Title: Belonging Beyond Borders: Malaysian Diaspora in Bayswater, London

Chuah Hao Feng (Student no: 6146384)
Supervisor: J.M.K. Hanna

Abstract

The Malaysian diaspora is defined by migration histories and cultural reinventions that have long influenced the preservation of heritage in new societal landscapes all over the world throughout time. This thesis examines the diasporic identity of Malaysians with a focus on the area of Bayswater, London. It draws on architectural history, sensory ethnography, and spatial analysis to explore how physical sites and intangible practices foster a resilient sense of belonging. Engaging with ongoing discussions about cultural hybridity and appropriation, this thesis argues that the diasporic identity goes beyond simply replicating traditional heritage. Instead, it reflects a continuous negotiation between past and present. Interviews, observations, and photographic documentation show that everyday experiences and shared memories are central to maintaining a vibrant urban heritage.

Keywords

Diaspora, Sense of Space, Culture, Identity, Temporalities, Multiplicity, Hybridity

London has long been a global center for immigration, with over 37% of its population born outside the UK as of 2021.[1] The term "reverse colonization" often turns into a provocative lens to analyze London's demographic transformation. While "reverse colonization" is a contested metaphor, as it risks equating migration with violent colonial subjugation, it underscores the cultural influence of postcolonial diasporas. This contested metaphor gains depth when applied to diasporas like Malaysia's, whose transnational cultural practices, though less visible than those of larger migrant groups, subtly reshape London's postcolonial identity, in which will be delved into with this thesis. Gilroy argues that Britain's multicultural present forces a reckoning with its colonial past,[2] while the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) framed this as a "reverse flow" challenging imperial amnesia.[3] Described as "postcolonial metropolis" by scholar John Mcleod, London's diversity is transformed by hybridity and diasporic communities that subvert colonial hierarchies, symbolizing a postcolonial reality where migration from former colonies reconfigures British society.[4] As mentioned, one of the many diasporic communities in London is Malaysia, while smaller than South Asian or Caribbean diasporas, the Malaysian

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[1] Office for National Statistics (UK), "Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality: Individual Country of Birth by Age, Sex and Quarter," June 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk.

[2] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 102.

[3] Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 120.

[4] John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), 78.

presence in the UK, which is approximately 84000 Malaysian-born residents as of 2021,[5] reflects similar postcolonial dynamics.

Malaysia's relationship with Britain began in the 18th century with the colonization of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, later expanding across the Malay Peninsula. The British Empire exploited Malaysia's resources such as tin and rubber and established administrative systems that linked the region to Britain.[6] This colonial infrastructure, combined with the forced migration of Indian and Chinese laborers to Malaysia under British rule,[7] created transnational networks that later facilitated Malaysian migration to the UK. Besides, during its rule in Malaya from 1786 to 1957, the colonial administration established educational and economic systems that privileged British institutions, fostering a local elite class oriented toward Anglo-centric opportunities.[8] These colonial legacies persisted after Malaysia's independence in 1957, as the UK remained a preferred destination for Malaysian students and professionals, facilitated by scholarships such as the Colombo Plan and other various institutional networks.[9] By the late 20th century, many Malaysians who initially migrated for higher education chose to settle permanently in the UK, driven by career prospects and diasporic networks that eased integration.[10] This trend is reflected in contemporary data, with approximately 35000 Malaysian-born residents were recorded in the UK in 2021, a figure stable since 2008, with London emerging as a central hub due to its concentration of universities and professional sectors.[11] Despite efforts by the Malaysian government to incentivize skilled returnees through initiatives like TalentCorp, many professionals remain abroad, underscoring the strong pull of UK-based opportunities, and hence establishing a stable Malaysian diasporic community in the United Kingdom.[12]

While Malaysians do not "colonize" UK in a literal sense, their presence contributes to the cultural pluralism that scholars like Paul Gilroy associate with postcolonial "conviviality."[13] Unlike Caribbean or South Asian migrants, Malaysians were not directly recruited post-WWII to fill labor shortages. Instead, their migration reflects elite mobility and educational ties, underscoring the unevenness of postcolonial diasporas. Yet their cultural impact aligns with John McLeod's concept of "postcolonial London," where hybrid identities disrupt

[5] Office for National Statistics (UK), "Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality: Individual Country of Birth by Age, Sex and Quarter," June 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk.

[6] Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 3rd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2017), 112–134.

[7] Amarjit Kaur, *Wage Labour in Southeast Asia Since 1840* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 67–89.

[8] John Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 145–68.

[9] Philip F. Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya, 1874–1940* (East Lansing: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1975), 89–94.

[10] Daniel P.S. Goh, "Diasporic Belonging and Malaysian Migration to the United Kingdom," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 688–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.957172.

[11] UK Office for National Statistics, "Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality: Individual Country Data," January 2021 to December 2021, https://www.ons.gov.uk; A. Sim, "Malaysians in London: Community, Culture, and Identity," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 19, no. 1 (2010): 148–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/011719681001900106.

[12] TalentCorp Malaysia, *Annual Report 2020: Engaging the Global Malaysian Talent* (Kuala Lumpur: Talent Corporation Malaysia, 2020), 12–14, https://www.talentcorp.com.my.

