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Writing a way home

ABSTRACT

This article discusses my (impossible) attempt to find a way home by writing a play — *Home*. *Home* is constructed by weaving together fragments from my grandmother's memoirs and my own writing (Thorp 1945, 2016). My grandmother, born and brought up in Myanmar, had never visited Britain until her family moved 'home' when she was sixteen, while I moved to Singapore in my thirties. As a child, my grandmother could not return home to Myanmar, while the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I was unable to leave Singapore. By comparing our experiences of being at home, and of not being able to go home, I aim tell a wider story about identity and belonging in migrant experiences that reach beyond our own intimate recollections. In *Home*, the page becomes a playground where I explore notions of home, identity, belonging, non-belonging, and the trickster nature of memory. This autoethnographic investigation combines my experience of writing *Home* with theoretical and methodological reflections on it. Through this process, the concept of home reveals itself as embodied, liminal, shifting, and trou-

bles notions of identity and belonging for both my grandmother and me. Extending Sara Ahmed's notion of home as skin (1999), I suggest that not only can home permeate the skin, but that there is a connection between home and sickness. In attempting to understand my grandmother's experience of home in her cultural and ethnographic context, I expose my own post-colonial discomfort about her claim that Myanmar was her home. These feelings affect how I select and reuse text from her memoirs, so that I reveal myself to be an unreliable narrator, biographer, and even an unreliable playwright. Ultimately, playwriting becomes a method that allows identity and belonging for my grandmother and I to exist in a third space (Bhabha 1994), both on the page and embodied in a character that is both of us and neither of us.

Keywords: *Home, playtext, belonging, non-belonging, identity, memory, sickness.*

I'm at a party.

I'm at a party and I don't know anyone except someone who knows someone who knows someone who I just met, who invited me.

People are draped over the backs of sofas, beer bottles in hand. I'm woozy with the strange, fruity cocktail someone pushed into my hand. The bass shivers through me.

> *Everything is grey. The buildings, the sky, the people. My bones ache with the cold. I am so brittle that with each step, every bump, I may crack into shards.*

Heat.
It hits me as I walk out of the hotel.
I am swimming through treacle, my body
shiny with sweat. The air, thick.

TRYING TO GO HOME

My grandmother, born and brought up in Myanmar, had never visited Britain until her family moved 'home' when she was sixteen.[1] Years later, in one of two books she wrote about her childhood in the Shan states she describes the experience, observing 'Now it was time for us to migrate, to leave home for an unknown, distant place called "home"' (Thorp 2016, 154).[2] Her discombobulation and sense of foreignness on her arrival in Bristol in 1921 is clear in her writing. She observes that 'I looked at the people plodding drably past, hunched against the cold; and I realised that already I was

longing for the brilliance of sunlight and could not recall the smell of heat' (Thorp 2016, 157). She never returned 'home'. By contrast, when I moved to Singapore from the UK in 2011, I was overwhelmed by the heat and humidity. My continual sweaty discomfort was an embodied reminder of how I did not belong. I missed the UK, but also a sense of familiarity and belonging and I have explored this experience in a playtext — *Home.*[3]

As a writer and theatre-maker, I meet my grandmother (who died the year I was born) on the page through our exploration of home, memory, belonging, and non-belonging in our writing. In this paper, I discuss my process writing a play that combines my writing with excerpts from my grandmother Ellen Thorp's books — *Quiet Skies on Salween* (1945) and *Candlelight in Burma* (2016), which describe her childhood in Myanmar. My grandmother's books offer a unique insight into a colonial childhood in the Shan states in the early 1900s that merits investigation. In *Home*, I take fragments from *Quiet Skies* and *Candlelight* and combine them with my own experiences as a British woman living in Singapore for over a decade to offer two singular, generational perspectives that contrast our migrant experiences.

Like Sara Ahmed who interweaves texts from a post-colonial, feminist perspective to explore notions of home (1999, 2000), I combine our narratives together to consider 'the relationship between migration and identity' across generations (Ahmed 1999, 329). Ahmed observes that migration is both embodied and 'also a matter of generational acts of story-telling about prior histories of movement and dislocation' (1999, 342). To tell our stories of 'movement and dislocation', I take an interdisciplinary approach that com-

bines creative writing, autobiography, and autoethnography with post-colonial theory, so that the process of writing a play becomes both the subject and method of exploration. Autoethnography offers a methodological basis to examine what my grandmother's and my own lived experiences reveal about identity and belonging in migrant life from our differing cultural viewpoints. To these insights, I apply the ideas of humanist and cultural geographers, and post-colonial theorists who discuss migrant identity. I also look to memoirists and theatre scholars to show how autobiography and theatre are apt vehicles to explore identity and belonging.

From this perspective, I aim to explore notions of home and belonging by comparing my experiences and grandmother's experiences of belonging and non-belonging. I examine what the genre and process of writing a play reveal about 'playing' the role of a foreigner. I question how memory works, how it fails us, and how a reader/theatre-maker/audience can then understand those fallible memories in an autobiographical playtext. I ask what remembering home reveals about identity, how we (re)construct ourselves when we are away from home, and how we are (re)constructed by others? Plays usually explore character identity and therefore offer an ideal approach to thinking about how our experience of home shapes us, and how this is complicated if home is a layered concept. Finally, I explore what happens to a body that wants to go home but cannot and consider whether there is a relationship between sickness and home.

Ahmed believes that identities are created 'through collective acts of remembering' by migrant communities (1999, 329). By reading, staging, and performing plays memories become collective experiences. Nira Yuval-Davis agrees that

identity narratives can be collective, relate to what being part of a particular grouping may mean, and that they 'can shift and change, be contested and multiple'. Yuval-Davis explains that 'Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)' (2016, 202). In *Home*, the page becomes a textual playground — a place to play with and explore different identity narratives and textual formats. I lay my memories and my grandmother's memories of childhood and home side by side in columns and interlace them in narrative braids so that they converse with each other, and our experience is compared, extended, and reexperienced by the reader/performer/audience.

