 1969, immediately after a contentious general election that saw the ruling Alliance coalition lose its two-thirds majority in parliament, marked the culmination of the simmering ethnic tension in Malaysia. In the aftermath, the emergency government imposed Malay as a medium of instruction in schools, thereby ending the ambivalent attitude towards the English language that the Alliance government had previously practised (305). The non-Malays were particularly affected by this policy, as many attended English-medium schools, including Yahp and her siblings. Because of the ethnic violence unleashed in 1969, Yahp’s parents and family friends no longer felt at home in Malaysia; they talked about giving up their established lives in Malaysia and migrating to other countries to avoid such violence in future (Yahp 72).

From the 1980s onwards, the Yahp family establish new homes away from Peninsular Malaysia, in Tawau, Singapore, Sydney, Honolulu, Seattle, Dallas, London and Paris (Yahp 136). However, they maintain their links with Malaysia because they still carry with them their memories of food, cooking and family as cultural and even physical baggage. Mara’s trusted *kuali* (wok) travels with her along her migratory route (4-5), while Yahp herself ships her paternal grandmother’s “hundred-year old marble table, where Peter [her father] ate all of his childhood meals” (32) to Sydney, Paris, and back to Kuala Lumpur. Building on Benedict Anderson’s observation in *Imagined Communities* on the

relationship between family history and the history of the nation, Rocio Davis says:

Family memoirs epitomize this connective process [of reorienting identity in a diasporic world] as they privilege the stories, rituals, and traditions taken from the former home to the new in order to forge a connection between the past and future. The baggage (stories, documents, rituals) of the *routes* are harnessed to provide *roots*. (22)

In her current home in Honolulu, Mara prepares a multi-ethnic dinner consisting of Chinese, Malay, and Thai dishes for her daughter, who has come home for a visit:

It's laid out in the kitchen alcove: steamed rice in the rice cooker, pak choy sautéed with sliced Hakka fishballs, pork bone and lotus root soup, chicken winglets deepfried crispy, with lemon sauce and slivers of browned onion rings. Tender beef rendang stewed for hours in its succulent coconut sauce. Mara has made other favourites too, before I arrived: yellow cucumber *achar*, with small crisp onions and whole green chillies, speckled with mustard seeds; saltfish *sambal*, swimming in fiery red-brown sauce. (Yahp 322)

Besides being a link to the physical homeland, this baggage and multi-ethnic dishes can be said to evoke memories of Yahp's "imaginary homeland" (Rushdie 10), the Malaysia of her childhood and adolescence, before racial politics reared its head and when the family was together in one place (Yahp 136). The Yahps' dinner spread in Honolulu is an example of a "home palate" that maintains links to the homeland by transnational subjects "through taste memories of a diverse, 'mixed' cuisine, associated with place identities of childhoods or more recent pasts" (Duruz and Khoo 5). The dishes also represent the mixed heritage of the Yahp family, embracing its Chinese (Hakka), Thai and European roots, as well as incorporating Malay (the *rendang* and *sambal*) and Indian influences (the *achar*). This hybrid cuisine carries great significance in light of Yahp's charting of contemporary Malaysian politics and society in

her memoir, for it represents a multicultural nation as opposed to the vision of a mono-cultural Malaysia promoted by right-wing Malay politicians in UMNO and Perkasa<sup>2</sup> in recent times (Andaya and Andaya 367).

The diversity and hybridity that shape human identity in diasporic and/or transnational lived experience enables creative re-imaginings of what it means to “belong,” particularly in the face of racist, nationalist and even diasporic discourses that privilege notions of origin, return and authenticity. The lived experience of diaspora and transnationalism exposes the tenuousness of the notion that cultural identity should be based on origins and “some essentialized past” (Hall 394) or a fixed, physical concept of “home” as a place (402). As Avtar Brah states, “[t]he *concept* of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*” (192-93). As a diasporic text, *Eat First, Talk Later* performs the task of interrogating and challenging discourses of origins, authenticity and purity, using food and family history to reveal the hybridity and inauthenticity underlying the official narrative of the nation. This is most telling in the story of her mother Mara’s origins.

