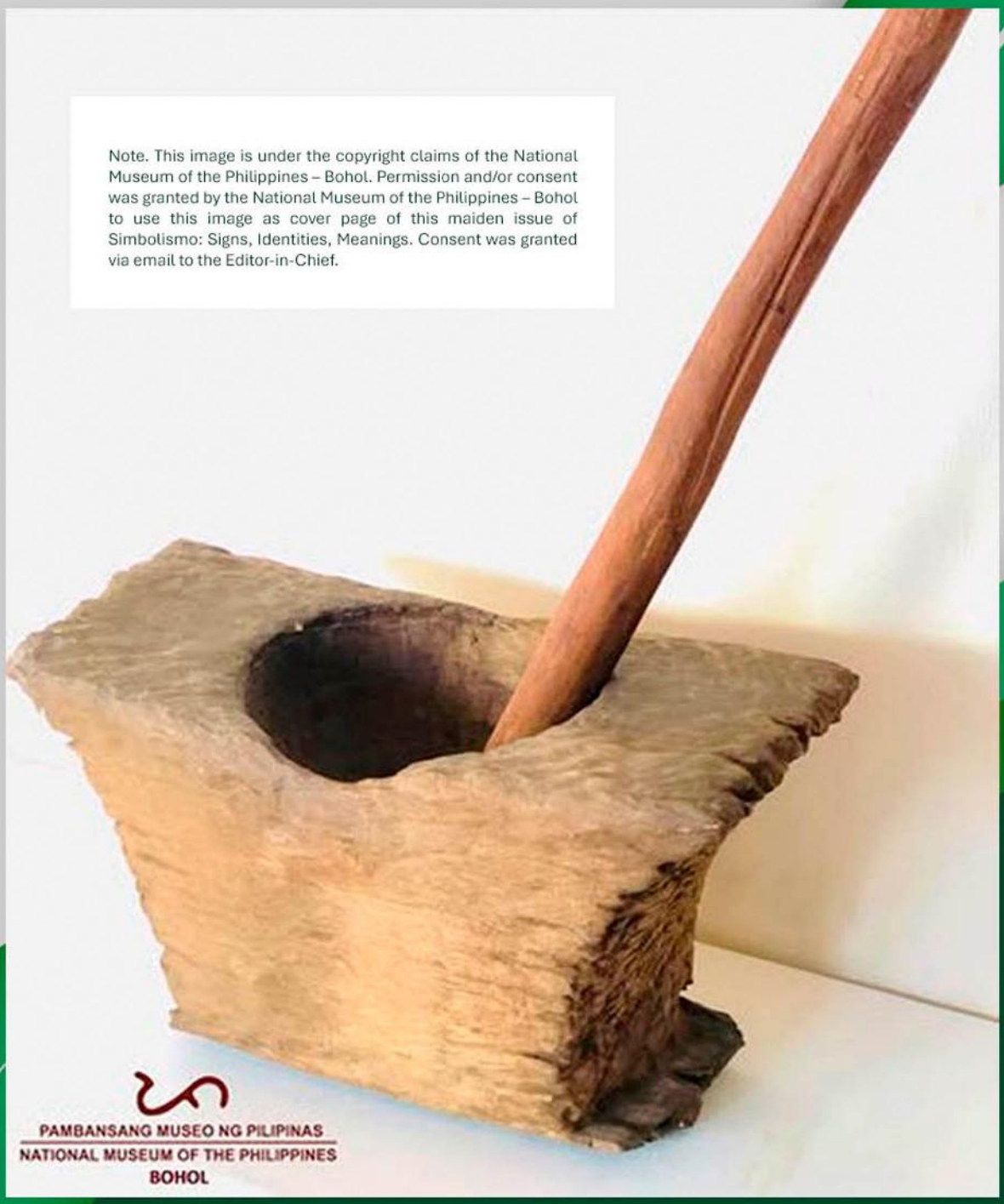
SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS



Note. This image is under the copyright claims of the National Museum of the Philippines – Bohol. Permission and/or consent was granted by the National Museum of the Philippines – Bohol to use this image as cover page of this maiden issue of Simbolismo: Signs, Identities, Meanings. Consent was granted via email to the Editor-in-Chief.

"A symbol of struggle and resilience, lusong and bayo were, and remain, as economic tools used by our parents and grandparents to prepare nilupak na saging na saba or nilupak na bugas to be sold to the community as a means of earning an income to buy our basic needs and provide food on our tables." -Editors, Simbolismo: Signs, Identities, Meanings

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1, 2025

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

CONTACT INFORMATION

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SHHK 02-04, 48 Nanyang Avenue
Singapore 639818 |
+65 6513-7633/7635
(link thru LCC landline)
editor@simbolismo.org

CREDIT

Cover image by the National Museum of the Philippines

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Publisher Registration No: R250508-007 with the National Library Board of Singapore

Volume 1, issue 1, 2025

Editor's Note

On behalf of the Editorial Team, I am pleased to introduce the maiden issue of *Simbolismo*: Signs, Identities, Meanings (herein referred to as *Simbolismo*). To establish our online journal and finally publish our maiden issue was not an easy feat. From the ideation process in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, to our career movements, to some detours and redirections in order to pursue a niche journal that speaks for ourselves, and to the failed attempts to engage some partners to collaborate with us for this intellectual endeavour, we did not lose courage, faith, and hope to make this happen. We stumbled, but we pursued and persisted all for knowledge building, knowledge sharing, and intellectual growth. We believed in ourselves because we could not afford to put our ideas to waste, and we could not afford to stay silent.

The essence of this journal is embodied by the shared interest and passion of the Editorial Team – to view and understand the world as symbolic, a space and place where symbols and sign systems abound waiting to be deciphered because their meanings matter so much to us and to the bigger world in which we live. We believe that these signs and sign systems have deeper contextual, social, cultural, political, or personal meanings moving beyond the literal meaning. These signs and sign systems reside and are captured in images, texts, narratives or stories, literature, poetry, folk songs, dances, lived experiences, media, visuals, emotions, struggles, and memories and states of mind of individuals, groups, or communities (including ourselves) that represent ideas that stand for something bigger.

We believe that through an exploration of the signs that reside in the world around us, we can locate our identity and galvanize our sense of place and positionality in the communities in which we live, and in the expanding diaspora in which we continue to tread. Signs and symbols summon us to engage in constant reflection and rumination as our way of maintaining a deeper connection with our distant past as a people and a community with rich history, heritage, traditions, and culture so that we can keep living the present and forging ourselves for the future.

The release of the maiden issue of *Simbolismo* is a testament to the enduring passion of the Editorial Team in pursuing semiotic studies as a creative expression of our ideas and lived experiences as academics, researchers, and individuals operating in our own spaces, contexts, or communities. However, the establishment of *Simbolismo* would have not been possible if we had not received the intellectual generosity of esteemed professors, academics, researchers, professionals, scholars, artists, and development workers from various universities and organisations in the Philippines, Singapore, and abroad who graciously agreed to be a part of our International Advisory Board.

Simbolismo embodies the principles and philosophy of semiotics as the intersubjective mediation by signs. It also represents the active engagement of the editors, reviewers, and the international advisory board in ongoing and emergent conversations on thinking qualitatively in research guided by semiotics as a theoretical and methodological lens (macro) entangled within specific fields or disciplines (micro) that we are pursuing such as communication, literature/poetry, English language studies, sociocultural studies, media studies, visual arts, creative writing, folk literature and dance, lived experience, memory and emotions, to name a few. Embedded in these essays, artworks and poems is the immense power of a semiotic interpretant entrenched deep within us provoking us to engage in making sense of our emotions, thoughts, values, and beliefs about ourselves and the world in which we live.