[13] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 102.

colonial hierarchies.[14] The diaspora's growth in cities like London, particularly in areas such as Bayswater, symbolizes a subtle reconfiguration of space once central to imperial power. As scholar Danau Tanu notes, Malaysian migrants navigate "dual identities," blending British and Southeast Asian influences to challenge monolithic notions of Britishness.[15]

This thesis investigates the Malaysian diasporic community, specifically in Bayswater, London, exploring how it navigates belonging in a foreign environment. This research is significant as it contributes to the growing discourse on Malaysian diasporas and their influence on multicultural urban landscapes. While studies often focus on larger diasporic groups such as Chinese or Indian communities in London, the Malaysian diaspora remains understudied, offering a unique lens on cultural adaptation and hybridity. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology, this study integrates architectural history, visual and sensory ethnography, as well as spatial sociology. Primary sources include interviews with Malaysian migrants, ethnographic fieldwork in Bayswater's "Malaysian" spaces, and photographic documentation of the community's presence. Visual ethnography plays a pivotal role in structuring this research, with methodological guidelines drawing heavily on Sarah Pink's work, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, which informed the fieldwork strategy and analytical framework.[16] Through this approach, the research provides an in-depth understanding of how the Malaysian diaspora has shaped and been shaped by Bayswater's urban fabric.

The thesis examines key themes, beginning with the historical context and migration patterns of the Malaysian diaspora in the UK. It then explores generational shifts and their impact on cultural retention and adaptation. This is followed by an analysis of spatial practices, focusing on key sites such as restaurants and religious institutions. Beyond physical spaces, the study investigates intangible cultural practices and digital networks, that also help sustaining a sense of belonging. Finally, the thesis reflects on the broader implications of these findings for understanding diasporic identity in multicultural urban spaces.

Bayswater's Historical Development and the Malaysian Diaspora

Bayswater, a West London district (Figure 1), evolved from a 19th-century aristocratic enclave into a hub of postcolonial diasporas, including a notable Malaysian community. Its transformation reflects broader patterns of postcolonial migration and the enduring legacies of British imperialism. Developed in the early 1800s as part of London's westward expansion, Bayswater became a prestigious residential area for Britain's elite, characterized by grand Victorian terraces (Figure 2) and proximity to Hyde Park.[17] Its central location and transport links, with Paddington Station built in 1838, made it a strategic node for commerce and administration. The opening of Bayswater Underground Station in 1868, further solidified the district's connectivity, accelerating its integration into London's urban fabric.

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[14] John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), 78.

[15] Danau Tanu, *Growing Up in Transit: The Politics of Belonging at an International School* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 144.

[16] Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2013)

[17] Fiona Rule, *London's Labyrinth: A Journey Through the Capital's Past* (Stroud: The History Press, 2016), 89.
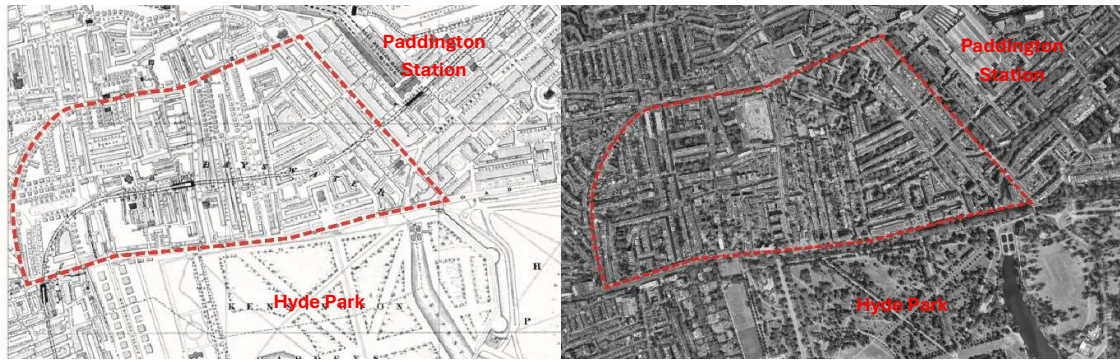
Figure 1. Bayswater in 1888 (Old Towns) and current (Google Earth).

By the late 19th century, Bayswater attracted wealthy colonial officials and merchants returning from Asia, establishing early connections to Britain's overseas territories.[18] Bayswater slowly become synonymous with rich multi-culturalism and quickly earned the nickname "Asia Minor" in 1885 during the period after the wealth of Indian produce available in the stores in the area, a demand generated by the many military and political families living in the area after postings to south Asia.[19] This period marked the phase of Bayswater's transition from a symbol of imperial elitism to a site of cross-cultural exchange.

After World War II, Bayswater's demographics shifted as London's housing crisis and suburbanization led to the subdivision of large homes into flats.[20] This created affordable housing in a central location, attracting immigrants from former colonies, including South Asia, the Caribbean, and later Southeast Asia. By the 1980s, Bayswater's Queensway and Westbourne Grove (Figure 3) became known for multicultural commerce, with international shops and restaurants catering to diasporic communities.[21]As Vertovec argues, dense clusters of diasporic groups generate conditions of "infrastructural multiculturalism", which reduces the friction of settlement for subsequent communities.[22] This phenomenon aligns with Suzanne Hall's observations on Commonwealth migration, where in postcolonial migrants gravitated toward neighborhoods adjacent to established diasporas, a pattern driven by shared linguistic, cultural, and institutional legacies of colonialism.[23] In Bayswater, for instance, Caribbean communities in Paddington and South Asian enclaves in Notting Hill served as gravitational nodes for subsequent Southeast Asian migrants. This pattern of chain migration may explain the early establishment of Malaysian communities in Bayswater. By 1981, Malaysian diasporic networks were already visible, exemplified symbolically by the Malaysian Royal Family's visit to Concordia Notte on Craven Road.[24]

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18 Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: "A Human Awful Wonder of God"* (London: Vintage, 2008), 212.