In her memoir, Beth Yahp narrates her mother’s hazy origins; born to a Eurasian father and Thai mother with too many children, Mara is adopted by Yahp’s Siamese grandmother, Kitty (41). The adoption was done unofficially, and any official record of Mara’s birth date and real name got lost during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (41). This complicates Yahp’s search for her mother’s origins. In the context of discourses of identity that privilege authenticity, this blurry history makes Mara (and by extension her children) “inauthentic” citizens without a strong claim to belong to the post-colonial nation of Malaya (later, Malaysia). However, tracing the history of her paternal family back to China and the evolution of the Hakka cuisine that they brought to Malaya, Yahp finds the perfect food metaphor to debunk the divisive and exclusivist narrative of belonging propagated by nationalist discourse. Rather than deploying the commonly used *rojak*<sup>3</sup> metaphor to depict Malaysia’s multiculturalism (Duruz and Khoo 3), Yahp takes the *yong tau foo*, a Hakka dish consisting of

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<sup>2</sup> Perkasa is the acronym for Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia, an NGO that was established in 2008 to protect Malay rights.

<sup>3</sup> A popular street food in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, *rojak* comes in many versions. In Malaysia, some consist of pieces of cut fruit and vegetables (*rojak buah*) while others may contain cut-up potato or prawn fritters, egg, tofu and vegetables mixed with a spicy-sweet sauce.

a bit of this, a bit of whatever was around: bite-sized slices of bitter gourd and eggplant, ladies fingers and long red chillies, tofu squares and skin, all stuffed with succulent fish paste . . . combined and bound together in a clear, fragrant soup. (Yahp 21-22)

For Yahp, this dish from her father's people, who were themselves forced to move and migrate within and outside of China over two thousand years, embodies the hybridity and inauthenticity of Malaysian identity. The tendency of post-colonial nations such as Malaysia and Singapore to ascribe cuisines that are essentially already hybrid in nature to specific racial groups ignores the "promiscuous and voracious manner" in which these cuisines borrow from each other (Chua and Rajah 164). After having evolved within a century to accommodate various local tastes and religious dietary requirements (Yahp explains that instead of the original mix of fish, pork and salted fish paste, the *yong tau foo* today uses only fish paste so Muslims can consume it), it is enjoyed by all Malaysians, regardless of "race." The *yong tau foo* also represents several local terms that refer to inauthenticity: "*Celup, chapalang, chap chong*. Dipped or dyed, drifter, mixed. Inauthentic, unfaithful to its origins" (Yahp 22). These terms could be used to refer to Malaysians like Yahp, who are designated *pendatang* (immigrants) and inferior to the country's "original" inhabitants, the *bumiputera* ("sons of the soil") by ethno-nationalists.

The evolution of the *yong tau foo* can also be read as an instance of "culinary transmogrification" (Mannur 38), when food defies one's expectations or assumptions, whether literally or figuratively. Some culinary transmogrifications in South Asian diasporic memoirs can disrupt discourses of patriarchal nationalism by inserting alternative, gendered histories (38). The scene also encapsulates what Jean Duruz says about the role of "food and its travels . . . as an imaginary of exchange within and between cultures, as a challenge (however partial, imperfect) to the rigidity of boundaries and the fixity of identities" (48). Ultimately, a hybrid dish such as the *yong tau foo* can be delicious, as Yahp's best friend Lily declares (Yahp 22). This comment hints at the possibility of Malaysia becoming a homely place where one's "inauthentic" origins will not be considered a threat or an aberration.

The preceding examination of the use of food in *Eat First, Talk Later* as metaphor for hybridity in a country that saw the rise of racist rhetoric and gestures in the past decade, such as the then-UMNO Youth Chief Hishamuddin

Hussein's ritual of waving the *keris* to assert Malay supremacy at the party's General Assembly from 2005 to 2008 (Liew), is a reminder that present-day Malaysia was still "an unhomey present" (Duruz and Khoo 8) when Yahp returned to Kuala Lumpur in that period. Besides the increase in racist rhetoric that normally occurs in the run-up to Malaysia's general elections, Duruz and Khoo also ascribe Malaysia's sense of unhomeliness to "the onset of rapid industrialization, urbanization, Islamization, and ethnic politics, neoliberal economic development, and privatization" (11). The country's appetite for development has resulted in a "visible urban Malay underclass whose marginalized youth became the subject of moral panics" (Duruz and Khoo 12), such as the *mat rempit*<sup>4</sup> who haunt Peter and Mara's imagination during their visit to Kuala Lumpur (Yahp 6). Added to these are rampant corruption and laws restricting the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. This unhomey present is manifested in the way that in public eating places such as food courts, restaurants and coffee shops, Malaysians tend to eat separately, according to their ethnicity, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s (Duruz and Khoo 8-9).