This maiden issue features ten essays coming from undergraduate students at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore who were undertaking an inquiry and communication course tasked at writing a critical op-ed essay. Wong Jing Qing Vanessa argues that when we fear loss, and when we grieve from loss, it is because we want to love and be loved. And when we recognise this, we might be able to teach ourselves to accept loss and move on. Kyaw Zin Thant, on the other hand, believes that even if "breaking" (a particular style of a street dance) has become highly competitive and commercialised due to its introduction *to* and inclusion *in* the Olympic Games, it remains an artful expression of one's identity and an authentic self because the breaker perceives it to be, and chooses to be.

With the intense desire of the human being to win, Cher Yue Yang posits that winning is so sought after not because we truly desire it, but because we fear the consequences of failure. He, therefore, shares an insight: to shift our perspective to see losses as lessons rather than failures to offer ourselves a sense of liberation from the vicious cycle of chasing victory. Lim

Ray'En develops this further by investigating this human desire to win in the context of arcades and casinos. He argues that if we develop an awareness of what happens to ourselves when we experience the thrill, excitement, and anticipation while manipulating those claw machines in the arcades and casinos, then we could better navigate the fine line between entertainment, experience, and obsessive habits, and we could possibly avoid the vicious cycle of disappointment and loss. This awareness of anticipation as a human reflex will teach us to understand why we are attracted to risks, to engage in the gaming experience thoughtfully, and ensure that excitement enriches rather than diminishes our lives.

On the aspect of seeking constancy and familiarity in the fast-changing world, Lim Kee Boon shares a thought-provoking insight about returning to our favourite food stall and eating the same dish on a regular basis. He asserts that the allure of the familiar is not only about convenience or nostalgia but also about the desire for belonging, the desire for some things to stay the same when everything else around us keeps changing. It is also about the human desire for sensual pleasure - enjoyment of taste, warmth, and feel. That familiar burst of flavour, the satisfaction of a warm, delectable dish, are small pleasures that ground us in the moment and remind us of what it means to feel human, and to be human. On the concept of time, Jayanty Maha Ananya, suggests that the familiarity that we find in the unfamiliar may be a testament to the deep, recurring patterns of human existence; that our souls are experiencing the same frame of time again and again, whether it be due to reincarnation or the actual repetition or cycle of time. Such familiarity in the unfamiliar is a testimony that we are reliving the experiences that our ancestors have gone through because their memories are being passed down to us in time and with time, with or without our notice - an echo of the past in one way or another finding grounding in the present that we are living, and what is to come.

But what about nostalgia? Foo Jing Lui Jonah postulates that places or spaces in which we have created vivid memories have so much impact to human connection, relationships, and the desire of the human spirit to hold on. He adds that places serve as a mirror, reflecting both impermanence and transformation, reminding us not only of what has been lost but also of what endures in our memory. However, he argues that memories forged from those places and spaces do not stop time and ourselves from moving forward. Places reveal the fragile, enduring, yet fleeting nature of human connection; they do not only remind us of the aching nostalgia that we cling to, but also afford us this resolve to let go and carry on.

In art, Wu Chloe argues that art as a free form of expression can be stunted with legalities and policies that have more bearing in terms of how governments manage their socioeconomic affairs; however, to find meaning in street or public art, the artists and their intentions might be pushed to the periphery and fade in the shadows. What emerges is the power of the passersby, the public, the collective making sense of this art in juxtaposition to their beliefs, values, perceptions, and lived experiences. What gives creativity such as art its value and meaning is *us* – the greater audience, the hivemind that seeks to manifest meaning from our volatile environments.

In terms of bravery and heroism, Swetha Sudhakar explores the reasons that firefighters hold as they confront risks in performing a noble profession – to run to danger in order to save lives. She argues that firefighting is effective because of teamwork, camaraderie, and stringent training of firefighters in extinguishing fires to save lives. However, there is more to this than meets the eye. Beyond the call to serve and a sense of fulfilment, fighting fires reveals a deeply complex psychological interplay where fear, ego, narcissism, tolerance of pain, and an almost playful defiance of danger intersect. Firefighters' actions challenge us to reconsider our own perceptions of courage and bravery: not as the absence of fear, but as an intricate rhythm between risk, resilience, ego, narcissism, and the unspoken allure of the human mind in confronting those moments of fighting the fire as a way of affirming self-worth.

Then, there is the concept of happiness. Viewed from the lens of the migrant workers working in massive construction projects in Singapore, Joshua Tan Wei Jun discovers wisdom in the way migrant workers live their lives and how it changed the way he perceives happiness. Facing wage discrimination, deportability, and poor mental health while working under time pressure, these migrant workers find joy in the simplest pleasures of sipping *kopi* before starting an arduous task, and drinking an ice-cold can of beer to end a long day's work. Migrant workers can overcome those difficult sacrifices in a foreign soil for one reason: to provide a better life for their families back in their home country. Such act of selflessness and heroism despite living a life of dearth is an eye-opening experience for Joshua, making him reevaluate how he views the concepts of comfort, privilege, and entitlement against the concepts of joy, happiness, and fulfilment.

This maiden issue also highlights four artworks. John Michael Caneda shares his journey of strength and purpose symbolised by the character of a turtle – slow but is determined to reach

its destination. We can reach our destination if we cultivate a sense of purpose within us, if we hold on to our dreams, and if we persist despite the odds, just like the turtle. We carry on and overcome obstacles despite how difficult they can be, just like the turtle. Jeric P. Lausin, on the other hand, cannot stop reminiscing his nostalgic past in the remote island of Biliran in the Philippines. Despite the dearth of life, he cannot afford to forget the simplicity and tranquillity of life in their rural province, and the memories forged there with his family and cousins will stay with him wherever he goes.

An unknown artist also shares an unfortunate and painful memory from super typhoon Haiyan. Losing two siblings and being a witness to the thousands of deaths from the disaster has been a deeply traumatic experience for her that is certainly difficult to bear. Guilt keeps haunting her for not being able to save her younger siblings from the deluge, and for not being able to contribute to environmental preservation. She is willing to carry such guilt as a way of emotional catharsis. In addition, Esther Wansing Soo's painting illustrates how a life of routine gives us the courage to leave, to travel, to go there and discover not only peoples, places, and cultures, but also ourselves, because it is in these routines and a mundane life that we take time to understand ourselves better, to establish grounding, and find meaning in existence. As Soo (2025) said, "To go there is not simply an escape, but a calling. We are responding to a call that echoes through the ages which allows us to listen to our core, our voice, our humanity, and to keep grounded in who we are, and why we keep living." (p. 65).

Three poems also found a space in this maiden issue. Written in Cebuano or Bisaya, these poems emerge as vehicles of honest expressions of emotions that these artists bravely share in their own rhyme, metre, and form. Steneli D. Oraya honestly and bravely expresses her love and longing for her deceased grandmother. She uses vivid descriptions to foreshadow the interplay of love and pain, depth and suffering, and this constant tug of holding on and letting go of such purity of love for her grandmother. Looking above into the vastness of the skies is her way of maintaining her relationship with her deceased grandmother whose death seemed to have taken a part of her sense of being. Jerlyn May C. Berador, on the other hand, presents a comical account of her relationship with her father. Rich in local colour, she narrates a thrilling experience of collecting coins from her father's pocket only to satisfy her desire for a sweet, fruity candy – a simple joy that a life of dearth can offer. Lastly, Lowella Jane Cabahug Eugenio expresses her admiration to a friend who symbolises integrity, accountability, fairness, strength, and wisdom to fight against the wickedness of the world in his own little ways. "Intoy", an

endearment of a mother or father to a son, or a big sister to a younger brother, signifies something bigger: a David, or an underdog, who is willing to triumph over the bigger evils of society.