A narrative braid is a method of writing that weaves 'more than one story thread back and forth, under and over to establish a braided form' (Write Now, n.d.). As in *Home,* narrative braids 'may have more than one storyline or piece of content or theme, and/or they may also employ more than one voice or style or discourse'. Therefore, they are an ideal way to combine 'the personal with the political', explore 'multiplicity of voice or polyphonic storytelling', to develop 'layered storytelling that carries more than one time and place', and to hold 'open questions rather than resolving them' as I do in *Home.* (Write Now, n.d.). Teacher of creative writing, Jennifer Sinor explains that the braided essay asks writers to 'navigate both chronology and white space, making decisions about when to allow readers to work harder and when to lead them by the hand'. This means that by 'Resting halfway between the linear and the lyric, the braided essay challenges both writers and readers by multiplying pathways into a subject and allowing meaning to accrue across white space' (2014, 189). Laying my memories and my grandmother's memories side

by side highlights how they are different and how they are similar and allows meaning to form in the white space between them. This allows themes to emerge that tell a wider story about identity and belonging in migrant experiences that reach beyond our own intimate recollections.

Using narrative braids also fits well with the contemporary form of playwriting I adopt, which, as discussed, I perceive as a textual playground. In this playground, I play not only with dialogue, but also narration, monologue, poetic text, and remove character names and stage directions.[4] This allows the different character voices to merge and overlap and inspired me to create a character who is both a combination of my grandmother and me, and at the same time neither of us. A playtext in its construction asks for imaginative investment from the reader/performer/audience to fill in the gaps that the playwright has left. A play needs a reader or performer(s) to come to life. Therefore, as Catherine Love describes, a playtext is both finished and unfinished — 'complete and incomplete' (2023, 24). A play is both complete on the page, and at the same time only ever completed in performance. Similarly, Dan Rebellato explains that either on stage or on the page, both 'are equally full realisations of the play. The play on the page is full of gaps, ambiguities, potentialities that can and should be supplemented by the reader's imagination and theatre makers in performance'. He continues that a play is 'a robustly unstable, singularly plural, simultaneously complete and incomplete object' (2024, 26). In *Home*, I invite the reader/performer/audience to play the role of a foreigner. A complete and incomplete play is an ideal vehicle for exploring ambiguity in identity and belonging through the process of transformation from page to a read-

er's imagination, from imagination to an actor's body, and ultimately from stage to audience.

Reading my grandmother's writing about her home, I am confronted with an array of uncomfortable emotions that make me reflect on my own position as a theatre-maker and educator living and working in Southeast Asia. I am aware that we are both privileged migrants, not forced abroad by the circumstances that exile many. However, our embodied experiences of home, identity, and belonging offer insights into these concepts as liminal, ephemeral, and edged with the problematic legacies of British empire. My grandmother asserts that Myanmar was her home, but despite being born in Rangoon (now Yangon) she was a foreigner there. She was a product of her time, and I cannot apply my contemporary moral perspective to her views, but I am uncomfortable about some of the opinions she expresses. For example, she describes British colonial rule in India as 'bringing the Pax Brittanica to a country sorely in need of it' (Thorp 2016, 1). While the world has changed since my grandmother wrote about her childhood in Taunggyi, I worry that by reusing her words in *Home* I may inadvertently appear to support views I do not agree with. I am also concerned that she may be an unreliable narrator, particularly in her representation of the Burmese. The term 'unreliable narrator' proposed by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), describes a narrative voice that cannot be trusted as we usually do first person narration. It is a rhetorical device where narrators may be biased, impaired, self-deceptive, or not in possession of all the facts. William Riggan (1981) develops Booth's idea, outlining four categories of unreliable narrator: madman, clown, picaro (an antihero in a picaresque novel), and naive. My

grandmother's narrative of childhood could be seen as naive although she wrote it as an adult. However, if my she is an unreliable narrator, I must acknowledge that I am too, with own my biases, self-deceptions, and need to fill in the gaps where my memory fails me.

Autoethnography offers a methodology where rather than dismissing or avoiding my feelings of discomfort, as a researcher I am encouraged to examine these emotions. The value of doing so has been shown by scholars including Rosemary Martin (2019), Mike Broussine, Linda Watts, and Caroline Clarke (2014), Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2016), and poet and memoirist Ruth Behar in *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996). Behar observes that the 'exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to' (1996, 13). Bringing my unease into conversation with my questions about my identity and my grandmother's identity as Western foreigners in Southeast Asia leads me to ask to what extent we could ever have a right to call our adopted countries home?

Searching for answers, I begin with the houses we lived in as children — the sights, sounds, smells, and haptic memories tied to them. For me, this is my childhood home in London and for my grandmother, a bungalow in Taunggyi. I add my memories of visiting the bungalow she grew up in with my family in 2012 and compare our memories of it — both of us piecing it together from our recollections. When I started to layer my memories of home together with my grandmother's, I was unable to return to the UK. In 2021, Singapore had largely closed its borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Employment Pass (EP) holders were not guaranteed re-entry if we left. In Britain, my mother was

hospitalised with heart problems. My longing for home and inability to go there echoed my grandmother's, just as the bilateral pull between the UK and Southeast Asia links us.