Against this, however, change is in the air, with opposition parties' successes in the 2008 general elections and mass public demonstrations calling for free and fair elections (the "Bersih"<sup>5</sup> rallies) challenging the status quo. In *Eat First, Talk Later*, spaces such as the *mamak* restaurant and the *kopitiam*, local food outlets run by Tamil Muslims and Chinese Malaysians respectively, are homey spaces carved out of the unhomey present because they can be democratic spaces where Malaysia's ethnic diversity and different political opinions are embraced and allowed to mingle.

*Mamak* restaurants and *kopitiams* are the unofficial meeting-rooms for Yahp's activist friends, Jing and Lily, both members of an opposition political party, to discuss current affairs, plan strategies and organise political activities. Their meetings are usually held late at night and into the early morning hours at the *mamak*, over "*teh tarik* or *kuey teow kampung*" (Yahp 8). *Mamak* stalls and *kopitiams* are the nation's "rumour mills" (128), where Malaysians can listen to, talk, and speculate about national issues that the mainstream media does not or are not allowed to cover. This attests to the characteristic of

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<sup>4</sup> *Mat rempit* in the local slang refers to working-class Malay youth who race each other on roads and highways, often performing dangerous stunts on their motorbikes.

<sup>5</sup> "Bersih" (from the Malay word meaning "clean") is the acronym for a coalition of NGOs demanding free and fair elections in Malaysia. They organized demonstrations in Malaysia and abroad in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2016.

*kopitiam*s and *mamak* stalls/restaurants as “cosmopolitan space allowing for civil discourse and political conversation” (Khoo, “Kopitiam: In Search of Cosmopolitan Spaces” 41), and as spaces for “transethnic solidarity or cosmopolitanism, meaning a simultaneous recognition of and an appreciation and respect rather than intolerance for difference” (Khoo, “‘Mamak, Anyone?’: Tamil Muslim Eateries in Malaysia” 90). Both have a significant place in Yahp’s journey to find “home” by being democratic spaces where reconstructions of an inclusive Malaysia can be mapped.

To conclude, Beth Yahp’s *Eat First, Talk Later* is a text that deploys food to articulate how notions of “home” and belonging should be constantly put to question. It affirms Avtar Brah’s theorisation of the “*multi-placedness of ‘home’ in the imaginary of people in the diaspora*” (197) by revealing the complex and hybrid histories of food and family spread over a network spanning China, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, and the USA. The innate hybridity of food in *Eat First, Talk Later* challenges discourses of the nation/“home” that privilege notions of origin and authenticity and demonstrates the ways that contemporary Malaysian food cultures creates a sense of “togetherness not as an uncomplicated path to the unfolding of a national identity but as a continuous renewal of multicultural relations in pursuit of adventurous appetites” (Lee 151). Meanwhile, cosmopolitan spaces such as the *mamak* and the *kopitiam* enable food to be consumed and shared by ordinary people across various ethnic communities despite the rhetoric discouraging diversity and inter-ethnic relations.

On many levels, *Eat First, Talk Later* engages in one of the motivations for the ethnic family memoir, i.e., “a recognition of the power of personal narratives inserted in the public forum to engage historical and cultural issues, in order to challenge dominant mainstream versions that have often hidden, misrepresented, or invalidated these stories” (Davis 13). Alienated by her status as an “Other” in Malaysia and Australia, Yahp uses the memoir form to deconstruct essentialist notions of “home” and nation. Perhaps, in place of a physical homeland to return or belong to, “home” is located in the amalgam of memories, experiences, feelings and sensory perceptions (taste, smell, touch, sight) of food as well as the creative strategies of reconstituting various ingredients and cooking methods to present new ways of belonging in a transnational world.