Before I end, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the following individuals who remained with me through thick and thin: the Editorial Team, Fraulein Oclarit, Angelo Tubac, and Ali Pinzon, for staying with me despite the challenges we faced; Loudie Suliva for his technical expertise and support making this online journal possible with OJS-PKP as platform and workflow; and my nephew Kurt Zackary Delante Oraya for his youth and optimism, such that when we dream and manifest that dream and work for it, it will eventually come to fruition. Consciously or not, he is a constant reminder of the mantra "Just do it and keep going". His innocence and purity of soul is worth a thousand attempts to make an online journal possible because, with his words, "Just do it, and believe in yourself", I found courage and will to carry on.

Here is to more symbolic but valid and meaningful interpretations of the world through the lens of semiotics grounded in our lived experience, and in our existence in this ever-changing world.

Nimrod L. Delante
Editor-in-Chief, *Simbolismo*: Signs, Identities, Meanings

Volume 1, issue 1

Wong Jing Qing, Vanessa*

Of Loss, Grief, and Love

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15301348

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

My world ended that day. Sorrow, guilt, regret, amplified by blind devotion. Desperation, helplessness. All I see are memories, ghosts of the past. I cannot forget him, no matter how hard I try. I deleted his pictures, only to recover all 800 of them again, and for what? All they give me is pain. I need to write this down, tell him how I feel, like I used to do every day. Maybe it will change his mind. I had lost all self-respect; I did not need any – I needed him. It killed me to think of what could have been. He blocked me, yet I still write to him. I just wish he was there to receive them. I wish I could accept that this is all in vain, that he is not coming back, and I am to blame. But it is hard.

I have nothing but love for him. I did this to myself. I hate myself. These thoughts ring in my head as I watch my feelings bleed into words, but I am physically unable to express it all. I feel as if I am going to burst and all I can do is write – but my writing helps no one, not even myself. Not when the only thing I seemingly know how to do is done with trembling fingers – it gets very messy. I do not know what I am writing about. I do not even know why I am writing. I only feel worse as I do it. What right do I have to drag others down as I spiral in my own pain? Nonetheless, I do it, without knowing why.

“He was so good to me. He treated me so well. I was the one who pushed him away. It was my fault.”

Regret lingered in my words. Every letter laced with guilt as I reminisce about us. Why did I not demonstrate my love for him then? Why do I, only when it is too late, try so desperately to make my feelings known? To write even while fully aware that my intentions will never reach him as my audience - why do I do that? This question rings in my head as I struggle to find peace within myself. “Fear”, I write. I have been so afraid of losing my best friend and companion that I was driven to subjugate myself just to feign normalcy. Deep in my heart, I knew we were never going to see it through, but why was I so afraid to lose him?

*__Corresponding Author (Wong Jing Qing Vanessa__, Psychology undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, wong1434@e.ntu.edu.sg)

As I try to find an explanation, I wondered why everyone else experiences the same thing. Why do we fear loss? More importantly, why do we so desperately hold on to what we have lost despite the painful reality that it is gone?

These thoughts echoed in my mind until I finally stumbled upon something that brought clarity to my incoherent ruminations: a TEDx Talk by Cole Imperi (2020), which sheds light on "shadow losses" – what she coined as a term to describe losses in life, but not of life. Examples of shadow losses include divorce, getting fired from your job, or in Imperi's experience, being told she is infertile. Shadow losses are painful, yet they often seem less justified than actual bereavement. However, this is not always the case. According to Imperi (2020), our brains grieve shadow losses the same way it grieves deaths, as they cannot differentiate between the two situations in the moment. Do we fear loss because we fear death? Or perhaps we are so afraid of loss because, at our core, all we crave for is to be loved – and when we lose someone who loved us, we start believing we are unworthy of love.

We tend to forget the tasks we have completed as it no longer remains a pending need, yet become obsessed with things we can never have, such that it may even become a psychological need (Meinecke, 2018a). So, perhaps not expressing our love for someone before they are lost is a way that enables us to cling on to their presence after they leave (Meinecke, 2018a). As Meinecke (2018a) writes, "We read when we cannot be with the things we read about… We remember because we cannot be with each other all the time." Whatever we write down becomes a dormant version of our thoughts, and when we cannot physically keep the tangible things that we so desperately need, we rely on the intangible that we know would never leave us. Perhaps in my futile writing lie my attempts at keeping a piece of him in my memory, even when he is physically gone, like an obsession to a task undone, or love unexpressed. After all, memories are nothing but endearing distributions, woven amalgamations of everything we hoped to never forget, which then become what we cherish more than the person themselves (Meinecke, 2018a).

This notion snaked a question in my head, "Why exactly do we tend to entertain these thoughts so much, even to the point of excruciation?" Maybe the very persistence of these thoughts is so deeply ingrained in our mental activity solely because it does not want to cease being needed by the vessel that it serves – us, our emotions, our thoughts (Meinecke, 2018b). This is evident in a study by Wiesel (1982, as cited in Meinecke, 2018b) where eye neurons that were left with no purpose relentlessly strive to find one anyway. This concept ties itself to the idea of object permanence, which refers to one's learned ability to believe that things still exist even out of sight. This is present when our nervous system still reminds us of somebody's

existence even when they are not physically in front of us, and these internal reminders transform into expectations that promise to never abandon us, keeping us company while we wait patiently for the return of even the people we have lost, and not coming back at all (Meinecke, 2018b). Maybe such expectations are really an attachment or preference formed, manifesting itself as a hopeful yearning of the return of someone we hold so dearly (Meinecke, 2018b).

As such, the memories and expectations we gained from repeated experiences of object permanence, like Mom always returning home from work, soothe our brain while keeping us company. This creates a cycle of cognition embedded in our mind that whatever leaves our sight is bound to return to us, and so disrupting this cycle of expectations creates a heavy cognitive dissonance within us, which occurs when our thoughts and beliefs do not align with the reality of our behaviour. After all, losing someone permanently contradicts every fibre of our being that believed in their return, and with such severe cognitive dissonance comes extreme discomfort, especially when we are unable to change reality to fit our beliefs and expectations. Do we really fear loss? Or do we fear losing that sense of stability in us, disrupting the mental process we spent our entire lives believing to be true? Are we more afraid of the discomfort that comes with loss, or losing the people themselves? If these are signs, what do they really mean?

Maybe we just want to be loved. Perhaps we are all desperately in search of our self-worth that we somehow think is nested within the love others give to us. Maybe we are so scared of losing people we love because we fear losing a piece of us in that person too, and we just do not want to perceive ourselves as unworthy. Maybe this is the object symbolized by the fear of losing someone; that a piece of us is gone and we seem to always feel empty and void, so we desire for the people we have lost to come back, even if in reality, they will not.

Nonetheless, however we perceive it, I now know that this is what it means to grieve so deeply — to fill my days drowning in bittersweet nostalgia that only serves as a painful reminder of what I let slip through my fingers; to spend my time pouring out my feelings and expressing my regret at the last moment, when it no longer matters. And most importantly, as I slowly begin to pick up my broken pieces, I have learned to let go of the hatred, regret, and judgement I once passed on myself for simply feeling this way.

After all, what is grief but love persevering? What is grief but love enduring?

Bionote

Wong Jing Qing Vanessa is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Psychology at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. With a strong interest in mental health and emotional expression, Vanessa explores the themes of grief and loss through her writing. She believes in the power of storytelling as a means of reflection and healing. Beyond academics, she enjoys spending time with animals and listening to music, and she hopes to continue crafting pieces that can resonate deeply with others on an emotional level. Her work is inspired by her lived experiences and a genuine desire to understand the human mind.