Over Zoom calls with my mother sick at home in London, she started to tell me stories about my grandmother, filling in gaps to answer my questions about her mother who I never knew. Correspondingly, I found my mother entered *Home* as a character, inextricably linked as she is to my understanding of home, and to my grandmother. As discussed, in describing 'generational acts of story-telling' Ahmed too links storytelling to migration and shares her memory of being told about her 'family's migration to the newly created Pakistan in 1947' (1999, 342). My mother sharing stories about her mother, my reading and retelling of my grandmother's narrative and shaping her recollections into a play becomes a generational act of storytelling. These stories have emotional significance for me, but they speak more broadly of class and race privilege in migration (white people going abroad by choice), and how the effects of such border-crossings are felt across generations.

COMING HOME

The minivan drives into Taunggyi, a
scruffy, low-rise town with prematurely
aged houses that are wilting and peeling
paint.

The wheels creak on, and the slow miles drop behind. We turn off the road, and in a few minutes crawl up a gravelled drive and stop in front of a bungalow. We have reached Taunggyi; we are at home.

We go to the Methodist minister's house. He knows where the school is. Next door to the school is the bungalow my grandmother
grew up in, and where the current
headmistress now lives.

Behind her the Crag rises, a long shoulder of wooded mountain, from whose summit a view of thirty miles is unfolded like a map.

We are taken to the bungalow and the headmistress comes out, wet headed. She is embarrassed to be caught washing her hair.
Explanations patter back and forth,
until we are invited into the house.

Our house, long and low, fronted by a veranda, lay enflowered, graced with lawns, girdled with trees.

Inside it is dusky and cool. I wander around matching the descriptions I have read of the long low veranda, the rooms, trying to imagine my grandmother here.

Each room of the house constituted a little world of its own. Our bedroom with uncarpeted floor was bare of all furniture save a couple of chairs, a chest of drawers and three beds.

Someone is cooking on a low stove next to a washing line festooned with clothes. She looks at me and I feel awkward to have invaded her home while she is cooking lunch and hanging her washing out.

Our bedroom windows were low enough for our dogs to leap through, which they did with a scratch, a scrabble and a thump, waking me up with a jerk and sending me cowering under the sheets, wondering when I should hear the leopard snuffling round the mosquito net.

I try to map my steps onto my memories of my grandmother's words.

Our house, so friendly, so safe, a fortress. I could lie at night and listen unafraid to the thunder of the rain on the corrugated iron roof and watch the lightening leap across the white walls of the mosquito net.

I move through the house she ran through, drew on the walls of, studied her lessons, and was sick and well in; the home she missed and wanted to return to. It echoes with memories that are not mine, familiarity that is not mine.

Here my sisters and I passed our childhood, and Taunggyi far among the Shan hills will always be Home, as England, which knew not the child, can never be.

Ahmed offers three definitions of home: 'home is where one usually lives, home is where one's family lives or home is one's "native country"' but finds her own descriptions inadequate, because, as it was for my grandmother 'it is possible that one's native country might not be felt as a home' (1999, 340). Cultural geographers Blunt and Dowling observe that for some home is 'the physical structure of their house or dwelling' while 'others may refer to relationships or connections over time and space' (2006, 1). Conceptual explorations of space, place, and home and related understandings of identity and belonging have received much attention

in scholarship since humanist geographers turned to them in the 1970s. Their ideas chime with my experience and my grandmother's writing, as I find that home is a 'place' that, unlike 'space', has emotional value and is rich with 'history and meaning' (Tuan 1979, 387). For my grandmother and me home is, as Cresswell suggests, a 'way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world' (2014, 18). My experience of London and Singapore, and my grandmother's connection to Myanmar are best understood as 'attachments and connections between people and place' (Cresswell 2014, 18). In *Home*, I weave together memories of the physical structures of my childhood home and my grandmother's with 'connections over time and space' (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 1). I connect us through the physical space of home and the ephemeral space of memory.

In our writing, both my grandmother and I try to return to a place that we love but are unable to go to. My grandmother left Myanmar when her family returned to England and, as a child, she had no agency to return, while a pandemic meant that I could not return home. Ahmed pinpoints that there is both a spatial and temporal dislocation remembering a past home that you cannot return to. She explains that:

> the past becomes associated with a home that it is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present. The question then of being at home or leaving home is always a question of memory, of the discontinuity between past and present (1999, 343).

Memory is also deeply interwoven in Palestinian-American, post-colonial scholar Edward Said's insights into exile from

home. He explains 'If you're an exile [...] you always bear within yourself a recollection of what you've left behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience'. Said continues that from exile arrives uncertainty in identity: 'multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them' (1991, 26). For both my grandmother and I, fractured identities have emerged through our experience of belonging and non-belonging in Southeast Asia. I explore these identities in *Home* using a polyphony of character voices and real and imagined memories, so that our shared, fractured identity becomes a third character. This third character who I will refer to as 'we' is both my grandmother and me, and at the same time neither of us. She is lost at a party in a strange new city, where she does not belong.

I'm at a party in a disused office. The furniture is gone, apart from an occasional deserted desk. The fuzzy office carpet is still here — sticky now — and the office ceiling is divided up into office squares.

It's 1am, or 3am, or 6am, or 11am. The windows are covered with paper and cardboard, but eventually the light creeps in from cracks at the edges.

I wander around looking for somewhere to sit down, but there's nowhere to sit down. I'm tired and buzzing. Tired and buzzing. There are fairy lights strung up, looped on nails on the wall. I am tired, but high with the beat. All I can do is dance to stay awake.

I don't trust my wiggly mind

As I weave my grandmother's memories together with my own, I acknowledge that both of us are, unavoidably, unreliable narrators — our memories full of gaps and errors. I find that, like the memoirist Mary Karr, 'I don't trust my wiggly mind' (2016, 5). Autoethnography is research method that draws strongly on the researcher's personal experiences and memories to 'describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences' (Adams et al 2005, 1). Yet, as I go back through memories of my childhood home there are gaps. Where was that door? Was the carpet green, or was that in the next house? I must create to recreate. Karr knows that 'For all of memory's power to yank us back into an overwhelming past, it can also fail big time—both short-term […] and long-term' (2016, 5).

