

## **The Past Perfect Kitchen: Materiality and Memory Spaces in *Unmade, Untitled***

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### **Abstract**

Written from a place of elsewhere, of not yet, perhaps never, arriving, my practice-as-research performance *Unmade, Untitled* focuses on the loss of 'sense of place', a symptom of modern mobility, and migration. The piece uses non-food materials (incorporating non-edible symbolic materials, specifically joss-paper and red packets) as an intervention in the semiology and affects of everyday food-making choreographies and its relation to identity. The following question is addressed: how might un-belonging be performed? The resulting gastronomic ritual of unmaking is performed with and through various surrogates, which connote displacement and the re-embodiment of past belongings.

### **1. Lost Geographies: Personal and National Displacements**

Imagine the dot of a languid exclamation mark being swallowed by the curvature above. That is usually how I might describe on a map, the tiny island of Singapore—a country I grew loyalties for without birthright. Singaporeans, and those studying it, refer to this 'little red dot' with a particular admiration and fondness, in the way one would regard something so small, yet so tenacious. Defending against the fragility of this dot has been at the forefront of the pragmatic policies administered by a government that continues to be in power, with little opposition, since its founding. The result is an 'air-conditioned nation'—this term was coined by the journalist and scholar Cherian George to describe the custodial ways in which the country has been able to achieve a high level of economic progress 'at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability' (15, 18-19).

Living in Singapore, even without bearing its nationality, has stitched on me an affective nostalgia associated closely with particular secret languages, and cultural codes, or historical events and their corresponding political amnesia. My departure and sporadic returns to this now-estranged home never fail to challenge my body and my memory. I perch precariously, scanning for recognisable fragments

of places I grew up in: homes, schools, hang-outs, eateries, places of worship. Didn't this use to be a shop I bought art supplies from? Wasn't there a church not far from it? Where is that sliver of sea I used to be able to spy from my parents' flat?

If we believe, as the human geographer Yi Fu Tuan posits, that '[p]lace is a pause in movement', then my movements in geographic space might have rendered it impossible for Singapore—the place, or my memory of it—to ever become 'a center of felt value' (*Space and Place*, 138). But mine aren't the only movements to have occurred. Singapore's clipped pace towards modernity and urban development has changed both the physical, social, and even geographic landscape. George crisply observes that you can get 'lost at home... because what was there then is here no longer' (190), because landscapes and maps of memory become virtually unrecognisable due to the constant remodelling of towns, and the reclamation and redevelopment of land—a self-erasure of geographic shapes, material history, and cultural memory.

In writing about women's intercultural performance Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins discuss geo-political interpretations of 'home', and how memory space is constructed within feminist, post-colonial narratives by female diaspora playwrights (97). Here, memory space—a concept first articulated by Gaston Bachelard—is the imaginary and symbolic space between 'home' and 'homeless' feelings experienced by the displaced. In this article, I explore how this double displacement (where the displacement of the person is intensified by the physical and macro changes within remembered spaces) is played out in *Unmade, Untitled*, a practice-led performance I created and performed once, somewhat furtively, in Singapore in February 2016. The performance is an interrogation of the processes of unmaking—particularly of how one might take the concept of belonging apart (both in the sense of belonging while away, and also deconstructing the notion of ever having belonged). This doubling of displacement is countered by the use of surrogates: of materials and their symbols, and of bodies and their voices.