References

Meinecke, L. D. (2018, April 23). *The uncanny fear of loss, part 2.* Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/theory-and-praxis/201804/the-uncanny-fear-of-loss-part-2

Meinecke, L. D. (2018, May 30). *The uncanny fear of loss, part 3.* Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/theory-and-praxis/201805/the-uncanny-fear-of-loss-part-3

TEDx Talks. (2020, March 6). *Shadow loss: Shedding light on our hidden grief | Cole Imperi* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/SqeKwOz3DMQ?si=MeQX_q1tK1Vck1Xn

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

Kyaw Zin Thant*

Breaking's Identity Crisis: Art, Sport, and the Fight for Authenticity

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303390

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

Source: Author

Beneath the towering skyline of Singapore, obscured from the bustling city, lies the Esplanade underpass—its bright lights accentuating the glossy sheen of smooth taupe walls and marbled floors, where subtle cracks bear the marks left by the thriving underground breaking community. As I descend the escalator, my attention is seized by a breaker frenetically rotating against the worn-out floor, his movements perfectly in sync with the deep hip-hop bass. With his arms tucked and legs slicing through the air in a tight orbit, he accelerates wildly yet with care and finesse. In a fit of spontaneity, he defies gravity, thrusting himself into the air while still rotating, gliding effortlessly from hand to hand. With a seamless transition, he snaps into a sharp freeze—body locked in place, perfectly punctuating the beat. An eruption of boisterous cheers from fellow breakers follows suit, galvanising other dancers to bust out even cooler moves. This

*__Corresponding Author (Kyaw Zin Thant__, Sport Science and Management undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, nie24.kzt@e.ntu.edu.sg)

friendly competitive spirit serves as a conduit for self-improvement. A faint yet recognisable hint of deodorant interwoven with the otherwise musty scent of the room, brings to mind the presence of a close friend, further fuelling my excitement to dance.

Breaking, at its core, is more profound than just dance—it's an art form, a medium of self-expression, and a deeply personal practice that shapes the self, identity and community. "Breaking is like a close friend," Flurry, one of Singapore's top breakers, shared. "It's something I can rely on, a creative output for my thoughts." As a breaker myself, his words resonate deeply with me. I've found that breaking isn't just about movement—it's about translating emotions into motion, using my body to express what I sometimes struggle to articulate in words. Whether it's the frustration from setbacks or the euphoria of a breakthrough, the dance floor becomes my outlet. And when I am breaking, I view the world as my stage, and I don't fail to deliver.

Breaking however, has evolved from an underground art form to a globally recognized sport, especially after its 2024 Olympics debut. With increased visibility and commercialization, it now emphasizes structured judging, athleticism, and mainstream appeal which often overshadows personal style, uniqueness, and improvisation. Flurry elaborates that while mainstream recognition brings opportunities, it risks reshaping the culture. "When competing, you tend to adjust your movements to fit the scoring system. Some dancers are more expressive than athletic, but competition forces a shift in thought process." Yet, the underground spirit persists. Breakers at the Esplanade underpass continue to train, innovate, and support one another, refusing to let competition dilute their creative voices. The tension between breaking both as art and sport is not a binary struggle but a negotiation—one that will determine whether breaking can remain a deeply personal craft while adapting to global recognition and competition.

This shift raises a deeper question: In what ways can breaking as a form of art and self-expression keep shaping identities and forging friendships if society is turning it into a more competitive sport? Does commercialisation that galvanises the competitiveness of breaking really reshape the dancer's identity and sense of meaning or is it the dancer's perception of this change that affords such reshaping of identity and meaning?

Jonathan Abrams's (2023) *The New York Times* article delves into breaking's uneasy transition from an underground art form into a globally recognized Olympic sport. He captures the voices of breakers, both pioneers and emerging talents, who are wrestling with what this newfound legitimacy means for their craft, their identity, and the soul of hip-hop itself. At the heart of the debate lies a paradox: breaking was built on capricious, raw energy and

musicality—qualities that don't easily translate into structured, score-based competition. The corporate-sponsored, rule-bound arena of the Olympics offers a massive platform but potentially strips breaking of its essence. Dionisio critiques this shift, arguing that breaking has always been about self-expression, but in the Olympic setting, dancers risk becoming representatives of the institution rather than their own artistic identity and an authentic self. "When you go to the Olympics, it's a corporate atmosphere. You become their identity. You're pushing the Olympics. You're not pushing hip-hop culture" (Abrams, 2023). This concern reflects a broader tension within hip-hop's history, between mainstream success and cultural authenticity. As breaking gains legitimacy on the global stage, some worry that its raw, grassroots spirit will be overshadowed by commercial and capitalistic motives.

This struggle between authenticity and commercial influence extends beyond the Olympics. More broadly, commercialization reshapes breaking by redefining what success looks like, shifting the focus from raw self-expression to measurable achievement. The tension between artistic integrity and external validation grows sharper as dancers navigate an evolving landscape.

However, the discussion assumes that dancers have a true choice whether to conform to commercialization and its judging standards or to follow their creative thoughts and uniqueness. In reality, the very structure of competition and industry rewards makes resistance far more difficult than it seems. Even those who value artistic expression may find themselves adjusting their style—not out of preference, but out of necessity. Prize money, sponsorships, and professional opportunities are often tied to how well a dancer fits within the established criteria. The tension, then, is not just about whether commercialization is good or bad, but about how deeply it embeds itself into breaking's culture, making it almost impossible to ignore.

I agree that commercialization influences dancers to align with competition standards. Yet, this effect isn't universal. Take Flurry, for example—despite being a renowned competitive breaker, he prioritizes personal expression over meeting external expectations. While commercialization doesn't sway me much, I understand why others embrace it - the allure of prize money, sponsorships, and the potential for a career in breaking is undeniable.

"It's subjective and it's art", Vithushan Ehantharajah (2021) asserts as he dives into the tension between commercialization and cultural preservation as breakdancing prepared for its Olympic debut in 2024. Within the breaking community, the debate rages: some see the Olympic spotlight as a threat to the art form's authenticity, while others embrace it as a platform for global recognition that could potentially remove socially dismissive tags tied to breaking. Beneath the surface, however, a more nuanced and symbiotic relationship unfolds with the

Olympics yearning for credibility with today's youth while breaking, in turn, seeking to show the world that this credibility is earned, not just bestowed. Lilou, a trailblazer in the scene, believes that "the duty to keep breaking as it is, is on the individuals rather than the collective" and that the Olympics is "just the logo on the floor" (Ehantharajah, 2021). This placement of responsibility emphasizes that the integrity of breaking culture transcends tangible labels or stages and that the Olympics is merely a platform to elevate breaking as an art and gain international visibility. This challenges the dogmatic perceptions of conservative breakers to leverage the symbiotic relationship between commercialization and breaking culture, using it as a means to develop the art to a whole new level.

Breaking's commercialization and its impact on dancers' identities present both a challenge and an opportunity, with the Olympics as a powerful yet precarious stage. While Abrams (2023) highlights the tension between breaking's authenticity and commercialization, Ehantharajah (2021) frames breaking and the Olympic Games as a symbiotic pair, evolving together while preserving authenticity. Yet, beneath this optimistic view lies an uneasy undercurrent. The assumption that breaking can seamlessly balance its rebellious roots with the structured world of corporate-backed competition overlooks the internal struggles dancers face in reconciling personal identity with external pressures. Moreover, the virtue of an unwavering identity in breaking is reserved for those with a deep and mature relationship to the art form, failing to account for newer, more impressionable dancers who can be easily swayed by the volatile influence of commercialization.

Ultimately, breakers, myself included, are caught at the centre of a Venn diagram, wrestling with the duality between the art and sport in breaking. But amidst all this, perspective becomes our anchor. It's what allows us to move authentically in a world that's constantly shifting. The way we choose to perceive breaking, and how we apply that lens to our lives, ultimately shapes the most honest, personal, and fulfilling journey, one that truly captures the essence of breaking. Personally, that perspective has become more than just a point of view, it's a mindset that helps me see beyond the moves on the floor and into the deeper rhythms of who I am.