Knowing my own fallibility, how can I trust my grandmother's certainty? In remembering it is necessary to construct. Theatre scholar John Freeman who uses both practice research and autoethnography reassures me that 'We know that writing changes everything just as we know that the self both is and is not a fiction; that despite a writer's claim to authenticity there is never anything authentic in the words we read' (2007/2016, 41). Knowing that in trying to discover my grandmother through her writing I am attempting something impossible, I realise that I am trying to (re)create us both. Accepting Freeman's suggestion, my writing and grandmother's memories are both authentic and inauthentic. A qualitative researcher in the social sciences, Tessa Muncey also employs autoethnography. She reminds me that 'fragmentary recollections that are rich in detail are characterized

by disjunctions', but also counsels that 'although memory is selective and shaped, and is retold in the continuum of one's experience, this does not necessarily constitute lying' (2005, 70). I can be kinder in how I look at our (mis)memories — rather than lying, our truths and untruths are woven together to create a new non-lie/non-truth. In *Home*, I extend the selectivity of memory and mis-memory into the 'we' character who finds herself at a strange party in an unknown city — a liminal character in a limonoid space. Even as I patch my memories and my grandmother's together, I am aware that I construct and reconstruct, conscious of what has slipped away over the years, finding a new story and a new character with both our memories and neither's.

I look at the hunched people plodding drably past. Will I become like them?

As I walk past automatic doors, they glide open, offering a bubble of coolness, seeping, pushing out against the treacle.

I am heavy with jetlag, heavy with humidity, my body is sticky and slow.

These people have shrivelled, broken faces, pinched and red as they hurry. Everything is clattering shoes and coal scuttles. Everyone is 'oh excuse me' and 'sorry' as though I should have said it.

The light is hot and sleepy. I miss the sharpness and cold brightness of autumn days.

Perhaps my face is already as pinched, as red. But I will never have their 'excuse me' soul.

Just a patch of sunlight. A tiny scrap. I long for it.

I see through a sepia lens of heat and humidity.

I try to remember. With all my being I try to remember the smell of heat, but it has slipped away, and I am left here. Left in this strange place called Home, red and raw with the cold.

I TRY TO REMEMBER THE SMELL OF HEAT

As I place our memories of home side by side, I am struck by how my grandmother's sense of belonging was for a country that was not her own. Blunt and Dowling remind me that our migrations 'are also processes of establishing home, as senses of belonging and identity move over space and are created in new places' (2006, 1). The concepts of home and belonging are intimately connected, and this is reflected in the literature that explores them. Both are often described in in terms of geographical or physical space, or in relation to feelings — whether we feel at home, that we belong, or do not belong — all emotions experienced by the characters in *Home*. This leads to two strands in discussions of belonging — political and social. Political considerations of belonging look at border crossing, migration, and exclusion, and how these experiences vary depending on privilege, gender, wealth, race,

and nationality. Intimately connected to this are the social and affective concerns of exclusion and non-belonging. Vulnerable and marginalised groups such as migrants, children, queer, and disabled people are also discussed in literature that explores belonging and non-belonging. In their wide survey of literature on belonging, Lähdesmäki et al (2016) chart definitions of belonging in scholarly research across a range of disciplines including geography, psychology, ecology, and gender studies through a qualitative analysis of 103 academic journal articles. Five themes emerge from their research: spatiality, materiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, and non-belonging. The spatiality of belonging is defined by geography, social, and temporal aspects — in 'terms of place, space, and boundaries' such as 'homes, domestic spaces, neighborhoods, suburbs, villages or urban spaces, regions, countries, and continents'. Immediately linked are concerns of 'migration, mobility, and displacement of people and trans-local and national boundary-crossing processes' (Lähdesmäki et al 2016, 236). As I discovered writing *Home*, the concepts of belonging, migration, and home are bound strongly together.

I recognise the ambiguity described by other authors as they explore belonging and non-belonging. This ambiguity is echoed in how the term belonging is understood, as it is, as Antonsich observes 'both vaguely defined and ill-theorized' (Antonsich 2010, 644). Similarly, Sarah Wright notes that 'Belonging is an ambiguous concept that has tended to escape rigorous theorization' (Wright 2015, 391). Attempting clarification, Antonsich suggests that 'belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms

of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)' (Antonsich 2010, 644). Lähdesmäki et al also highlight the ambiguous nature of belonging, observing that 'by choosing to use the concept of belonging, scholars seek to emphasize the fluid, unfixed, and processual nature of diverse social and spatial attachments' (2016, 234). This fits with the understanding of belonging that I discovered in my exploration of home, which is, as geographers David Ralph and Lynn A. Staeheli find in many discussions of home 'messy, mobile, blurred and confused'. However, Ralph and Staeheli also suggest that there is an overemphasis on 'the shifting and mobile meanings that migrants give to home' that underplays 'the resilience of its stable, bounded and fixed interpretations' (2011, 519). These observations match my personal experience of home and belonging. Therefore, rather than attempting to fix the idea of belonging, I embrace its ambiguity and note how it emerges in *Home* — the sense of belonging and non-belonging, of instability and security, and the experience of feeling you belong when (in terms of race and nationality), you do not belong.