My personal narrative is re-voiced by a pair of participants (who I call 'surrogate speakers'), while the other participants are guided into incorporating symbolic paper materials (joss paper and red packets, described below) with food materials within a familiar kitchen ritual of shared food preparation. As such, the piece is seen as a joint performance with audience-participants who engage with what Astrid Breel has defined as a 'co-execution' of an invented ritual of unbelonging (370). I enlist the concept of 'surrogacy' to gesture towards a quality of imprecise substitution, and to echo Joseph Roach's use of 'surrogation' in his exploration of how colonial cultures in the circum-Atlantic world employ memory, counter-memory (substitution), and performance to collectively reproduce new social and cultural memory (2). The article will focus on two main registers of surrogacy within this performance: an invented gastronomic ritual that uses symbolic but un-eatable materials in food-preparation to unmake food-making, and the locus of the body's voice in retelling a poetic, auto-ethnographic narrative detailing places of past belongings. These techniques firstly provide an embodied representation to address the concept of double displacement, and, secondly, engage the ruptures around authenticity and unbelonging.

## **2. Techniques of Surrogation**

A residential kitchen as a performance venue stood in for the light-filled kitchen of my childhood, which had been on the seventh floor of a government-subsidized high-rise. This kitchen was also the starting point of my narrative in the performance. Hosted in the home of an expatriate family living temporarily in Singapore, the kitchen emphasized impermanence: a transient place where an outsider's home houses a performance by a once-insider no longer at home in her own home.

There is a discomfiting moment as the twenty or so unshod participants take their places in two groups, on the floor, occupying the home of strangers (who themselves might be viewed as strangers to the country). The two performance facilitators who guide each group

demonstrate how to begin working with the materials placed in the middle of each circle, with the simple, repetitive actions of communal food preparation. As I moved slowly and silently in the background, boiling a pot of water and frying diced onions, participants were tasked with handling one of two symbolic paper materials as though they were ingredients: red packets in one work circle and joss paper in the other (Figures 1 and 2). Traditionally, the former are given out as tokens of good luck and prosperity during celebratory or auspicious occasions (red being a color of good luck), such as weddings and birthdays, and the latter gold- or silver-printed papers folded into ingot shapes, are burnt in special bins for ancestral and deity worship, to send currency and provision in the afterlife.

Participants in one of the circles rather enthusiastically



**Fig. 1 and 2:** Left, red packets or 红包; on right, joss paper or 金纸, Singapore, image courtesy of the artist.

ripped open the sealed red packets that contained a jumble of dried beans in lieu of money, which they began to sort by type (Figure 3). The red packets were shredded by hand by participants, following customary practices (perhaps a way to ensure every penny is extracted before disposal) but this is where the tradition ends. The torn red bits were placed in water and the macerated mush was then mixed with a paste made from cooked red beans and fried onions. Members in this group hand-shaped the mixture into meatballs, which I fried and topped unceremoniously on cooked spaghetti. The group working with joss paper was tasked with twisting the icing tops off the gem cookies, and mashing only the white ones. I later combined this white



**Fig. 3 and 4:** Left, a group working on opening red packets; on right, a group crafting and filling tubes of joss paper, Singapore, image courtesy of Sam Chow.

icing dust with dried shredded cabbage, and orange peel to create a filling which participants spooned into rolled tubes, tucking the ends neatly to contain this (Figure 4). Once this task was completed, I took the filled, prepared rolls and placed these on a gas-flamed barbecue grill outside where they were reduced, fragrantly, to ash. This was sprinkled on the meatballs as garnish to the dish.

Cultural/material practices and rituals surrounding red packets and joss paper are adapted and incorporated through food-making gestures within an invented ritual that is devised, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, ‘by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual’ (6). Participants, complicit in an invented ritual that they do not recognize, are nevertheless able to tap into their embodied knowledge of culturally Chinese rituals surrounding gifting and processing red packets (opening, extracting, tearing) and burning joss paper (folding, burning), even if these ultimately become intercepted by the languages of cooking. Those familiar with the original uses of joss paper and red packets might detect that these materials are only mis-used insofar as they do not overtly perform their original function; the manner in which they are performed with remains true to their form if not outright function: the sealed red packets were torn open, the new forms of currency extracted, and the packets shredded in particular ways that conform to the usual ritual, and the joss paper likewise, was burnt. The conformity of use signified a knowledge of these rituals, yet their undoing and unmaking by including them in the vocabulary of food, albeit non-eatable, might be seen as unusually

novel, both strange and estranging. The surrogation in material and ritual as such begins to displace the transmission of ritual performances with joss paper and red packets. The resulting plate of enmeshed symbols—what might be seen as an ‘effigy’, to further borrow from Roach’s constructions of material surrogacies around memory and performance (36)—bear an unspoken critique and a material rejection of the cultural symbols of wealth and currency that these materials once embodied.