19 "Bayswater | Hidden London," *Hidden London Gazetteer*, accessed March 3, 2025, https://hidden-london.com/gazetteer/bayswater/.

20 John Davis, "The Transformation of Bayswater: From Aristocracy to Multiculturalism," *London Journal* 44, no. 2 (2019): 156.

21 "Queensway: The Making of a Global High Street," *Bayswater Chronicle*, March 12, 2005.

22 Steven Vertovec, "Super-diversity and Its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): 1035.

23 Suzanne Hall, *City, Street and Citizen: The Measure of the Ordinary* (London: Routledge, 2012), 67.

24 "Kojac Drops In," *British Newspaper Archives,* January 16, 1981, 23.

Figure 2. Bayswater's Westbourne Terrace, with Victorian Terrace architecture (Underground Map)

Figure 3. Westbourne Grove, where earlier diasporic community presence can already be seen. (The Library Time Machine, 1971)

Diasporic Placemaking in Bayswater

Building on this foundation of infrastructural multiculturalism and chain migration, the Malaysian diaspora in Bayswater began to actively reshape the neighborhood's social and cultural fabric. By leveraging the networks established by earlier diasporic communities, Malaysian migrants forged their own distinct spaces of belonging, transforming Bayswater not only into a site of settlement but also a stage for diasporic placemaking that echoed both colonial legacies and postcolonial reinvention.

A core example of placemaking is the Malaysian Hall. Originally located at Bryanston Square in the 1950s, just next to Bayswater area, it signified the first major Malaysian (Malaya at that period) diasporic communities (Figure 4) in the area.[25] With amenities, like canteen (Figure 5), shared housings, music rooms and prayer rooms, it was the "home away from home" among Malaysians in London.[26] Its relocation to 30-34 Queensborough Terrace in 2004 marked a strategic shift toward leveraging Bayswater's infrastructural multiculturalism.[27] Housed in a repurposed Victorian townhouse, the Hall embodies a spatial paradox, its Georgian façade, a relic of British colonialism, is juxtaposed with the rare display of the Malaysian flag (Figure 6), a visual rupture that asserts diasporic identity within London's urban fabric. This hybridity aligns with Jane M. Jacobs' concept of "postcolonial bricolage," where colonial architectures are retrofitted to serve postcolonial communities.[28]

The Duchess and the students from Malaya — TST, 4 July 1953

Malaya Hall, above, is at 44 Bryanston Square, in London. It is the only centre of it kind for Malayan students in London and provides accommodation and club life. Dances are held there once a week, with a really big one once a month.

TST, 30 September 1953

[25] Harith Faruqi Sidek, "Dari Malaya Hall ke Malaysia Hall," *Kitab Tawarikh 2.0* (blog), April 26, 2014, https://harithsidek.blogspot.com/2014/04/dari-malaya-hall-ke-malaysia-hall.html.

[26] "Malaysia Hall: A Home Away from Home," *New Straits Times*, November 18, 2019, https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2019/11/534974/malaysia-hall-home-away-home.

[27] klyeoh. "[London] Best Malay Food at Malaysia Hall Canteen, Bayswater." *Hungry Onion*, July 16, 2018. Accessed March 22, 2025. https://www.hungryonion.org/t/london-best-malay-food-at-malaysia-hall-canteen-bayswater/14139.

[28] Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Figure 4. Malaysian presences in the Malayan Hall before its independence. (Kitab Tawarikh 2.0)

TRULY MALAYSIAN ... The Malaysia Hall canteen which becomes the meeting place for almost every Malaysian in Britain.

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME ... Malaysia Hall, the pride of Malaysians will come to an end if its lease is not renewed.

Figure 5. Old Malaysia Hall in the 2000s. (New Straits Time, 2000)

Figure 6. Current Malaysian Hall since 2004 in Bayswater, with Malaysian flags (Jalur Gemilang) seen on the terraces. (author, 2025)

As one migrant explained, *"I, like many other Malaysians here, chose Bayswater because the Hall was here. It wasn't just about cheap rent; it was about being near mamak food and easier to connect with other Malaysians."*[29] The Malaysia Hall exemplifies placemaking as

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[29] Owner of Cham Kampung Boy, interview with author, March 14, 2025.

defined by Savills, a process transforming spaces into "vibrant, inclusive environments" through community-centric design.[30]

