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Chalk dust and footprints: A semiotic reflection on vocation, legacy, and becoming

Received June 2025; Reviewed July 2025; Accepted August 2025; Published September 2025

Abstract: In the language of signs, legacies are not inherited; they are enacted. Every morning as I ascend the cinder block steps of the state university where I am currently a teacher, I am not haunted by ghosts, but by shadows – my late father, who walked these very canals as an associate professor, and my aging mother – who etched her quiet defiance into blackboards across public school classrooms for over three decades. I, the unwilling next generation in service, follow in their footsteps with a blend of piety and intransigence, asking myself: What does it mean to teach in a place where your own becoming is buried beneath someone else's legacy? I teach at the same state university where my father had a role – not simply as an employee, but as someone whose commitment to the university deeply embedded him in its mission. He passed away in 2020, but remnants remain – not in statues or plaques – but in the reflections, from colleagues who knew him for decades, in the institutional habits he institutionalised, and in the knowing glances some people throw at me, seeming to expect to hear imprints of my father's voice within mine.

Keywords: semiotics, vocation, legacy, becoming



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In the language of signs, legacies are not inherited; they are enacted. Every morning as I ascend the cinder block steps of the state university where I am currently a teacher, I am not haunted by ghosts, but by shadows – my late father, who walked these very canals as an associate professor, and my aging mother – who etched her quiet defiance into blackboards across public school classrooms for over three decades. I, the unwilling next generation in service, follow in their footsteps with a blend of piety and intransigence, asking myself: What does it mean to teach in a place where your own becoming is buried beneath someone else's legacy?

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The semiotics of this space – the peeling walls of the faculty space, the distant tarpaulins of university events that no longer seem relevant, and the familiar smell of old books that hint at new possibilities – mean more than what is merely in front of me. Keane (2009) reminds us that objects and rituals are not innocuous; they are crawling with ideology and affect. In my case, they mean both hope and inadequacy. I often say I am a "trying hard" university lecturer, but what is "trying hard" but an index, a signifier of devotion muddled with desperation? In this sense, I do not see *trying hard* as performance; I see it as pedagogy composed by wounds.

There is vulnerability in being the symbolic retention of someone else's integrity. My father's death – both literally and symbolically – left me a silence in the university that I am still trying to name. His name, for now, is spoken by elder colleagues like an always-float signifier of warmth and care, and discipline. I am walking that memory, not to replace that memory or to disassociate with it, but to make meaning within its weight.

In contrast, I am still unsteady, perceived as able but never consistent, appreciated, but still becoming. Here, I see Ahmed (2012) engaged with the politics of representation. My syllabi, my gestures, my role on committees – they are always being read and sometimes misread, they are always being framed and spoken through the archival memory of family and institutional knowledge. One connotes with one's name and where it comes from, one learns to manage the understanding of difference.

In my mother's hands – still callused from years of grading tests, now just softened by age – I see another form of pedagogy: the teaching of endurance in repetition and love. In her experience – told in Ilokano, in jumbles, sitting over re-heated rice and boiled vegetables – she speaks in symbols: red pen as authority, chalk as sacrifice, class roll as burden and pride. These are the symbols of service daily, uncounted in academic literature, but written in bodies.

These memory fragments are the "in-between spaces"- come to represent such rich opportunities to consider my own positionality. I am not teaching in order to mimic my parents' work; I am engaged in teaching to translate their work. Their discipline is my learning outcomes. Their tiredness, my syllabus updates. Their silence, my office hour dialogue. Their faith, my follow-through, especially on days when I feel unseen or unsure.

And yet, even within this translation, I understand I too have become a symbol of a generation of scholar-teachers entangled with our labour, love and liminality. Some of us are trapped between uncertainty and pride, and wear impostor syndrome like a second layer of skin. Particularly within public education, it feels that excellence is measured through sacrifice and not sustainability. My own presence is not evidence of success- it is a gift. A lowly act of staying.

I dream still. I dream of professorship, not as an endpoint, but as affirmation. Not for prestige, but for fulfilment. My father wanted that for me quietly. He never spoke it, never named it even, but he planted it like a proverbial seed, restlessly gesturing with his body as he beheld me when I spoke publicly, or how he used to tell neighbours that I "*might someday become a doctor – not of medicine, but of words.*" The metaphor, too, is the sign: of care, of storytelling, of possibility.

Loughran (2006) called this practice engaged pedagogy, a model of teaching which positions the self as a site of knowledge. For me, teaching is embodied. It is in how I gaze at students who arrive late - not with judgment, but with curiosity. It is in how I invite a space for students who say they are tired but still come. I know that particular feeling well. Teaching is not only intellectual; it is dignity.

I've been involved in administrative meetings, policy reviews, and strategic planning for some months now, and I continue to return to the classroom, the only place where the abstractions of development plans and institutional markers fuse into real actors. A student who is reluctant to speak. A group that missed the deadline and submitted a project effort. A young mind that apologises too much! Each thesis is a text – each one a signal, quietly asking to be interpreted with care.

As Serres (2008) said, "teaching can be likened to ferrying across a river. One remains in the stream, learning to bring others across." Perhaps this is my reason for hanging on. I know the river well. I have crossed it too – wounded and hesitant but hoping all the same. And I believe I can help others do this, too.

There are days when I think about giving up. About moving elsewhere. About living a less hurried, more praised life. And then I remember: this is the same place that made my family. This is where my father gave his heart, where my mother found her voice. This is where I return – not out of nostalgia – but in continuity. There's still work to do.

And so, I persist.

Not because I have to, but because I am able.

Because there is meaning in persisting.

Because sometimes, the most radical act we can do is to stay.

I am not the greatest teacher. But I am a faithful teacher. I struggle, and in the struggle, I serve. My teaching is not a spectacle; it is a slow, deliberate act of caring. It is a practice of presence. A translation of the lives that shaped mine.

This is my vocation.

Not loud. Not perfect. But lived.

Chalk dust on sleeves. Footprints to follow.

Signs, everywhere.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Jesus Rafael B. Jarata is the Director for International Affairs at Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University (DMMMSU), Philippines. A former Chair of the Languages Department, he has presented research in Asia and Europe and was a recipient of a National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA) travel grant. He represented the Philippines in the 2022 YSEALI Fellowship in Vietnam and joined CHED's academic immersion in Canada. His fields of interest include semiotics, media, and development communication.

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