This method of manipulating food material and symbols in *Unmade, Untitled* has a lineage in the counter-gastronomic turn-of-the-century avant-garde arts, which dabbled with the ‘dietetic (and aesthetic)’ (Novero, xxxiv), and is nestled within a plethora of artistic practices that work critically and experimentally with ‘speculative gastronomy’ through the use of symbolic ingredients (Denfeld et al. 21). When the Futurists released their scrapbook of culinary formulas (or ‘recipes’) in the 1930’s, Cecilia Novero notes that they ‘radically juxtapose[d] ancient customs with future bodies and high technological worlds’ and ‘(l)ight and steel [...] two staple ingredients of most Futurist recipes, [were] symbolically and rhetorically evoked in certain instances through organic materials, and concocted through actual metallic or artificial materials in others (11, 14).’ While the inclusion of ball bearings and electricity in recipes reflected a clear rupture from tradition for the futurist palette, the incorporation of joss paper and red packets demonstrated a complicated (and simultaneous) corroboration *and* disruption in the enmeshed relationships between remembrance, place and identity, when viewed through the lens of food and symbolic dietetics. The nutritive quality of food, its affects, and meanings are contested when the prepared and cooked materials (both food and non-food that symbolize currency) transforms the lot into anti-food for remembrance instead of for eating. The unmaking of food thus becomes a surrogate ritual meal signifying unbelonging.

Surrogation happens most clearly in the roles and performing bodies of what I term surrogate speakers, volunteers recruited by facilitators early in the proceedings to recite a short, contextualizing

narrative to the group. The volunteers listen to a pre-recorded text via an in-ear audio feed and say verbatim what they hear (Figures 5 and 6). Like Janelle Reinelt, I am cautious of employing ‘verbatim theatre’ to the surrogate speaking used in *Unmade, Untitled*, as I would like to avoid the ‘narrow orthodoxy’ she identifies (13), and largely because the performance aims to turn this very technique on its head and reveal the limits of authenticity and memory in personal or autobiographical narratives, rather than preserving or documenting them unaltered and unquestioned. The transfer of voice from the originary narrative body (mine) to the surrogate speaker contributes a rhetorical matter-of-factness, and a third person displacement and distancing. It further instigates the instabilities of memory and autobiography and highlights, to cite Roberta Mock’s investigative and reflective reperformance of Dee Heddon’s autobiographical narrative, ‘the relationships between intertextualities and embodiment, and the “authenticity” of located memory as coherent story’ (17).

My own role as author and artist is at once present—my silent body performing-cooking is in the same space—but disembodied, or rather, self-selectively dis-voiced. My narrative, as embodied by a surrogate speaker performed in Singapore (the site of the narrative, even if in a different kitchen), like Mock’s re-performance, by-passes ‘the tendency to accept the separation of authorial voice from the voice produced by a specific performing body, as well as narrative time and place from the here and now of performance’ (Mock 17). Truth in memory and authenticity in *Unmade, Untitled* is yet another element that has found a surrogate through various displacements. It is now voiced by a different body speaking these words of past belongings without having experienced them, and without the benefit of rehearsing the affective quality of the words in the story.