The Hall's move to Bayswater amplified its role as a chain migration catalyst for Malaysians to Bayswater area. Apart of it being the institutional anchor of Malaysian diaspora in Bayswater, it subsequently contributed to the establishment of many Malaysian businesses, particularly restaurants, due to the Hall fostering a network effect where emerging businesses benefit from established community ties. This phenomenon aligns with Portes and Zhou's analysis, which argues that robust community institutions provide vital social capital and support systems that facilitate chain migration and entrepreneurial activity.[31] Conversations with the locals, reveal that Bayswater as the most authentically Malaysian culinary enclave (Figure 8) in London, a testament to the Malaysian community's deep pride in its food and the nostalgic allure of familiar flavors that evoke memories of home.[32]As Chambers and Douglas argue, food serves as one of the critical markers of cultural continuity, fostering community cohesion and a sense of belonging through its nostalgic power.[33] Furthermore, urban geographical studies demonstrate that the clustering of ethnic businesses not only reinforces social networks but also reconfigures the spatial dynamics of a neighborhood, embedding diasporic identity within the broader urban landscape.[34]
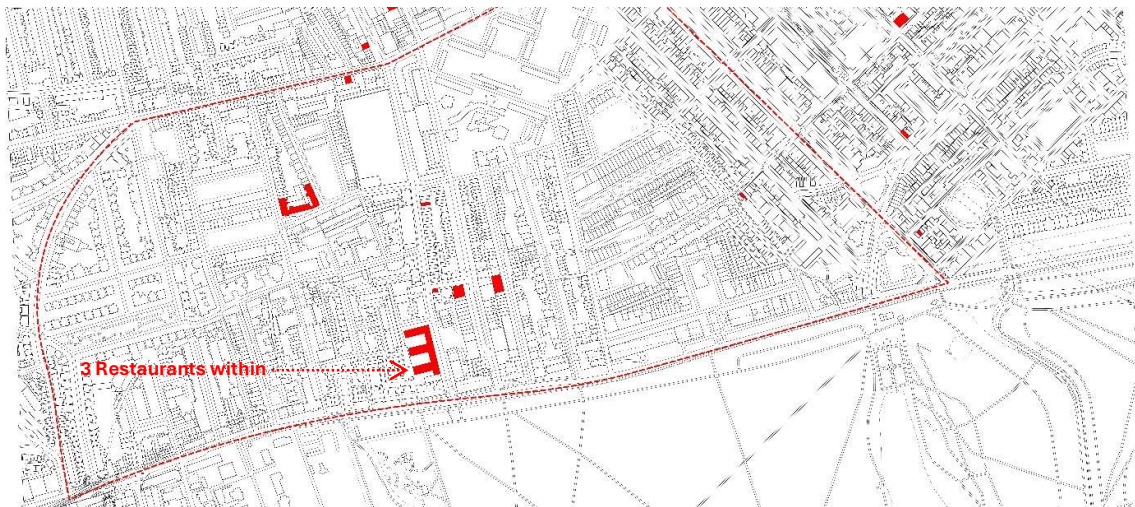

3 Restaurants within

Figure 8. Malaysian restaurant distribution around Bayswater area (author, 2025)

Even with the highest concentration of Malaysian restaurants around London, they are still easily missed by other uninformed people that cross the area due to its unassuming exteriors

[30] Savills, "The Concept of Placemaking," accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.savills.com.my/blog/article/214378/vietnam-eng/the-concept-of-placemaking.aspx.

[31] Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants," in *The Adapted American: Culture and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

[32] Ming Yao Yap, personal conversation with author, March 15, 2025.

[33] Deborah Chambers and Mary Douglas, "Food and Foodways in Migration," *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 3, no. 2 (2022): 105–123.

[34] Robert Kloosterman and Gert Nicolaou, "Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Ethnic Business, and Economic Development in Amsterdam and Rotterdam," *Regional Studies* 38, no. 8 (2004): 1013–1027.

(Figure 9).[35] Unlike many areas in Chinatown, where most of the appearances including the exteriors are modified, giving a distinct appearance for the public,[36] the Malaysian diasporic presence through exterior architectures is not distinctly shown. According to Dr. Umi, Malaysia's domestic multiculturalism, shaped by its multiethnic composition like Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous groups, has historically necessitated negotiated coexistence rather than ethnic dominance.[37] This domestic reality translates into diasporic communities prioritizing inconspicuous integration in host societies to avoid politicized visibility. Besides, according to a local author's friend, Malaysian diasporic spaces prioritize economic functionality, more focusing on practical needs rather than symbolic architecture,[38] in which reflects broader trends where Malaysian migrants, excluded from domestic affirmative action, emphasize economic survival over cultural monumentality.[39] Instead, Malaysian diasporic identity is often expressed through temporary or social practices, food, religious gatherings, digital networks, rather than built forms. This aligns with Margaret Crawford's theory of "everyday urbanism," where marginalized communities shape spaces through informal, non-architectural means.[40] While some Malaysian diasporic businesses still incorporate national motifs such as the Jalur Gemilang flag or batik patterns through their exteriors, these elements remain understated compared to Chinatown's overt iconicity. (Figure 10)

Figure 9. External profile of some Malaysian restaurants in Bayswater. (author, 2025)

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[35] Hong Sum Ho, personal conversation with author, March 14, 2025.

[36] S. Lau, *Chinatown Britain* (UK: Chinatown Online, 2002).

[37] Umi Manickam Khattab, "Who Are the Diasporas in Malaysia? The Discourse of Ethnicity and Malay(sian) Identity," *SOSIOHUMANIKA* 3, no. 2 (2010): 157–174.

[38] Ming Yao Yap, personal conversation with author, March 22, 2025.

[39] Low Choo Chin, "The Malaysian Chinese Diaspora in Melbourne: Citizenship and Belongingness," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 24, no. 1 (2016): 257–276.