Bionote

Kyaw Zin Thant is a Singapore-based breaker and a Year 1 undergraduate pursuing Sport Science and Management at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. Having returned to the competitive breaking scene after recovering from an ACL injury, Zin explores how the culture of breaking is shifting amid rising competition and commercialization.

References

Abrams, J. (2023, October 10). Breakers grapple with hip-hop's big Olympic moment. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/arts/dance/olympics-breaking-dance.html

Ehantharajah, V. (2021, March 31). 'It's subjective and it's art': How Olympic inclusion highlighted breakdancing's cultural divide. *The Independent.* https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/breakdancing-inclusion-paris-2024-b1824494.html

Volume 1, issue 1

Cher Yue Yang*

Winning: Why Is it so Sought After in Life, and Why Does it Matter if We Lose?

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303533

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

"PONG!" The explosive cry exploded the absolute stillness like a deafening thunderclap and startled the players seated around the mahjong table. I saw a hand, fast as lightning, grab a discarded tile like a ravenous eagle hunting its prey from the sky using its sharp talons. Eyebrows knitted. The players gripped their mahjong tiles firmly like warriors holding on tight to their weapons during an intense combat. The battle-worn mahjong table had just witnessed yet another shift in the tide of war. At the opposite end, a grandmother, her fingers bore the delicate wrinkles of time, gently but superstitiously stroked a lucky charm hanging from her neck. With a barely audible mumble, she prayed, not for herself, but for Lady Luck to smile upon her next draw on a mahjong tile. The young man beside her used his squinting eyes to concentrate while developing his strategy like a military commander who prepares for battle. I stared in the direction he was scrutinizing - the discarded tiles scattered across the table like fallen soldiers who sacrificed themselves in a bloody war. I could not help but wonder, in puzzlement and curiosity, why he would expend so much energy calculating the probability of a single tile. The effort seemed immense. Yet, to me, this was just a game. "So, what if you win? So, what if you lose?" I wondered.

As I observed the game and the players' facial expressions, I was drawn to the concept of this relentless pursuit of victory, in which the smallest decisions we make carried immense weight. Even a discarded tile might be a message, a whisper of one's strategy, and an accidental reveal of the sets forming in their hands. The veterans understood this well, but not me. Their faces often remained emotionless and unreadable, even enigmatic, while their hands moved with precision, executing smooth plays. The fourth player, a newcomer, however, was an open book. Her frowns, hesitation, and the subconscious rhythmic tapping of her fingers all betrayed her thoughts. It was intriguing how much significance was placed on such unnoticeable actions, and the cunning strategies veterans employed to bluff their opponents. There was an

*__Corresponding Author (Cher Yue Yang__, Computing in Computer Science undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, c240147@e.ntu.edu.sg)

undeniable energy in the room, a palpable tension that hung in the air, where each player was engaged in a battle far beyond the confines of the wooden borders of the table. The atmosphere was no weaker than when fighters gasped for their breath within the boxing ring. Each player, in their own way, with a blend of excitement, hope for luck, calculation, and the anxiety - all wishing for victory and the honour that came with it.

Then, the inevitable happened. The amateur player exhaled sharply, her face in disbelief and frustration as she lost the game, discarding a tile that completed another player's set. She slumped back into her chair. Her mouth twitched, as if she wanted to complain but held back, as if she was questioning what went wrong. It appeared to me that losing the mahjong game carried a psychological burden that extended beyond the game itself. Why, I wondered, was winning so sought after in life, and why did it matter so much if we lose?

The disappointment in the amateur player's eyes reminded me of students failing their examinations, athletes falling short, and job seekers facing rejection. This moment was never just about mahjong. It was, instead, a microcosm of life, where victories and wins are celebrated, while losses are perceived as downright failures. If losing just a game could invoke such strong emotions, how much more significant would it be with larger stakes in life?
Losing is not merely a setback. It carries a psychological burden that extends beyond the game itself. The pain of losing is deeply ingrained, a concept known as loss aversion. According to Gordon (2020), a clinical social worker, loss aversion explains why humans feel losses more intensely than wins, making failure especially frustrating and painful. Anger and frustration often mask deeper emotions of shame, helplessness, and worthlessness when individuals fail. In the mahjong game, the amateur player's physical reaction - her deep sighs, her slumped posture, and the unspoken disappointment reflected this ingrained response. More than that, society continues to condition individuals to associate losses with incompetence. In life, losing is not just a one-time event; it is a prolonged assault and harassment on one's self-worth. In a world that glorifies winners and worships victories, to lose is to feel lesser.

The pain from losing is not the only driving force towards winning. A different catalyst - one's innate competitiveness – amplifies one's obsession with winning. This obsession stems from what is known as competitive arousal, a state in which emotions override rational thinking, pushing individuals into an all-consuming desire to win. Malhotra et al. (2008) highlight three main factors that amplify competitive arousal: rivalry, time pressure, and the presence of an audience. Rivalry intensifies one's motivation to outperform others; time pressure compresses decision-making, while the presence of an audience creates pressure to perform. These factors could amplify one's competitiveness towards winning. In the mahjong game, the players were

not just playing for themselves; they were competing against seasoned veterans, with the weight of silent judgment pressing down on every other player. The loss was not just about missing a win, but about what it meant in the eyes of others. Consider an entrepreneur pitching a business idea to a panel of investors on Shark Tank - their confidence may waver, not just because of potential failure but because of the scrutiny under experienced and renowned business pundits evaluating their every word. Similarly, students racing against time in an exam hall feel an immense sense of urgency, knowing that every ticking second brings them closer to an irreversible outcome. Employees vying for a long-awaited promotion find themselves locked in silent competition, knowing that only one of them will come out on top. Meanwhile, social media influencers live under the constant gaze of an audience, where their success is not only measured by personal growth but also by how many likes, shares, or followers they accumulate. In all these situations, the stakes are never just about the outcome itself but about the fear of judgment, comparison, rejection, pain and loss.

If the desire to win is fuelled by competitive arousal (rivalry, time pressure, presence of an audience) and the pain of losing is intensified by loss aversion, then the relentless pursuit of victory might not be as much about triumph as it is about avoiding defeat. Winning is glorified, not necessarily because of its intrinsic value, but it could be because it shields us from the sting of losing. This raises an unsettling possibility: winning is so sought after not because we truly desire it, but because we fear the consequences of failure. The mahjong game was just one symbolic example that mirrors the same patterns in life - in academics, careers, relationships and personal aspirations. Additionally, the amateur player's disappointment mirrors the experiences of countless individuals who invest their emotions into the hope of success, only to face the crushing reality of loss. Although one could argue that her response was possibly intensified by her ego, it was still true that she was frustrated losing to her "mahjong rivals", even losing some "face". Perhaps the problem is never losing itself, but how we perceive it. If society were to reshape its narrative, if losing was seen as part of growth, not failures, would the punch of defeat still feel as heavy and hurting? Would the pursuit of winning still hold the same power over us?

When we assess why winning is so sought after in life without understanding the motivation behind it, we tend to lose sight of why we seek to win and be consumed by an endless pursuit of victory. However, shifting our perspective to see losses as lessons rather than failures can offer a sense of liberation from the vicious cycle of chasing victory. True success is not found in the number of wins we accumulate, but in our ability to embrace setbacks, adapt, and grow beyond them. In the end, perhaps the ultimate triumph is not in winning, but in

learning how to lose without losing ourselves. Perhaps learning how to lose without losing ourselves is symbolic of something bigger yet deeper – being kind to ourselves, because after all the losing, who can we run to but ourselves? And how can we understand others who are losing if we don't try to understand how it feels to lose?

Bionote

Cher Yue Yang is pursuing a Bachelor of Computing in Computer Science at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Beyond academics, he is deeply interested in cybersecurity and post-quantum cryptography. He has gained valuable experience through hands-on internships and aspires to be part of a team that safeguards systems against both cyber and quantum threats.