The amorphous nature of belonging is also apt for the places that the characters inhabit in *Home*, particularly the partygoer lost in a strange city. Huot et al, Gail Hopkins, and Julia Bennett are amongst those who consider belonging in relation to place, arguing that belonging is an embodied experience. Social geographers Huot et al discuss how migrants experience a sense of in-betweenness in their exploration of place, belonging, and identity in francophone minority communities. They argue that 'The interrelation between place-belongingness and the politics of belonging is a fluid process that is continually performed through practices and

contributes to the embodiment of belonging'. They continue that 'senses of belonging are multi-scalar as they are constructed in relation to one's body, household, city, and nation, among others' (Huot et al 2014, 330). Hopkins notes that although migration is 'founded in place' she believes that 'physical location itself does not drive change in identity or belonging, but rather it is the interaction of migrants with the various components in that location which sets in motion change and these components and interactions are constantly in flux' (2010, 534).

Julia Bennett argues that people's relationship to place 'plays an integral role in who we are, and, consequently, how everyday life is lived'. She proposes that 'Place can be understood as simultaneously imagined and embodied, an active site for social practices through history, memory, other people, and material things' (2014, 658). She continues that 'History is not stuck in the past but moves through the lives of people and places, and is constantly being recreated in the present through memories'. Thus people 'come to have an embodied understanding' of their relationship to place (Bennett 2014, 658). Bennett's understanding of place as constantly recreated, imagined, embodied, and connected to memory works well with the home spaces that my grandmother and I write. They are both imagined and embodied, constructed and reconstructed through memory, experience, and imagination.

As I do, Harris and Gandolfo use creative writing to 'narrate' their own lives and explore non-belonging and identity. They combine their 'interwoven narratives' to 'explode the isolation of individual experiences of refugeity and unbelonging that accompany our identities as migrant, adoptee,

and motherless child/childless mother' (2014, 568). Harris and Gandolfo suggest that 'identity can be co-constructed in narrative, and methodology can be advanced through "saying" as a form of "doing."' (2014, 571). Thereby writing drawing on personal narrative becomes a way of constructing identity. Harris and Gandolfo invite 'readers to locate themselves in our narratives, making possible multiple positionalities' as I intend to do in *Home*, inviting the reader or performer to take on the roles and imagine themselves in these situations and identities (2014, 578). They hope, as I do, that this can 'create new connections to place, and community' (Harris and Gandolfo 2014, 579).

Conceptually, belonging and non-belonging are intimately connected to identity and have emerged from the larger discussions of identity across a range of disciplines. Identity has been explored from the perspective of gender and sexuality, significantly by Judith Butler (1990, 2024), and by bell hooks of race (1989, 2008). Ahmed, Avtar Brah, and Edward Said are amongst those who look at identity through the lens of postcolonialism and ethnicity. Lähdesmäki et al observe that 'in recent scholarship, the concept of belonging has emerged alongside, and partly replaced or challenged, the concept of identity' (2016, 234). I find that belonging and non-belonging recur in the experiences I explore in *Home*. Perhaps this is because 'belonging is used, more or less consciously, as a synonym of identity, and in particular national or ethnic identity' (Antonsich 2010, 644). My grandmother felt that she belonged in Myanmar although this did not fit her national and ethnic identity. Although I have lived in Singapore for thirteen years, longer than I lived have anywhere except the house I grew up in, I remain unsure wheth-

er it is a place I can claim to call my home. Thirteen years have shaped a strong connection in me to Singapore; so that it is a place filled with memories, friends, and profound personal experiences. As I move around it different places tell different stories — there is the theatre where my first play as a playwright was staged, that is the hospital where my heart broke, over there is the place I am proud to teach at. Yet, the first question any taxi driver asks me is 'how long have you lived here?' Their surprise when I tell them shows me that no matter how long I live here, I will always be a foreigner.

Also adopting belonging as an alternative to identity and, as I do, employing 'experience, autobiography, and writing', Elspeth Probyn explores theoretical, political, and sociological questions about the self and belonging, choosing outside belonging as a term that resists 'certain categorical tendencies and the rush to place differences as absolute' (1996/2016, 7, 9). She explains that 'In the face of the fixity of the categorical logic of identity, I seek to instil some of the movement that the wish to belong carries, to consider more closely the movement of and between categories' (Probyn 1996/2016, 9). Belonging in place of identity, Probyn suggests:

> captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state (1996/2016, 19).

Wanting to belong, wanting to become, is present for all the characters in *Home* and linked is a yearning to return

home. Probyn sees that 'the desire that individuals have to belong' is fragile and 'increasingly performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging', just as I acknowledge I can never really belong in Singapore (1996/2016, 8). She ties the 'movement of desiring belonging' to 'the postcolonial situation' and queerness, to examine 'the in betweenness of belonging, of belonging not in some deep authentic way but belonging in constant movement, modes of belonging as surface shifts' (Probyn 1996/2016, 19). The in betweenness of belonging and belonging in movement are what I discovered writing *Home* found in my own experience and in my grandmother's texts.

AN UNRELIABLE PLAYWRIGHT?

While my grandmother claims Myanmar as her home, from my contemporary perspective, troubled by the legacy of the British colonial empire that she was a part of, there is something that discomforts me in her assertion. Unpacking these emotions, I consider those like Ellis and Bochner and Broussine et al who argue that a researcher's emotional journey 'positive or negative' is 'an inherent part of the experience of researching' in an autoethnographic process (Broussine et al 2015, 3). I need to explore my own discomfort and the way that this affects me as a playwright. I am conscious that while selecting sections from my grandmother's memoirs to include in *Home,* I edit away the colonial sentiments that make me uncomfortable. I censor her text, trying to ease my own post-colonial guilt, and in reshaping her words I become an unreliable narrator.

Whatever I may feel, for my grandmother as a child Myanmar was emotionally and physically her home, and as Bennett describes she had an 'embodied understanding' of it as such (2014, 658). Heat and sunlight were what made her feel as though she belonged in a way that was, for her at least, distinct from politics. She explains 'Taunggyi was my home. I had passed the first sixteen years of my life there. I knew each clump of bamboos, every turn of the road' (Thorp 1945, 7). She continues 'I have set down these memories of the Shan states because I was happy there, as a record of an era which has passed, never to return, and because there was a beauty and a serenity which enrich the heart' (Thorp 1945, 8). Can I question her claim that the Shan states were her home when she felt it so strongly?