[40] Margaret Crawford, *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Chase, John Kaliski, and Margaret Crawford (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008).

Figure 10. Symbols incorporated to exteriors of Malaysian businesses in Bayswater. (author, 2025)

Despite the subtle and understated external profiles, Malaysia diasporic community in Bayswater employs various visual markers within interior spaces to assert cultural identity and negotiate belonging in a foreign urban landscape. While the exteriors of Malaysian-owned businesses and community spaces often blend subtly into Bayswater's Georgian and Victorian streetscapes, their interiors are transformed into vibrant repositories of nostalgia, memory, and transnational connection. These visual and material practices show how diasporic communities use space and design to challenge colonial architecture, creating what Homi Bhabha terms a "third space" of hybrid cultural expression.[41]

The interiors of establishment like Med Salleh's Kopitiam, a Malaysian restaurant tucked within a corner of a hotel (which is also own by a Malaysian developer holding), exemplify this duality. The exterior retains (Figure 9, center), apart from its store signage, a nondescript Victorian facade, with its muted brickwork and glass windows indistinguishable from neighboring shops. Inside, however, shelves are lined with the iconic tin cans of biscuits and snacks produced during the 1980s, together with the rattan weave baskets (Figure 11, left), evoking wet market stores in Malaysia. Walls adorned with durian drawings, Malaysia's national fruit and vintage posters and drawings of Malaysian nostalgic landmarks like the "kopitiam". Penang's famous bicycle mural can also be seen utilized (Figure 12, left), creating a sensory enclave that bridges geographical displacement. These curated elements function as mnemonic devices, spatializing collective memory through what Michel Foucault describes as heterotopias, "counter-sites" where diasporic identity temporarily overwhelms the dominant urban narrative.[42] The tin cans, often arranged in rows reminiscent of Malaysian domestic pantries, are not merely decorative but performative, selling many Malaysians' favourite childhood snacks,[43] transforming quotidian acts of shopping or dining into rituals of cultural reaffirmation. These objects, functioning as what Sutton, terms "culinary souvenirs",

[41] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 55.

[42] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

[43] Gan Yu-Shuang, personal conversation with author, March 15, 2025.

are strategically placed in semi-public zones, like countertops and shelves to foster communal recognition among patrons while remaining unobtrusive to outsiders.[44]

Figure 11. Interior visual markers in Malaysian businesses, Met Salleh Kopitiam. (author, 2025)

Figure 12. Nostalgic markers at Cham Kampong Boy, (author, 2025) evoking the famous mural in Penang. (Ernest Zacharevic, 2014)

Generational shifts further shape these visual practices. First-generation migrants often prioritize direct cultural signifiers, in contrast the newer generation entrepreneurs curate subtler visual codes. Roti King, a newer establishment branched out from their original store at Euston Road, blends Malaysian slangs typography with discreet nods to heritage, minimalist wall art abstracting Islamic geometric patterns, and tropical plants like pandan. (Figure 13) This evolution mirrors Pnina Werbner's concept of "aesthetic cosmopolitanism," where diasporic youth negotiate hybrid identities through spatially embedded design choices.[45]

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[44] David E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (New York: Berg, 1999).

[45] Pnina Werbner, "Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 5 (2004): 897.

Figure 13. Newer establishment employing subtler visual markers, but with its own newer hybrid personalities. (author, 2025)

Sacred Spaces as Infrastructure of Belongings

While visual markers in Malaysian-owned businesses and domestic spaces articulate cultural identity through material nostalgia, religious institutions in Bayswater serve as equally vital anchors for the diaspora, embedding sacred geographies into London's urban fabric. These institutions like mosques and prayer rooms, function as hybrid architectural forms, blending Malaysian cultural and religious symbolism within British urban infrastructure.

The Malaysia Hall, apart from functioning as a community center, canteen and shared housings as mentioned before, also provides ample spaces for prayer room for the Muslim community, further exemplifying the adaptive reuse of Georgian and Victorian architecture. In diasporic context, religious architectures function not only as sites of worship but also as third spaces that mediate between the homeland and host society, fostering diasporic consciousness and communal cohesion. As Edward Soja noted, he argues that this "third space" transcends the conventional binary of the "here" (the host society in Bayswater) and the "there" (the homeland in Malaysia), allowing for a reimagining of identity that is continually in negotiation.[46] This idea is further supported by a friend of the author, who observed that these spaces are often arranged to resemble familiar cultural settings, thus maintaining a clear connection to the homeland.[47] Similar to business establishments, religious institutions also employ visual markers to assert cultural identity. In the Malaysia Hall prayer room, traditional ukiran (woodcarvings) can be seen frame along the walls, (Figure 14) effectively layering Malaysian identity onto a foreign architectural framework. This echoes David Lowenthal, who argues that buildings rich in cultural symbols function as tangible repositories of collective memory, fostering a sense of rootedness for dispersed communities.[48]

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[46] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 15.

[47] Nazhrin Faisal Sabri, personal conversation with author, March 25, 2025.

[48] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23–27.