References

Gordon, R. (2020, November 16). *Losing — Why does it hurt so bad?* Theravive. https://www.theravive.com/today/post/losing-why-does-it-hurt-so-bad-0004654.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Malhotra, D., Ku, G., & Murnighan, J. K. (2008, May). When winning is everything. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2008/05/when-winning-is-everything

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

Foo Jing Lui, Jonah*

Beyond the Basketball Court: Place, Connection, Memory and Letting Go

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303611

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

Source: Author

Looking out from the window of my HDB block, I see the court sitting precisely where it always had. Enclosing the court is a four-sided, green wire fence that rises like a cage. Outside, the court gives a sense of containment, whereas inside, it feels exclusive. Stepping onto the court, memories rush in, overwhelming my mind like a long-forgotten treasure chest that has been pried open, spilling out memories of the distant past. There was this smell in the air, that of a faint rubber scent of a worn-out basketball, accompanied by the echoes of bouncing basketball against the court—a rhythm that remained unchanged through the years. I could feel the life of the court purring softly beneath my feet as though the ground itself held the weight of every game, every step, and every memory made here. The court, once worn with deep cracks and patches of paint rubbed away, now gleams with a fresh coat of sky blue and matte red paint.

*__Corresponding Author (Foo Jing Lui, Jonah__, Accountancy undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, jfoo044@e.ntu.edu.sg)

However, no matter how many layers are painted over, the rust clinging onto the edges of the rim, slightly bent from the countless shots taken, whispers the memories of the games long played.

I have noticed that the friendships I had once formed here have faded in time, replaced by young adolescents and unfamiliar faces. The way they sprinted across the court with effortless movements, was so familiar it felt like looking through a window into the past, reminding me of my primary school days. The unspoken coordination, the way friendships were effortlessly forged, their faces displaying expressions of sheer joy as if all their worries had dissipated, mimics how my childhood best friend and I once played here almost every day. For a split second, I thought I saw him there, giggling and yelling my name to pass the ball eager to win over our opponents. But he had migrated long time ago. Suddenly, the court feels different, smaller than before, even emptier. I once believed that childhood friendships formed were permanent. However, with new players now claiming the space we once ruled, the absence of those I knew had left a hollow shell even in the most popular of sports. And it seems to be a painful void I had to bear.

As I leave the court, it seems the memories remain trapped inside, locked behind the metal cage. Behind me, I can still hear the sounds of the game, but they feel distant; it feels like I'm losing the beat. So, I hesitate, glancing back for one last look, hoping to peek into the past, to see if there are still remnants of my childhood memories there. However, the moment has passed, and the game shall continue while my role in it has changed. I leave carrying nothing but the ache of nostalgia. I couldn’t help but wonder: Are the places we cherish merely backdrops to the fleeting nature of human connection, or do places hold people together despite the passage of time?

Drozdzewski et al. (2016) explored the complex relationships between memory, place and identity, especially in the aftermath of war and conflict. They investigated how individual memories are embedded into physical landscapes. They argue that memory is active and powerful. Rather than being static, memory is perpetually questioned and challenged, actively reshaping how individuals recall both joyful and traumatic experiences. It is not merely written in official narratives or preserved in stone monuments but rather experienced through sensory encounters with the locations, triggering memories through sight, sound and even taste and smell. Drozdzewski et al. (2016) assert that memory is not merely a passive recollection of the past, but an active and ever-changing force that summons individuals, communities and countries to perceive themselves and their role in this world.

According to Jones (2011, p. 2), "memory makes us what we are", emphasising that remembrance is not just a reflection of history but a crucial process that shapes, challenges and reaffirms identity. Drozdzewski et al.'s (2016) argument holds true in many situations in our life. Our experiences at significant places are more than just the details. It is through the sensory encounters that a past reality is triggered, and such are the places that hold our memories, at times bittersweet, painful, melancholic. However, are the memories embedded deeply in such places enough to hold people together?

Such concerns have been explored from a psychological perspective. Scannell and Gifford (2017) provide a different perspective by exploring the psychological benefits of place attachment. They argue that places are not passive backdrops but active contributors to emotional stability. Going in-depth on the psychological benefits of place attachment, they argue that with significant places, individuals can galvanise cognitive and emotional connection. Scannell and Gifford (2017) identified some psychological benefits of place attachment theory, such as stimulating positive emotions, stress relief and memory support. Place attachment is positively correlated with the quality of life. A meaningful location works as an active contributor to emotional stability and connection rather than a mere passive backdrop, reinforcing the idea that "to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places" (Scannell & Gifford, 2017, p.1). Nevertheless, relocation or forced displacement can have detrimental psychological impacts on place connection, those being stress, isolation, suffering, and a feeling of loss. I agree that places help sustain relationships by anchoring emotional stability through psychological attachment to places. I also agree that relocation can have a detrimental impact on one's emotions. I felt it when I lost a very good friend due to migration.

However, would emotional stability extend beyond the place itself, preserving the relationships formed within the place, even when the individuals are no longer physically there? Scannell and Gifford's (2017) argument seems to mirror my experience but in a different way. I do feel an emotional connection when I am at the court, but the emptiness I experience is not from being physically distant from the place, instead it stems more from the absence of those who used to be there, such as my primary school friend who left Singapore long time ago. This makes the argument more complex as place attachment may help maintain stability, but it does not necessarily guarantee continuity of relationships. Scannell and Gifford (2017) emphasise how places can hold people together over time, yet in my case, the court has remained unchanged while my relationship with my friend has faded, at times, empty and void.

If places were merely passive backdrops, their role in relationships would be insignificant. However, if places actively hold people together, my return to the court would have brought back my old friendship along with my memories. It appears that reality seems more nuanced, and yes, painful. Places do preserve memories, but they do not necessarily preserve relationships in the way we hope them to. Drozdzewski et al. (2016) claim that places act as repositories of memory because they shape identity through our sensory encounters becoming less a site of connection and more a quiet witness to what had been forged and to what has changed. In contrast, Scannell and Gifford (2017) suggest that places provide emotional stability by focusing on individual psychological attachment, anchoring us to moments we once cherished. However, their argument overlooks how places can simultaneously highlight the weight of absence, in a way that reminds us of what has been lost rather than a force that holds people together. While the basketball court does not sustain my relationships, it stands as a witness of my past—acting as a site for nostalgia, a physical manifestation of the passage of time and a remnant of a distant memory for which remembering can seem painful deep within, and forgetting seems palpable in time.

Therefore, despite my deep attachment to the basketball court, and despite the nostalgic ache, why did my relationship with my primary school friend fade in time? Why did it become alienating and void? If this were a sign, what does it signify? In my rumination, I realised that places do not merely exist as passive settings, nor do they single-handedly preserve relationships. It goes beyond just that; places refine our relationships or allow us to see and feel more vividly what we have not seen or felt before. They serve as a mirror, reflecting both impermanence and transformation, reminding us not only of what has been lost but also of what endures in our memory, and the decision we make to either hold on to this memory or let go.

Memories hold the echoes of our past, yet they do not stop time and ourselves from moving forward. The memories of my friend and I embedded in every bounce of the ball did not just preserve connection, they amplify my consciousness of how I reconcile nostalgia with reality, longing with acceptance, letting go, and moving on. Perhaps, then, it is not simply whether places are passive or active instruments in sustaining relationships, but rather how they reveal the fragile, enduring, yet fleeting nature of human connection—how they remind us of who we were, who we have become, what we have lost along the way, and our resolve to carry on.

Bionote

Foo Jing Lui, Jonah is an undergraduate student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore pursuing a major in Accountancy. His academic work centres on financial reporting and business decision-making. His writing explores how memory, identity, and place intersect, drawing from lived experiences. Beyond academics, he is actively involved in the NTU Sports Club and plays competitive basketball.