## V. Alice in Wonder Land: An Asian Australian's Anxiety about "Home"

In this section, we look at Alice Pung's debut memoir, *Unpolished Gem: My Mother, My Grandmother and Me* (2006), in which she recounts her experience growing up as a Chinese-Cambodian Australian in the 1980s and 1990s. Beginning with her birth in a Melbourne suburb to parents who fled violence in Cambodia, Pung's memoir narrates how she negotiates with family and community expectations concerning identity. These expectations and the contradictory pull between the diasporic subject's "desire to assimilate" and "an incapability or refusal to adapt and adjust" (Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese* 28), result in Pung's depression during her teenage years. Central to her memoir are her relationships with her maternal grandmother, who also came to Australia from Cambodia, and her mother, who makes gold jewelry and supplies it to the many Chinese Australian-owned jewelry stores in Footscray, Melbourne.

For the Pung family, "home" is located in three places: China, "the Motherland" of the matriarch, Huyen Thai, who was exiled from it as a young woman; Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where she ended up and started a family; and Australia, where they fled (via Thailand) during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the 1970s. Alice is the first of them to be born on Australian soil. "Home" is not a given for her but is something (or somewhere) that she arrives at only after having to deal with Australia's ambivalence towards her, as she battles with family and community expectations to be a "good Chinese girl" and copes with depression. In *Unpolished Gem*, her humorous but sobering memoir spanning her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, Pung's anxieties about "home," authenticity and belonging are articulated through rituals of eating, how meanings of food change from one generation of Asian Australians to another, and its role in the cultural battleground between "Asian" and "Western" traditions.

Pung starts off her memoir by taking head-on the stereotype of Asian Australians as having arrived on boats with the matter-of-fact statement "[t]his story does not begin on a boat" (1). The "boat" is a recurring motif in the perception of Australian immigrant narrative and is often used to foreshadow diasporic and migrant trauma and the implications surrounding their displacement. Yet, while the image of the boat in this context is rigid and limited, it can also be used to subvert this popular stereotype. Wenche



Ommundsen reads Pung's inversion of the boat motif as a challenge to the assumption that all Asian Australian writing will be about their victimization, suffering and trauma ("This Story" 504). In the context of this paper's focus on transnational Asian Australian writers' notion of "home," we read Pung's opening sentence as a deliberate strategy to emphasise her place *in* Australia rather than outside it. To be specific, *Unpolished Gem* begins in a market in the suburb of Footscray, Melbourne, where her father is buying pig's trotters to make into a broth for her mother, who is in hospital waiting to give birth to Pung (Pung 3). The comical scene of her father braving the smelly, noisy and crowded market in order to obtain the prized trotters for the arrival of his firstborn child sets up the ensuing narrative, in which food and foodways chart Pung's journey to find a sense of "home" in Australia.

To the newly-arrived immigrants like Pung's parents and her grandmother, one can never go hungry in Australia, unlike in Cambodia. The abundance of food in the Pungs' new homeland makes it seem a "Wonder Land" (Pung 16) to them, as well as a land of safety and democracy. Their appreciation of Australia's homeliness is further expressed in the grandmother's conviction that her granddaughter will have a good life in the new homeland, comparing Australia's abundance with Cambodia's lack of food (16). Besides abundance, Australia is couched in a metaphor of sweetness: "there is sweetness" (9), literally, in the endless supply of sugar, jam and honey at breakfast that the Cambodian refugees encounter as they take their first hesitant steps in their new homeland. Their marvel at this "Wonder Land" continues as Pung's mother discovers the well-stocked shelves at the local supermarket; so bountiful is Australia that, in a humorous episode, even dog food is fit for human consumption (12)!

Thus, the Pungs' eating ritual becomes a means of paying homage to a benign Australia, presided over by Huyen Thai, the family's formidable matriarch, with the infant Pung sitting on her right. The Confucian principle of filial piety is expressed at mealtimes not just towards the elders of the family, but this time also towards a new "elder." "Father Government [who] looked after us when Motherland China didn't want us, and took us in when that angry adolescent orphan Cambodia decided to abandon us to Brother Number One [Pol Pot]" is thanked at dinnertime (Pung 26). This scene shows how the first-generation immigrants seem to have no problems shifting their allegiance to

their new home. However, to a second-generation Asian Australian, making Australia “home” is a much more fraught process.