Similarly, the nearby Queensway Mosque, also position as one of the major religious institutions for Malaysian diasporic community in Bayswater. Tucked amidst a labyrinth of diasporic-owned businesses in Queensway Market (Figure 15), it also helps to provide an alternative spiritual sanctuary, and a transnational anchor point for business owners or visitors around the area. Its prayer hall merges fleur-de-lis-patterned carpets (Figure 15), fusing European decorative elements with Jawi-script Qur'anic calligraphy on the walls. This shapes a mixed spatial story that supports both local-global connections and religious identity. This synthesis reflects Edward Said's concept of "orientalism in reverse"[49] and Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "production of space,"[50] underscoring how religious institutions in diasporic contexts not only provide spiritual solace but also facilitate cultural preservation and community cohesion amid the urban landscape

Figure 14. The interior of Malaysia Hall's prayer room (Shahir Shamsir, 2020) and the two locations of religious hotspot for Malaysian diasporic community close to the high street and station in Bayswater. (author, 2025)

Figure 15. Queensway Mosque (Zaid Z, 2019) and its location within the packed labyrinth of Queensway market (author, 2025)

However, the concentration of these religious institutions is primarily Islamic, catering for the Malaysian Muslim community. This concentration of Islamic religious institutions, together with the halal-centric commercial enterprises (Figure 16) in Bayswater reflects a deliberate spatialization of ethno-religious identity, shaping the area into a diasporic enclave that

[49] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[50] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

privileges Malay-Muslim Malaysian migrants. This phenomenon aligns with Saskia Sassen's assertion that global cities act as "strategic sites" for marginalized communities to reconstitute cultural and religious practices through localized infrastructure.[51] The clustering of mosques, halal restaurants, and grocery stores creates a "sacred geography" that reinforces Malay-Muslim identity while simultaneously excluding non-Muslim Malaysian minorities, such as ethnic Chinese and Indian communities, who lack equivalent institutional support. It has also been dubbed by Malaysian diasporic community as "Kampung Melayu" (Malay Village) to a certain degree instead of "Malaysian".[52] These spatial dynamics underscore religion's role in structuring diasporic settlement patterns, as noted by Lily Kong, who argues that religious spaces become "anchors" for migrant communities, enabling the reproduction of cultural norms and fostering a sense of belonging.[53]

For Malay-Muslim migrants, Bayswater's halal ecosystem facilitates daily religious compliance (dietary laws, prayer spaces) and social cohesion, effectively transforming the neighborhood into a "lived sanctuary". This mirrors Michel de Certeau's concept of "spatial stories," where everyday practices like shopping for halal groceries or attending Friday prayers become acts of place-making that resist assimilation into the dominant secular-urban fabric.[54] Conversely, the absence of analogous infrastructure for non-Muslim Malaysians, such as Chinese Buddhist temples or Indian Hindu cultural centers, disincentivizes their clustering in Bayswater. Instead, ethnic Chinese Malaysians gravitate toward areas like Canary Wharf, where proximity to East Asian financial networks and educational institutions aligns with their socioeconomic priorities.[55]

Figure 16. Halal Signage can be seen everywhere around Bayswater area, ideal catering for Muslims community. (author, 2025)

Beyond Visuals: Intangible Practices and Digital Networks

Apart of these tangible presences that shaped the Malaysian diasporic community in Bayswater, Malaysian migrants in the area also crafts a distinct urban enclave through festivals and digital networks, transforming the neighborhood into a dynamic site of transnational identity. Festivals like Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Chinese New Year temporarily reconfigure Bayswater's secular spaces into sites of ritualized belonging. The Malaysian Hall and many other culinary establishments in Bayswater become a heterotopic site during these

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[51] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 322–23.

[52] Nazhrin Faisal Sabri, personal conversation with author, March 25, 2025.

[53] Lily Kong, "Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity," *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 2 (2001): 224–25.

[54] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117–18.

[55] Lim Jonson, personal conversation with author, March 13, 2025.

events. Interiors would be draped in traditional fabric patterns and posters, as well as lanterns, each to different festival occasions, further reinforcing and celebrating the diverse cultures of Malaysia (Figure 17). Such spatial transformations again, align with Foucault's concept of heterotopia, where "other spaces" momentarily suspend the norms of their surroundings.[56] The secular architecture of London is thus resignified through diasporic rituals, creating ephemeral yet recurring spatial practices that assert cultural continuity. This phenomenon aligns with Rahul Mehrotra's concept of the "kinetic city," where urban spaces are dynamically transformed through temporary events and rituals, reflecting the fluid and adaptable nature of urban life.[57] Even public parks nearby Bayswater like Kensington Gardens witness Malay "buka puasa" (breaking of fast) gatherings, their open lawns temporarily transformed into communal dining spaces.[58] These acts of spatial reclamation underscore how diasporic festivals "reterritorialize" urban landscapes, embedding them with layered meanings of home and displacement.[59]

Figure 17. Within the same establishment, Med Salleh Kopitiam in Bayswater, it celebrates different festivals of different time, turning its interior into a "heterotopia" temporarily. (left: Med Salleh Facebook, right: author, 2025)

Digital networks further amplify this spatial dynamism. Platforms like Facebook groups and WhatsApp chains serve as virtual "town squares," coordinating everything from festivals to grassroots initiatives (Figure 18). These networks not only sustain transnational connections but also materialize in physical space.[60] They collapse geographic boundaries through what Nancy Ettlinger terms "relational geography", a process that reconfigures diasporic spatiality

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[56] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in *Foucault on Urbanism*, ed. John Smith (New York: Routledge, 1990), 73–80.