My grandmother was so sure that Myanmar was her home, a place where she belonged, and her love for Taunggyi is clear. However, would her Burmese contemporaries agree, or was she to them forever foreign? Postcolonial scholar of sociolinguistics, Homi K. Bhabha reminds me of how 'fixity' acts in in his interrogation of the notion of 'Other' in colonialism. Building on the work of Said, Bhabha suggests that a division was created by colonialism between East and West, with the East projected in a derogatory way as 'Other'. Bhabha destabilises this binary division and interrogates understandings of identity with his concepts of hybridity — identities created in the meeting of cultures and ideas, and mimicry — taking and copying ideas from another culture. Like those exploring belonging in migrants, Bhabha suggests that identity is flexible rather than fixed, challenging the colonial view of colonised peoples as stereotypes. Bhabha explains that 'An important feature of colonial discourse

is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness'. This fixity 'connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition' (1994/2004, 94). This idea of fixity and rigidity in how foreigners are seen is evident in how my grandmother viewed people in Myanmar, and in her understanding of how they saw her. She describes how on a trip from Taunggyi to visit Laikha 'At first the children were scared, and ran away screaming', but that they became 'accustomed to seeing us', eventually 'closing in round us and touching us to see if our white skins were real or merely "put on"' (Thorp 1945, 74). Her description of this experience is as revealing about her view of the Burmese as Other as theirs of her as the target of their curiosity.

Ahmed's exploration of 'stranger fetishism' is useful for understanding how both my grandmother and the children constructed each other's identities as strange. Ahmed suggests that strangeness is only associated with some bodies, those seen as either exotic or dangerous, which she calls 'stranger fetishism'. She explains 'By defining "us" against any-body who is a stranger, what is concealed is that some-bodies are already recognised as stranger and more dangerous than other bodies' (2000, 3-4). This leads her to ask:

> how does identity itself become instituted through encounters with others that surprise, that shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume that we know? Identity itself is constituted in the 'more than one' of the encounter: the designation of an 'I' or 'we' requires an encounter with others. These others cannot be simply relegated to the outside: given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only

> through encounters with others, then the subject's existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered (Ahmed 2000, 7).

Not only does my grandmother construct the children's reaction to her as strange and their identities as strangers and as other, but the encounter creates both their identities. While I know that she was a product of her time, I am uncomfortable about including this section of her text in my play. I write it in and then delete it out. I realise that I am trying to hide the parts of her views that make me uncomfortable, but what right do I have to censor her? For me, her memoirs are not just any books. I feel connected to them and, perhaps irrationally, that they somehow reflect on me and my life in Singapore. Our personal connection means I am biased in the way that I encounter and use my grandmother's writing. I must admit to being not only an unreliable narrator in my (mis)rememberings, but an unreliable biographer and playwright too.

My mum collects me from school, and I change in the back of the car. She has bought me a new, pink tracksuit. I hate it. I hate myself in it. I only have my brown school shoes with me. When I wear the tracksuit with my school shoes, I look so bad that I don't blame the others for judging me. They are wearing Levis, t-shirts with open Cumberland shirts over them, and converse trainers. A few even have leather jackets. I hate myself with every step I take, but night is the worst.

A kind of nausea would grip me as I heard in the distance that unmistakable underground rumble of an approaching quake, as I felt the ground ripple beneath me, and waited to see whether the ripple could turn to a swaying or whether it would die away.

I lie there, looking at the springs of the bunkbed above me and tucked in corners of the sheet and blanket above. I listen to the night sounds of breathing and watch the fragments of night sky.

Every part of me hurts.

By day these tremors were bad enough, leaving me always with shaking knees and hollow stomach,

I must not cry,

but in the darkness they brought nightmare terrors which sometimes recur even now, if a distant lorry or train sets my bed shaking.

I must not cry.

HOMESICK

Until I started writing *Home* I had somehow forgotten about the homesickness that troubled me as a child. Sleepovers, holiday camps, anything that meant a night away from home was torture. Too often, my parents would receive a phone call late at night to come and take me home. This experience tells of the sensory connection between home and the body, which Ahmed identifies in her examination of 'journeys of migration'. Ahmed complicates the concept of home through an exploration of 'the relationship between identity, belonging and home' in migrants and the effect of 'transnational journeys on homely subjects' (1999, 331). Rather than offering a 'migrant ontology' she proposes 'a consideration of the historical determination of patterns of estrangement in which the living and yet mediated relation between being, home and world is partially reconfigured from the perspective of those who have left home'. She proposes that this arrives 'through the forming of communities that create multiple identifications through collective acts of remembering in the absence of a shared knowledge or a familiar terrain' (Ahmed 1999, 331). There is a difference, Ahmed suggests, between spaces that we have inhabited and ones that we have been enveloped in and inhabited by, between 'home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience' (1999, 341). Like my grandmother moving from a hot climate to a cold one, Ahmed recalls 'the cold pinching my skin' on her return to England. These physical responses to a new place mark 'a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied' (Ahmed 1999, 342). Developing this insight into the sensory nature of experience Ahmed proposes:

> The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*. To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel and fail to feel (1999, 341, original emphasis).

The idea of 'home as skin' where there is a permeable boundary between self and home, where 'subject and space leak into each, *inhabit each other*' echoes my discovery in the process of writing *Home* of the connection between home and sickness. Extending Ahmed's proposal of home as skin, home, self, and sickness can also permeate each other. The home does not only 'contain the homely subject' but touches, shapes, and permeates them. Home is where we go to be sick, to rest, and to recuperate. Memories of objects from my childhood home are also tied to sickness (the metal bowl we were given to vomit in, also used as the salad bowl). Ahmed suggests that movement away from home can affect how you feel, that subject and home can leak into each other and inhabit each other, as was the case for me as a homesick child.