References

Drozdzewski, D., De Nardi, S., & Waterton, E. (2016). Geographies of memory, place and identity: Intersections in remembering war and conflict. *Geography Compass, 10*(11), 447–456. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12296

Jones, O. (2011). Geography, memory and non-representational geographies. *Geography Compass*, *5*(12), 875-885. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00459.x

Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2017). The experienced psychological benefits of place attachment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 51*(2017), 256–269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2017.04.001

Volume 1, issue 1

Swetha Sudhakar*

Bravery, Psychopathy or Purpose? Understanding the Firefighter's Resolve

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303633

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

The air was crisp as I stepped into the Jurong Firehouse for its open house on a Saturday morning. With a silent yet commanding presence, the station stood tall. Firefighters, their navy-blue uniforms spotless, their boots gleaming in the sunlight, moved with ease and confidence. The garage housed the emergency vehicles, a silent yet imposing fleet ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. The fire truck, a massively superior figure, gleamed in its bright red hue, as if it had been polished just minutes before. Its pristine surface was so reflective that I could see my own face staring back at me. The fire truck mirrored this organization. The firehose was coiled to perfection, the nozzles polished, and the compartments meticulously packed with axes, breathing apparatuses such as oxygen masks and other firefighting tools. I watched as the firefighters moved through their routine inspections, checking the headlights, mirrors, and even the tiniest scratches. I watched curiously as they tested the tire pressure, brakes, coolant levels, license plates, first aid kits and sirens going through each step with careful precision. It wasn't just about keeping the trucks in working order. It was a ritual. It was a way of showing pride in their work and respect for the vehicles that would carry them into danger. It was a symbol of confidence.

As I kept observing, I became aware of how well they coordinated as a cohesive team. It made me wonder—what drives someone to risk their life for a complete stranger? What makes them run into burning buildings, fully aware that fire brings one of the most excruciating pains a person can endure including death? I asked one of the firefighters leading the tour, and he chuckled, "It's definitely not the salary." His laughter quickly faded and transformed into a more serious tone. Firefighting, he explained, was his calling. He regards it as one of the highest forms of giving back to the community that nurtured him. He acknowledged that there are many ways to serve the community, but placing one's life on the line for another is a deed never forgotten, heroic, a testament of why we keep living.

*__Corresponding Author (Swetha Sudhakar__, Computing in Computer Science undergraduate (Honours), swetha007@e.ntu.edu.sg)

I was struck by this moment. They demonstrated discipline, dedication, and a strong sense of duty by taking great care to maintain their fire trucks in good condition, which went beyond simple functionality. The gleaming fire truck, the neatly arranged tools, and the careful safety checks weren't just part of the job—they were a testament to the pride and dedication of the firefighters to a noble profession, at times taken for granted by an economics-driven world. However, beyond that, what really struck me was the sheer selflessness of the firefighters. With the human in us, our first instinct is to protect ourselves by running away from danger, yet for them, running *into* and *through* fire is just another day at work. It makes me wonder: what truly drives firefighters to risk everything, even when their instinct is to stay safe? Is it this sense of duty, something inside them, or something else lies beneath? Maybe understanding what motivates them would change how we see heroism and the sacrifices that hold our communities together.

One possible explanation lies in their training. In National Serviceman's (NSF) Fight Live Fire as Part of SCDF's Firefighting Training (2024), Gabrielle Chan describes the gruelling preparation that National Servicemen in the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) undergo. Trainees are subjected to extreme heat, dense smoke, and erratic circumstances that strain their bodies and minds. The ultimate goal is to hone their technical abilities while also developing discipline, teamwork, courage, and a strong sense of responsibility. "Surprisingly, I am not worried about fires on site because I am trained, and I have this muscle memory, so much so that when I turn up for fires, I am confident that I know what to do," says one trainee, highlighting the level of preparation that allows them to face danger with such confidence (Chan, 2024, para. 19). Rigorous trainings explain why firefighters seem almost fearless in the face of danger. However, training alone does not account for their willingness to take risks. Fear is definitely still present, lurking inside of them—the uncertainty of how each call will turn out, and how they respond not only to fire, but also to fear. Training provides the tools, but what truly motivates firefighters to use these tools in life-threatening situations? How do they manage fear?

Many firefighters consider their work to be a calling rather than just a job. Timothy Wang offers a very intimate description of his experiences as a frontliner. He narrates his sacrifices, such as missing vacations, working long hours, and always being on call. Despite these difficulties, he talks about how knowing that his work saves lives gives him a deep sense of fulfilment and meaning in existence. "Someone somewhere has to make unseen sacrifices for our everyday life to go on as we know it," he reflects, capturing the unseen bravery and heroism that defines his profession (Wang, 2024, para. 25).

Wang's (2024) words resonated so much with me as they unravelled the emotional core of firefighting. It is not just about skill or duty—it is about selflessness. Unlike the average person whose instinct is to flee from danger, firefighters feel compelled to run toward it, to face it, to confront it no matter what. But why? Perhaps the answer lies in something more intangible: a deeply ingrained sense of purpose. The culture in which firefighters work emphasizes service, resilience, determination, and camaraderie. This notion was reaffirmed by my visit to the firehouse. Whether they were checking tire pressure, coiling hoses to perfection, or just cracking jokes between shifts, they all had a sense of mutual respect and trust. It became clear to me that firefighting is not just an individual effort; it is a team commitment, a conviction that galvanises the profession and the reasons for why they keep doing the job.

Often, this sense of obligation overcomes fear. Firefighters are trained to trust their team, knowing that their lives depend on one another. This bond fosters a level of courage that allows them to push past their natural instincts. While most people avoid high-risk situations, firefighters willingly step into blazing buildings because they believe in the greater good. They embody values that extend beyond their profession—courage, selflessness, and an unwavering commitment to service. Their work serves as a stark reminder of the vital role of public service even though they often go unnoticed. In a world where individualism is increasingly celebrated, firefighters demonstrate the power of collective responsibility. Despite fear, they face fire. Despite uncertainty, they deal with fire – to extinguish it in order to save lives.

Yet, I go back to the question I asked above: Beyond fear, what truly drives firefighters? Is it sheer courage, or does something deeper lie beneath their willingness to confront danger? Do they acquire an almost innate bravery, an increased capacity for pain, or they are driven by a deeply psychological fortitude that verges on psychopathy making their way through raging fires? Perhaps, to them, fire is more than just a matter of obligation; it is a challenge, a conflict, a relationship, and possibly even a puzzle worth solving. Could their resistance to destruction be a form of narcissism, a subconscious need to demonstrate control over an uncontrollable force, or is it a call to ego, validation, and self-worth? Beyond the call to serve and a sense of fulfilment, fighting fires reveals a deeply complex psychological interplay where fear, ego, narcissism, pain tolerance, and an almost playful defiance of danger intersect. Firefighters' actions challenge us to reconsider our own perceptions of courage and bravery: not as the absence of fear, but as an intricate rhythm between risk, resilience, ego, and the unspoken allure of the mind in confronting the very moment of fighting the fire itself as it turns a building into an inferno eager to kill anyone that comes its way.

My original question—why they do it—feels different now that I've spent time at the firehouse and as I kept ruminating about fires and the firefighters' resolve to fight it. It's not just about their training, duty, or even heroism. It has to do with something more profound—a steadfast faith in their work. Not only do firefighters see the fire in front of them, but they also see the lives they are saving, the families they are protecting, and the community they are defending. More importantly, not only do firefighters confront the fire ablaze in front of them, but deep within, they also view it as a symbol of something deeper – a psychopathological relationship they desire to sustain because it fuels not only their self-worth but their anticipation, their adrenaline rush, their ego, and their value not only to the world but also to the existence of the "self". Such makes firefighting a complex profession as it signifies something deeper, entrenched in the deepest recesses of the mind of the firefighter.