[57] Rahul Mehrotra, *The Kinetic City & Other Essays: The Permanent and Ephemeral* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2021), https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2021/11/excerpt-from-the-kinetic-city-other-essays-the-permanent-and-ephemeral-by-rahul-mehrotra/.

[58] Syahme Syazanee, personal conversation with author, 22 March 2025.

[59] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 89.

[60] Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 112.

by merging online and offline practices.[61] Furthermore, Instagram accounts documenting Malaysian-owned businesses like Normah's in Queensway Market, blur the line between digital promotion and spatial occupation, drawing both diaspora members and curious Londoners into these culinary spaces (Figure 19). This digital visibility transforms businesses into a hybrid node, where online promotion reinforces offline foot traffic, creating a feedback loop that enhances the economic and cultural viability of Malaysian spaces. The curation of nostalgic aesthetics in these posts also performs "digital placemaking", embedding Malaysian material culture into global visual economies.[62]
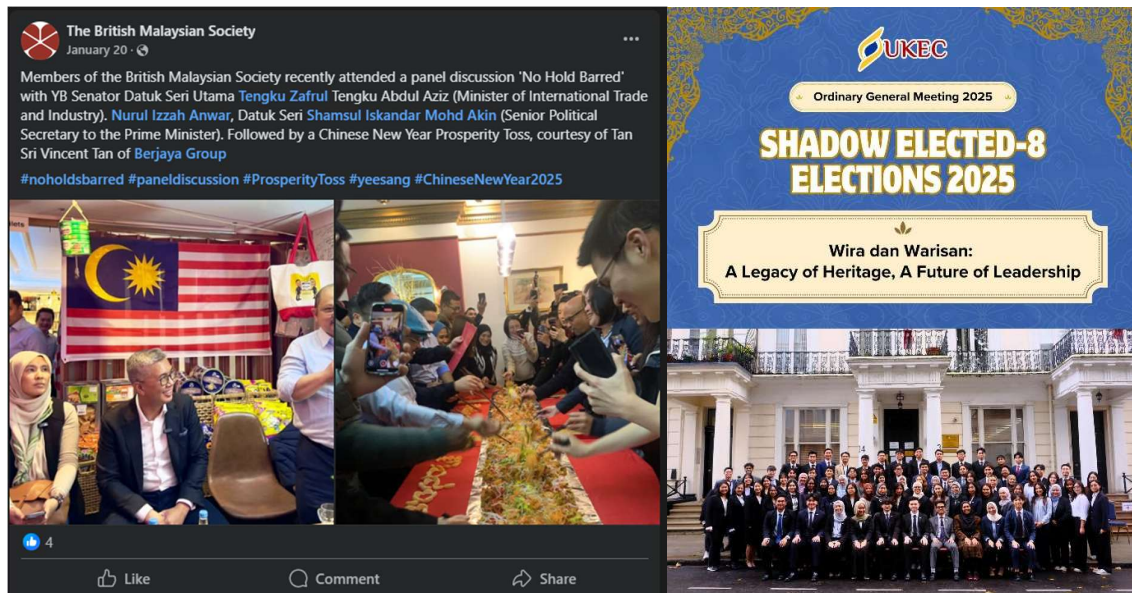

Figure 18. Facebook groups and pages as a platform for coordination and advertisement of Malaysian events. Med Salleh Kopitiam and Malaysian Hall in Bayswater is often used as a place for "covers" gathering Malaysian, further showcasing the strong Malaysian diasporic presence in the Bayswater area (The British Malaysian Society and UKEC Facebook, screenshotted by author, 2025)

The interplay between festivals and digital networks fosters transnational resilience, a concept Mihaela Nedelcu defines as the capacity of diasporas to sustain identity across borders through socio-technical systems.[63] Virtual coordination enables the rapid assembly of physical gatherings, while the documentation of these events online reinforces collective identity across borders. These shows how intangible elements like festivals and digital connections can work together to create a strong yet flexible sense of community for Malaysians in Bayswater. These cultural practices, supported by technology, allow Malaysians to maintain their identity across borders while adapting to life in Bayswater. Ultimately, it is not just physical spaces but these everyday traditions and online networks that shape belonging to this diasporic group.

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[61] Nancy Ettlinger, "Relational Geography: A Basis for Addressing Digital-Physical Hybridity," *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 5 (2020): 874.

[62] Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets, "Platform Urbanism and Hybrid Placemaking: A Case Study of London's Migrant-Owned Food Businesses," *Urban Studies* 59, no. 8 (2022): 1632.