The connection between home and sickness emerged in

two distinct strands of *Home*. Both in my childhood homesickness, and in the connection between home and my mother's sickness. My grandmother seems to be inhabited by the home space of her childhood memories of Myanmar. Something about nighttime also heighted her sickly response to the memory of earthquakes. She describes how 'the darkness […] brought nightmare terrors which can sometimes recur even now'. Following Ahmed's argument, even away from home it inhabits us, and, for me, as a child distance away from it made me sick. Extending Ahmed's proposal of 'home as skin', where home is permeable and becomes one with the bodies of those you love, missing home, missing my mother, and sickness coalesce.

It's Christmas, the first time I have been
home in two years.

> *IMPORTANT WARNING:*
> *Spironolactone has caused tumours in laboratory animals. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of using this medication for your condition.*

She is gaunt. Her clothes hang loose. She uses
the arm of the sofa to help as she stands or sits.
Her hands are warped into Vs.

> *Spironolactone may cause side effects. Tell your doctor if any of these symptoms are severe or do not go away:*

She is cheerful.

Vomiting, diarrhoea, stomach pain or cramps, drowsiness, tiredness, restlessness, muscle weakness, pain, or cramps,

She is in pain.

burning numbness, or tingling in the hands or feet,

She takes the pills. They sit in a wicker basket,
she works her way through them;

inability to move arms or legs, changes in heartbeat, confusion, nausea, extreme tiredness,

packet by packet,

dry mouth,

box by box,

thirst, dizziness, unsteadiness, headache, or other signs of dehydration, unusual bleeding, or bruising.

pill by pill. Different pills at different times
of the day.

Some side effects can be serious. If you experience any of these symptoms, call your doctor immediately.

Two years have changed her. Two years have
changed us both.

SICK-HOME

In the process of writing a play, you begin with things that you know and plan, then other elements arrive unexpectedly as you write. Writing *Home,* I was surprised to find that sickness kept emerging and that my mother entered, unplanned, as a character. I did not realise that as well as writing as a method of trying to go home, I was also writing about bodies and sickness — about my mother's hospitalisation and about the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining this discovery, I realise that, for me, home is principally a connection to the bodies of my loved ones and how sick or well those bodies are, rather than to a material structure. Sickness emerges and recurs throughout the play — my own childhood homesickness, my mother's sickness, and the pandemic that prevented me travelling home to visit her.

The idea of a generational connection to home and sickness is explored in Alice Birch's play *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017).[5] *Anatomy* is laid out in three columns that represent three generations of women and explores how depression and suicide are passed down through them. The family home is also significant in *Anatomy*, which is finally sold by the granddaughter Bonnie in the final scene of the play, echoing her decision to be sterilised so that 'There is no further line […] That it finishes here' (Birch 2017, 234). I adopt Birch's structure in *Home*, which she describes in the notes on the play as a score, using columns to represent my grandmother, mother, and me. I also adapt Birch's score template to add the 'we' character whose text moves across the page and breaks this structure.

Memoirist and cultural critic Olivia Laing proposes that

the body is 'a device for processing the external world; a conversion machine, hoarding, transforming, discarding, stripping for parts' (2021, 21). This chimes with my experience, my grandmother's memoirs, and with Birch's text. Laing shares Wilhelm Reich's claims that 'our bodies carry our unacknowledged history, all the things we try to ignore or disavow', and which if kept pent up can lead to sickness (2021, 26). This view is also echoed in psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's exploration of how bodies process trauma. He explains 'It is amazing how many psychological problems involve difficulties with sleep, appetite, touch, digestion, and arousal'. This means that 'Intense emotions involve not only the mind but also the gut and the heart' (2014, 36, 47). What was it that brought about a physical expression of things that, perhaps, both my grandmother and I were trying to 'ignore or disavow'? Just as journalist and memoirist Joan Didion in *The White Album* (1979) connects an uneasy time and the Manson murders to her own diagnosis of multiple sclerosis; so, sickness and separation brought about by a pandemic, became a thread that weaves together my experiences, my mother's, and my grandmother's.

I don't know this city. I don't know this heat. I don't know this cold. I don't know who I am here. I could be anyone. No one knows me. I can begin again.

Someone sways up to me as I dance. Smiles and comes closer. I smile back and we mirror each other as we move to the beat in long slow curves. You move closer and your hands slide onto my hips, and we are one with the music moving together. I feel your body pressed against me, your buttons catch on my clothes, your thumb traces lightly down my arm.

I am 1921 and I am 2021. My body flashes hot and cold and hot and cold.

I want to go home, but I can't go home until the trains start.

I want to go home, but I can't go home. The world has frozen, stopped in its tracks.

LIMBO

Textual form and content become a playground for characters and concepts in *Home* in my attempt to explore uncertain, in-between states of liminality in place and character, like the unstable states of in-betweenness described by Huot et al., and being outside belonging discussed by Probyn. Here, I also draw on the ideas of Victor Turner (1982) and van Gennep (1960), who describe the betwixt and between state of liminality. Home, either in Myanmar, Singapore, or the UK, for my grandmother and me is a liminal, in-between space of both belonging and non-belonging. For us both, home is a place of transition — my belonging in Singapore is liminal — it is both my home and at the same time can never be my home. I use the page as a playground to visually represent the liminal, in-between states of place and character. The 'we' character who embodies my grandmother and me and is also neither of us, exists in limbo so that 'we' are set free in an imaged space to explore without constraint. This liminoid space is one, Schechner explains, 'where elicit, subversive, subjective behaviours are allowed and encouraged, and where the persons can critique the dominant social discourse' (Schechner 2012). I take the idea of a liminoid space, that is not only in-between and indistinct, but also elicit and sub-

versive so that the 'we' character who is unable to go home is free to do things uncensored, to explore elicit spaces, and act in ways that do not fit my grandmother's narrative or mine.