From post-performance feedback, Paul, one of the surrogate speakers within the performance might well concur with Mock’s experience, in his reflections on his embodied performance, which required a complex and occasionally conflicting balance between being a performer connecting with his audience, and ‘channel’



**Fig. 5 and 6:** Surrogate Speakers, Singapore, image courtesy of Sam Chow.

conveying and transmitting an authored, ‘source’ narrative:

It quickly became evident how important it was ... that I use my voice effectively to convey not just the words but the meaning of what others weren’t hearing for themselves from me (“the source”). I felt aware of being constrained by my newly assigned role in this performance, which was making me feel removed to a certain degree, no longer able to simply experience what was unfolding around the room. I was using gesture, eye contact, as well as my speaking voice, to affirm connection with those around me ... On further reflection my role was more of a channel than an interpreter (Surrogate Speaker, Paul, in email exchange with author).

Embodying, as the surrogate speakers do, a narrative of being in a state of unbelonging, opens the possibility of reading the body as an archive of knowledge on how to be both in and out of place(s): in Paul’s experience, ‘feel(ing) removed ... no longer able to simply experience what was unfolding’ and yet simultaneously feeling the importance of ‘affirm(ing) connection’ with those around.

### **3. Belonging, Translated**

In writing about the poignant meeting of the homely (*heimlich*) with the uncanny (*unheimlich*), Svetlana Boym notes that ‘[r]eflective nostalgics see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts’ (251). This reflective nostalgia is picked up on in George’s observation that ‘[e]ven if they stay put,



the country moves around them, and Singaporeans find themselves eventually in a new place, clinging only to ghosts' (193) amid the relentless changes the little island has endured in the name of progress. Much of what *Unmade, Untitled* tries to do with its inversions and inventions of rituals for belonging to homes consists of establishing an intimacy with ghosts from the past, by setting out a meal for them. The performative ritual of unbelonging becomes a call for responses from the uncertain belongings of those at home, those never at home, or those for whom home is always only remembered.

The intentional use of strange, imperfect surrogates for memory, places, materials, bodies and their meanings was a way to acknowledge and counter these instabilities of belonging to a place, and to enable a re-embodiment, an inhabitation of the failure of belonging, or of the failure or ghosts of memory. The failure of memory and belongingness is less fraught with consequence within this invented ritual, where the de- and re-construction of familiar objects in semi-familiar actions and performance frameworks. This ritual helps the spectators to pursue an uneasy navigation of an artist's psycho-geographic memory space of the home performed inside a stranger's home kitchen. The participation in tactile hand-work provides an opportunity for the participant's sensory awareness to call upon the active and constant making and un-making of his/her own memories and material experiences as they relate to home. Translation-by-doing here could also be seen as a constructive act of destruction. As the cultural anthropologist William Reddy argues, translation happens 'not just between languages and between individuals, but among sensory modalities, procedural habits, and linguistic structures ... toward a conception of the individual as a site where messages arrive in many different languages or codes, and where some of the messages are successfully translated into other codes, while others are not' (80). In post performance feedback, one participant admitted to an initial reluctance to participate, reflexively perceiving her refusal as a 'childish way to deal with initial uncertainty when coming to new environments'. And yet, this resistance was

still a meaningful translative process where ‘destruction, rather than contributive creation ... performed some sort of selective process ... to get a sense of orientation within the staged place and find the anchor points’ (participant Markéta, in Facebook message exchange with author).

The estranging quality of including non-food materials into communal food-making proceedings further helped to configure a metaphor for dysfunctional memory (being required to forget in order to belong, yet not remembering to forget) in the context of Singapore. Paul Rae’s demonstrative analysis of how this city/state performs self-care astutely points out how this is dependent on a populace participating in what Paul Connerton might call ‘prescriptive forgetting’ (61): forgetting that is in the interest of all citizens. Lulled by the tropical heat and humidity the bodies of Singaporeans become ‘all the more significant as repositories and representations of memory’ (Rae, ‘No Sweat’ 163). Despite the prescribed and possibly constructive forgettings at play, the muscles in my body slip into imprecise remembrance, unable to remember to forget, requiring other bodies better at forgetting to embody my past belonging to places, many of which no longer exist.