[63] Mihaela Nedelcu, "Transnational Resilience: Romanian Migrants' Digital Practices in Switzerland," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 4 (2022): 912.
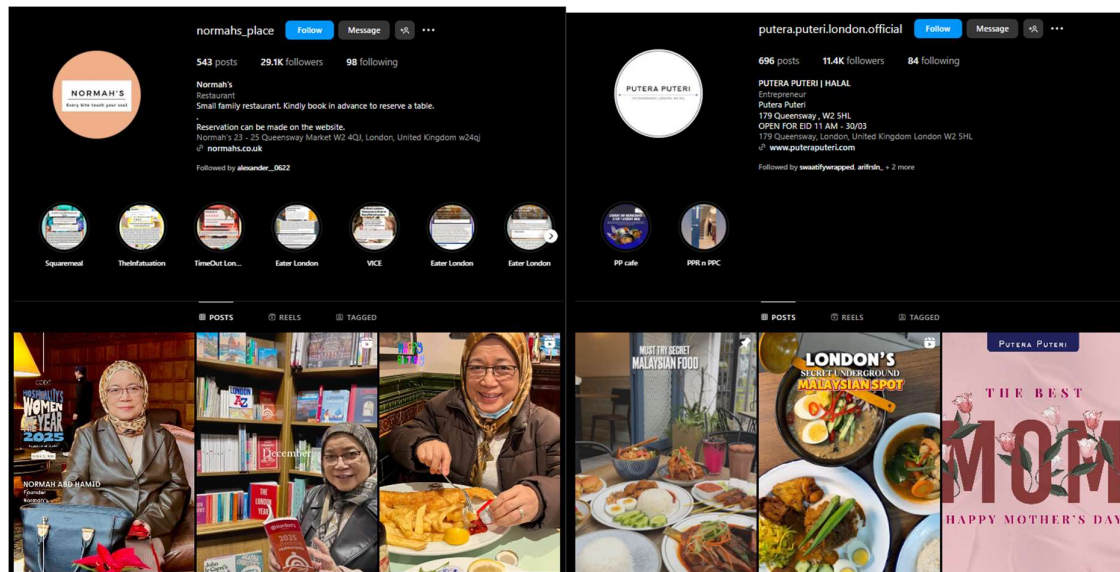
Figure 19. Instagram posts features Normah's and Putera Puteri, these Malaysian establishment utilized social platform to promote their business, usually depicted as underrated and hidden gems by public. (Instagram screenshot by author, 2025)

Conclusion

This thesis offers a compelling and methodologically innovative contribution to the discourse on Malaysian diasporic identity. By interweaving architectural history with visual and sensory ethnography, the study successfully elucidates how Malaysian diasporic communities in Bayswater negotiate belonging through an intricate dialogue between material culture and intangible practices. The research notably challenges conventional narratives of multiculturalism by demonstrating that diasporic identities are neither static nor merely reflective reproductions of heritage, instead, they are fluid, continuously negotiated through processes of adaptation, reinvention, and the strategic resignification of colonial legacies.

A central strength of the thesis lies in its nuanced analysis of spatial placemaking. The adaptive reuse of British structures, such as the Malaysia Hall, serves as a metaphor for postcolonial bricolage, where the juxtaposition of Georgian facades with overt diasporic symbolism encapsulates a dual narrative of continuity and disruption. This approach not only foregrounds the role of institutional anchors in facilitating chain migration but also highlights the subtleties of visual rhetoric employed in the interior spaces of diasporic establishments. In doing so, the research reveals how everyday practices, from culinary rituals to the digital coordination of festivals, function as mnemonic devices that both resist and transform the dominant urban narratives.

Yet, despite its significant contributions, the thesis also invites critical reflection on its scope and methodological orientation. The privileging of Malay-Muslim institutions and symbols, while analytically justified by their spatial prominence in Bayswater, raises questions about the extent to which non-Muslim Malaysian communities are marginalized within the urban framework. This selective focus underscores an unevenness in diasporic placemaking that merits further inquiry. Future research could fruitfully extend the analysis to incorporate the

experiences of non-Muslim Malaysians, thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of the spectrum of diasporic identities.

Moreover, the incorporation of digital networks into the analysis marks a timely recognition of the evolving modalities of community formation in a globalized world. By articulating the transformative role of social media and other virtual platforms, the study advances our understanding of "digital placemaking" and its capacity to reconfigure spatial narratives across borders. However, this digital dimension also complicates the traditional dichotomy between physical and virtual spaces, prompting a re-examination of what constitutes urban belonging in the contemporary era.

Overall, this thesis stands as a significant academic intervention in the fields of architectural history and postcolonial urban studies. It effectively demonstrates that diasporic identity is produced through a dynamic interplay of historical antecedents, material practices, and modern digital interventions. In doing so, it not only enriches our conceptualization of hybridity and spatial resilience but also sets the stage for subsequent research on the interplay between emerging diasporic practices and the urban environment.

Positional Statement

I am a Malaysian Chinese born in Penang, whose personal and academic journey has been deeply influenced by a diverse set of cultural and geographical experiences. My Malaysian roots and my education, starting in college where many of my friends saw the United Kingdom as a place for further studies and career opportunities, then studying in Hong Kong and eventually the Netherlands, have deeply influenced my view of diasporic identity and migration.

This architectural history thesis on the Malaysian diaspora in the Bayswater area of London is informed by both my lived experiences and interests. I approach this work with an awareness of the complexities of identity formation and spatial belonging that come from being part of a transnational community. My personal narrative is interwoven with the collective experiences of many Malaysian expats, yet it remains singular in its specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. I recognize that my perspective is both enriched and limited by my background and committed to engaging with a multiplicity of voices within the diaspora to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of how space, culture, as well as architecture intersect.

By critically reflecting on my own positionality, I aim to explore how diasporic narratives are expressed and reinterpreted in urban landscapes like Bayswater in London. This inquiry is both personal and analytical, an attempt to bridge the gap between lived experience and this research, and to contribute meaningfully to discussions about identity, migration, and the cultural transformation of spaces in a globalized world.

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