For a start, “the Motherland”—China—hovers in the background like a ghost that refuses to go away. It remains the source of the family’s cultural reference, as shown in Huyen Thai’s insistence on demonstrations of filial piety at the dinner table: “no one starts eating until she [Huyen Thai] picks up her chopsticks,” Pung recalls (25). As a young mother in Cambodia, Huyen Thai had raised her sons to develop the same piety for China, dreaming of sending them back “to become Chinese” because “[t]his barbarian land [Cambodia] is crazy” (Pung 44). Later, the teenaged Pung is expected to conform to ideals of Chinese womanhood, despite her Australian upbringing and outlook on life. Alice is forced to alternate between two vastly different ideals. While she is expected to be a good Chinese girl, at the same time, she is also encouraged to learn English and be as Australian as possible so that she could quickly thank Australia for showing kindness to her family. “Agheare,” says Pung’s grandmother, “when you are old enough and speak the English good enough, you have to write them a letter . . . . In the letter I want you to write how much old people appreciate the money” (Pung 25).

On the other side of the coin is Cambodia, her parents’ homeland, which Pung associates with deprivation, starvation and the suffering of the Khmer Rouge years. Memories of food in Phnom Penh that her grandmother and parents evoke in Australia are of “eating brains in broth made by street vendors stationed across the road from the homeless leper coughing out half a lung in the doorway of some derelict shopfront” (Pung 2) and of her maternal grandmother in Vietnam selling *bancao* at the market to make a living while waiting for her refugee application to be processed (11). Cambodia also harbours ghosts—Huyen Thai had two daughters who died as infants—further making it an unhomey place.

The expectation in Australia for immigrants to assimilate is met with gusto by the newly-arrived, who make sure there are no markers of their Asian identity and culture on the facades of their homes. In most cases, marked difference can be seen as undesirable for those wishing to assimilate within the host culture. There are “[n]o hexagonal I Ching mirror on the front door, no words of warning, no clipped hedge and double happiness signs anywhere . . . . No neat little cumquat trees at the front for luck” (Pung 20) at Pung’s childhood home. David Ley suggests that through their large homes, immigrants “wish to

project a successful, forward-looking, modern identity” (192). Although the family feels the need to assimilate, they are also conscious of their Chinese ancestry and heritage. When interviewed by Jane Sullivan in 2011 for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Pung mentions that her father had raised her and her siblings “to be Australian” so that they would not be perceived as refugees, but at the same time they were also taught to take pride in their Chinese heritage. This illustrates how important it was to maintain a social identity that was acceptable to Australian middle-class suburban communities and shed anything that would point to her family’s history as refugees. Yet, she finds, there are barriers to assimilation too, like when she is left out of her Australian History class parade (theme: colonial era) because she was dressed “wrongly” (Pung 54). Unlike the other children, all she had to wear to school were the little Mao suits her grandmother made for her. This feeling of being different can be a source of anxiety for children of immigrants.

Despite the anonymity afforded by this sense of external sameness projected by their house’s exterior, the interior of the newly-arrived immigrants’ home reveals their continuing ties with the old country. This cultural continuity often takes the form of a colourful and affordable decor composed of Indochinese knick-knacks, as well as the food items in their kitchens. Staple food such as “endless cups of coffee and sweetened condensed milk and multitudes of Marmee instant noodle packets” (Pung 22) were part of the effort to turn Australia into “home” by bringing over dietary habits from the old country. While these are comfort food for the first generation, ironically, they become Pung’s means to cope with the stress of having to meet expectations of becoming a domesticated young Chinese woman and excelling at her studies:

Instant coffee was my panacea in these years. I put International Roast powder into everything, even our milder forms of Chinese herbal medicine like Lou Han Guo and Chrysanthemum Tea. I would drink cupful after cupful mixed with sweetened condensed milk. It gave me the shakes, but I didn’t care. Sometimes the milk would run out, and I would have to improvise by using coconut milk. Sometimes we would not have any sugar left, and I would use jam. I would also throw in a few spoonfuls of Milo. (95)

The food metaphors of Australia's sweetness and abundance that her parents' generation had used fail to describe Pung's own experience of the land of her birth, captured so well in this scene. Neither the roles of "good Chinese girl" (148) nor "the Asian High-Achiever" (177) bring about a sense of "home" and "belonging"; Pung's lonely adolescence and subsequent depression speak of how "[i]t is quite possible to feel at home in a place, and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may prohibit public proclamations of the place as home" (Brah 193).