As such, requesting other bodies (truer repositories of present memories living in Singapore) to perform my narrative of displacement and migrancy allowed for a disruption and translation of the experience of authenticity. This, in turn, opens up the possibility to reflect on post-belongings within the performance: belongings which are able to intersect fluidly with numerous social, spatial, material, affective and political dimensions (Lähdesmäki et al. 236). The performance space of *Unmade, Untitled* becomes a general repository of all the potentialities of unbelongings, and prior, hybridized belongings, experienced more fluidly than we think. Surrogate speaker Paul reflects that the performance brought to mind ‘questions of identity, culture, tradition and the sense of place, of the meaning of home—especially for those whose lives are shaped by currents of globalized sense of community and identity ... I think

this piece led me to consider the ephemeral and context-determined nature of my own identity and the identity of others with whom I am connected' (in email exchange with author). His transient, 'globalized sense' of belonging and identity evoked by the imagined rituals and remembered narratives of *Unmade, Untitled* can be located in Arjun Appadurai's notion of complex, interwoven reconstructions of imagined lives and 'imagined worlds'—a term Appadurai has refashioned from Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' to connote the 'multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (33).

My disembodiment from my home, conveyed through my dis-voicement, and in the co-creation of anti-food is the inevitable and dissonant result of an attempt to re-member (put together) and inhabit the multiple shifting worlds of my body, its memory, my country and its habitual forgetfulness, all of which have been transformed and reimagined by the pushes and pulls of modernity and mobility. As such, the performance plays out the out-of-place-ness experienced by members of diaspora, where:

[t]he experience of leaving home in migration is ... always about the failure of memory to fully make sense of the place inhabiting a migrant body, a body which feels out of place, which feels uncomfortable in this place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way, by that which appears as familiar (Ahmed, 343).

In fact, it could well be that the handful of migrants in the performance (rather than Singaporeans who can decode many of the symbols and lingua franca used within the performance, and in general feel the strongest level of belonging) that might engage most affectively with Ahmed's notion of 'uncommon estrangement' where people in diaspora come together in the 'potential to remake one's relation to that which appears as unfamiliar, in order to reinhabit spaces and

places' (344).

If Rae is correct in his assessment that '(n)othing—and no-one—is entirely at home in the city/state' of Singapore ('Performing Singapore', 190), perhaps one can only aspire to touch on the mythic impossibility of home through the back door of unbelonging, where the choosing, discarding, ordering of symbolic meanings of home point to a more homely, self-ordered elsewhere, from the repositories of our bodies and memories. The tearing, sorting, mashing, soaking, filling, rolling, smelling, and listening amidst the cooking haze in the kitchen afforded an intense, embodied sensory experience for the audience in this performance of culinary realism that unmade food into inedible relics for a ritualized performance of unbelonging.

Between listening to a story unmade of memory, and inhaling the sticky smells of fried bean-paste-paper mixed with ash, one might begin to feel the remnant steam from boiled pasta water. This mixes with the thick humidity from being so close to the equator, which causes the newspaper you are sitting on to leave its inky imprint on your ankles. A familiar strain of a nostalgic folksong barely being hummed is echoed in the raindrops splattering the terracotta tiles just outside the kitchen. If we pause long enough to attend to what our hands, eyes, noses, and ears are gathering, we might be urged to conjure a remembrance of what it was like to once belong. And in this sensory, felt, memory space of belonging elsewhere, elsewhere, we might recall Tuan's observation: '[w]herever we are, our senses immediately bind us to it. Think and we are out of our senses, detached and elsewhere ... Thinking makes us an exile' ('Home as Elsewhere').

### **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Sibilla Gelpke & Aran Scutcher, David Szanto, Stacy Huang, Siong Chung Hua, Liyana Amani Binte Shaifol Bahri, Hazel Lim, and Sam Chow.

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