Home, for my grandmother and me, is both a concrete geographical space, and at the same time one that is imagined, a memory, a series of keenly felt emotions, and an intangible dream. In *Home,* I tangle my memories and my grandmother's memories together, combining lived experience that is both specific and out of time, in what could be understood as a dramatic third space. Bhabha proposes that meaning is created by communication between two cultures — You and I — in a third space of 'enunciation'. It is this 'inbetween space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. […] And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves' (1994/2004, 56). Dance scholar Royona Mitra explains that Bhabha proposes that the third space for diaspora like my grandmother and me is figurative and metaphoric, reforming our identity in the gaps between 'one's home and host nations and cultures' (2015, 93). In *Home*, the spaces I explore are both metaphoric and construct new identities for my grandmother and me, embodied in the 'we' character. This character sits in the interstices between us, our cultures, and our identities. She exists in an intangible third space where, as Bhabha explains, 'meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; [so] that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew' (1994/2004, 55). Or to put it another way, as geographer Paul Routledge suggests discussing 'encounters between academia and activism', it is a space 'where neither site, role, or representation holds sway, where one continually subverts the meaning of the other' (1996, 400).

Roanna Mitchell writing about performer training proposes a 'transdisciplinary third space' between 'training and therapy' (2022, 222). Although she focuses on training rather than writing or performance, she describes a co-created performative third space that 'is intangible and not owned by anyone, and simultaneously would not exist without the specific ingredients of the people and environments' (Mitchell 2022, 230). Similarly, my attempt to write a way home for my grandmother and me would not exist without the specific ingredients we bring to this theatrical third space, and indeed those from my mother. The layering and weaving of experiences, (mis-remembered) memories, and fiction in *Home* creates a dramatic and textual third space where one meaning 'continually subverts the meaning of the other'.

Something doesn't feel right. The woozy is getting worse, pushing up inside me. Something inside me isn't right. I need to find the bathroom. Fast.

I stagger towards it. Everything is pulsing, my body is moving me in ways I do not own. My body is not my own.

I am everywhere and nowhere, out of myself, I can't move from here. My body is lead and ice and I am floating. Drifting away.

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

I end, in some sense, where I began with the impossible task of trying to write a way home for my grandmother and me. Laying our experiences together in a textual playground has revealed to me that working with a text written by a family member brings unique emotional and cultural challenges.

Our connection means that as well as finding parallels in our experiences of belonging and non-belonging, I also feel strangely complicit in the views she expresses, even though they are not my own. Therefore, the process of selecting and editing/censoring extracts from her memoirs has shown me to be an unreliable biographer and playwright. However, beyond what her existence in Myanmar may have represented, or continues to represent, I feel a tenderness for the teenager suddenly moved across the world at sixteen, away from the only place she knew as home. I also am left with questions about the ethics of re-working a memoir, particularly if it belongs to a family member, which could merit further exploration. Additionally, the play in its current format is unfinished, unpublished, and unperformed; so, in addition to further research this play could also be shared with a wider public through performance and their responses captured and analysed.

Examining the embodied aspects of home, I was surprised to discover a connection between bodies, sickness, and home. Ahmed's idea of home as skin, home that is permeable and able to seep through the skin, taken a step further offers a way of understanding how sickness worked its way into my exploration of writing a way home. The act of imagining home, missing home, and missing my mother brought back my forgotten juvenile homesickness. Van der Kolk observes that 'Scared animals return home, regardless of whether home is safe or frightening' (2014, 22). Similarly, sickness seems to pull me home.

I now understand that I have more uncertainty about 'belonging' in Singapore than I had consciously realised — how I am Other and how I may unconsciously Other. Saara Jäntti

writing about madness and home in literature from a feminist perspective explains that in narratives 'home functions as a frame within which the subject is realised' (2012, 76). Jäntti believes that home is 'no fixed place, but a process of becomings — of both the subject and the space where it is located' (2012, 89). For my grandmother and me, home is an ephemeral place of becoming that impacts our sense of identity, both in my play and in our (misremembered?) experiences. My understanding of my grandmother and of home has changed in exploring our shared narrative. But rather than certainty, I am left in a new kind of limbo, everywhere and nowhere, in a place of newly discovered uncertainty, but more conscious of the embodied ties of home that pull across the generations.

She was dying really,
by then.

A baby is crawling towards me, reaching out and fisting handfuls of eiderdown, pulling them into her mouth.

She was quite bright, but
confused sometimes.

I lean towards her.

You had just started to crawl.

The surface rocks.

I think that was the last
time I saw her.

I scale the mounds,
cross the satin
garlands.

The baby comes closer.

I put you on her bed and
you crawled towards her.

I reach my finger
out. The baby stops.
Her eyes widen. Her
mouth bubbles an
'O' of discovery.

She looked and you and
said

Who is this little person?

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NOTES

[1] I follow most international organisations including the United Nations who now adopt the name Myanmar instead of Burma, which was the old colonial name. However, this issue continues to be contentious (Richmond, 2021).
[2] My grandmother died before *Candlelight in Burma* was published leaving a manuscript, which my uncle Tim Thorp self-published in 2016.
[3] Excerpts from my play Home are in italics.
[4] See, for example, Sarah Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis* (first performed at the Royal Court in 2000, published 2002), which playfully uses different kinds of text and does not identify the changing character voices.
[5] Hereafter referred to as *Anatomy*.

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