Pung's mother and grandmother as well as the older women in the Cambodian-Chinese diaspora in Australia act as guardians of Chinese womanhood in their adopted homeland, and problems occur when their daughters do not always conform to their mothers' standards. One of the ways that a good Chinese girl should show her prowess is, of course, by cooking authentic Chinese cuisine in preparation for marrying good Chinese boys. Pung's struggle to find a sense of "home" is partly played out as the cultural battle between Chinese food (standing in for "Asia") and Australian food (representing "the West") when her mother realises that her daughter is not as "Chinese" as she would like her to be. In her mother's eyes, Pung's lack of Chineseness is already evident in her limited ability to speak Chinese, which causes a rift between them, as her mother believes that she is drifting away from her cultural heritage. The anxieties experienced by both mother and daughter exemplify how the intricacies of negotiating between cultures can affect relationships in a family. Fearing that her daughter will marry a white man—a "ghost husband" (Pung 150)—Ma imagines a bleak future where she will be stuck with white people, eating "their food, their cheeses and other vomity things" (149). When Pung fails to fry some taro cakes properly, her mother takes it as proof that she has failed to be a proper Chinese girl and has gone over to *the other side*.

Thus, in her attempts to feel at "home" in Australia, Pung is excluded not just from white Australian culture, but also from her parents' Chinese culture. Similarly, Ien Ang explains how Chineseness is constructed and engaged in the context of diaspora in her book, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (2001). Pung's inability to speak the Teochew dialect and cook Chinese food epitomize what Ang argues as the indeterminacy of Chineseness to signify identity. If "home" is about belonging by way of one's origins, the dilemma for some second-generation Asian Australians is how to stake a claim

to any origin if they are deemed inauthentic by their homelands (both Australia and the old country of their parents).

Like Yahp's memoir, the dynamics of the diasporic and/or transnational subject's inclusion and exclusion from "home" are also played out in *Unpolished Gem* over the notion of food's ability to indicate authenticity and belonging. Satirizing white Australians' quest for "authentic Chinese cuisine," Pung recalls the "fluorescent yellow lemon chicken and sludge-black beef in black-bean sauce" served to white customers who then "lauded our fine Chinese cuisine. Anything nuanced, like brown braised chicken's feet (we were never wasteful) was also cultural but in an idiosyncratic 'only the Chinese eat that' sort of way" (Pung 226-27). This shows how she is aware that there is only so much of Chineseness in Australia that white Australians are willing to accept as "authentic," and the limits between "us" (white Australians) and "them" (the Australian Chinese) remain. The customers' preference for this version of Chinese cuisine also indicate the way that "Asia" and Asian identity is generated by the West through homogenizing Asia's sheer culinary variety into a generic, uniform category (Ang, "Between Asia" 151-52).

## VI. Conclusion

This paper has examined the roles of food, its preparation and consumption, and the places where food is consumed, in the memoirs of two Asian Australian writers searching for "home." It is clear that food occupies an important place in Yahp and Pung's efforts to remember, (re)construct and define what "home" is. Reading their memoirs reinforces our observation that the global mobility of people around the world, whether as refugees, exiles, sojourners, or guest workers has resulted in creative transmutations of traditional notions of "home," origins, and authenticity. The use of food in Yahp and Pung's memoirs channel how diasporic and/or transnational subjects construct "home" on the memories, tastes and culinary practices and rituals of former homelands and of new ones. "Home" is not always in a fixed location but can be multi-located, existing in the realm of the imaginary rather than geography. Food could conjure a sense of "home" and "belonging" beyond geographical boundaries and challenge the Othering of the writers in Australia or Malaysia by uncovering the hybridity and commingling inherent in food and cultures. However, there are limitations to the extent that food can evoke "home"

for diasporic subjects, as it can also articulate the discomfort, alienation and Othering that they encounter as they attempt to establish a sense of belonging to a particular place. These are the exclusions that deny a full or complete sense of “home” in the transnational imaginary.

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