We often take safety for granted, but behind every siren, uniform, and fire truck speeding through a red light is someone who has chosen to put others first. Knowing what drives them, perceived to be inherently complex, makes us appreciate their efforts even more, encourages us to think about how we, too, can change the world, yet also summons us to dig even further the psychology behind firefighting. We might not only settle seeing what is known, but also what is not.

Bionote

Swetha Sudhakar is a Computer Science undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore who plans to specialise in cybersecurity. Alongside her interest in digital defence, she is passionate about real-world rescue work, which is why she became a volunteer firefighter with the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) under the Civil Defence Auxiliary Unit. Beyond academics and cybersecurity, she trains in Muay Thai and loves pushing her limits through extreme activities like skydiving, paragliding, and bungee jumping. She also tutors children in academic subjects—Maths, Science, and English—as well as piano. Music has always been a big part of her life, and her ARSM Diploma in Performance with Distinction is a testament to this. She thrives on challenge, variety, and purpose—whether solving problems, mentoring young minds, or stepping up in high-stakes situations. To her, life is all about growth, grit, adventure, and giving back.

References

Chan, G. (2024, November 25). NSFs fight live fire as part of SCDF's firefighting training. *The Straits Times*. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/live-fire-simulations-part-of-scdf-s-firefighting-training-for-nsfs

Wang, T. (2024, October 14). What I learnt as a frontliner in the Singapore Civil Defence Force. *Thir.st*. https://thirst.sg/what-i-learnt-as-a-frontliner-in-the-singapore-civil-defence-force/

Volume 1, issue 1

Wu Chloe*

“Us” and Experience: Finding Meaning in Street Art Through the Collective

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303710

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

It is not often that I feel like a tourist in my own country. At Haji Lane, I see spray-painted murals littering the walls, some oversaturated with lurid colours and some an alluring monochrome, and tell myself, “What an anomaly this place is!”

Haji Lane sandwiches itself between unassuming streets, amidst rumbling construction sites and tour buses, almost hidden by the main road. Inside, a whole other world unfolds where foreigners unleash their open-mouthed wonder. I mirror their expressions as I walk. It is one of the few places where graffiti is not something to get rid of. Rather, their garish distortions of the English text create a homely insulation for the youth of Singapore to make a statement of themselves.

Metal pipes. Cement walls. Thin trellises with creeping vines. Everywhere. This street is their oyster.

This is property of SP PowerAssets Ltd. The pasting of notices or advertisements on this box is prohibited. Legal action will be taken against offenders. The electrical box may try, but it is no exception. It puts up a feeble fight against the stickers of Mobile Legends characters (a game I played obsessively as a kid), logos of old-fashioned rock bands that haven’t emerged mainstream in decades, and unintelligible text bleeding paint as if it were a fresh wound—a mosaic of magnificent proportions.

This outlandishness is dotted across the whole stretch of dwarf shophouses, a bustling hipster village emanating charm accompanied by an unobstructed view of the blue sky—as well as the Pan Pacific Hotel.

It really is quite an eyesore, erected like a skyscraper in the backdrop. It is a stark contrast to the youthfulness of Haji Lane, an unrelenting monolith of glass and a constant reminder that you are in fact in Singapore’s city centre. You are once again reminded that in this insulated paradise, creativity is allowed, yes—so long as it is within this designated area. When I

*__Corresponding Author (Wu Chloe__, Psychology undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, cwu019@e.ntu.edu.sg)

realise now that those unassuming streets are unassuming because they are not within the legalised zone for street art, they become barricades. The green sign Haji Lane becomes the gate to a dam, holding back the endless innovation and individualism flowing within.

Electrical boxes a few streets ahead are barren, sleek, a few scratches away from the pristine standard-issue design. Not a speck of paint is out of place in those buildings, with walls that never knew the beauty of non-uniform colour. They are buildings, and that is where their similarities with Haji Lane shophouses end. And they span for miles and miles of terrain, the standard sight across Singapore.

Upon seeing this jarring disparity, I wonder, is Haji Lane really a beacon of creativity? Or is it a prime example of something more sinister—controlled individualism, which labels street art as "vandalism" outside the legal cocoon?

In a video documentary entitled "The 'Legal' Street Art of Singapore" (2019), VICE Asia explores the perspectives of two contrasting street artists in Singapore: Yip Yew Chong, who has been practising since 2015, and graffiti crew RSCLS, founded in 2006 by Zulkarnaen Othman (ZERO). While Yip looks back on his murals with fondness, believing that there can be peaceful coexistence with the law and the creativity in street art, RSCLS believe the opposite. They sidestep the law by spray-painting on scraps, which are unprotected property. "Even a small tag in Singapore means more than a huge mural I painted," ZERO says, showing respect to those who violate the law to establish individualism and portray an authentic self. RSCLS introduces viewers to an expansive mural depicting "the dark side of history". Their leader's exasperation at how the mural is slated for removal for its portrayal of a controversial event hints at how censorship has stifled the creative scene, including any meaningful message it aims to send through the medium of graffiti. Meanwhile, Yip works within the regulations to create works that reflect Singapore's rich history and finding meaning by evoking nostalgia.

Through these two vastly different perspectives, we get a nuanced view on the local street art scene, and creativity as a whole. While the law definitely has its drawbacks, one can opt to collaborate with official institutions to make their creations known. However, in reality, the process to gain official permission is likely to be lengthy and tedious, which sets a high barrier to entry for just the ability to indulge in this art form. Depending on the location, one must submit a formal application to the National Parks Board (NParks), or any other relevant authority. Simply having a hobby and a creative vision isn't enough to gain official approval. Thus, to these artists, controlled individualism is salient in our society, and if the artists want their artworks to be seen and heard, they have to go through the tedious application process.

But is this true of just Singapore, or is this a universal fault line shared by all governing authorities? The journal article "Limiting Law: Art in the Street and Street in the Art", Tatiana Flessas and Linda Mulcahy (2016) narrate the challenges to the long-standing view that street art should be classified as "vandalism". They highlight that "the expectation that [street art] is produced *illegally* is part of its essential identity" positing the view that part of the appeal of street art quite possibly lies in its illegal nature, echoing RSCLS' opinion. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. "There is no reason to use law to legitimate art". Street art depends on passersby, artists, and other actors in the community, being inherently collaborative; this makes art difficult to confine, let alone categorise by the law. Flessas and Mulcahy (2016) therefore posit that street art should exist without legal disruptions, as they risk oversimplifying its complex value.

The law and street art do not have a straightforward, diametrically opposed relationship. While the law suggests street art should be labelled as vandalism, this article highlights how we do not have to confine our evaluation of art and creativity through the simple lens of the law. It expands my question by bringing attention to how street art is, at its core, an *experience.* It is the reaction, rumination and emotion of people who respond, and add to, the artwork, which changes over time with the nudge or help of an array of strangers coming together to create a mosaic of their own. This shared experience makes art stands on its own, liberating itself from the confines of how it is perceived by the law.

I believe RSCLS are right to quote the communication theorist Marshall McLuhan in saying that "the medium is the message"—the vehicle of the message is just as crucial as the message itself. The very existence of the law, which dictates that all graffiti outside legal bounds is destined for removal, connotes the idea that not only is creativity obstructed, the messages that communicate through it are also obstructed, messages that want to reach its audience which is the greater public. This is how the law exerts control not just on creativity, but voice. Hence, Flessas and Mulcahy (2016) advocate for a broader evaluation of what makes street art valuable and meaningful. If we were to agree that graffiti is innately a medium of defiance, of rebellion against the rules, we would be forsaking the murals in beloved Chinatown which do nothing but exist as beautiful documentations not only of our painful past, but also the struggles of our ancestors for the sake of our liberty and freedom.

Thus, what gives creativity value has never been the artists themselves. Nor has it been the labels deeming it beautiful, crude, ingenious, "rebellion", or "vandalism". Even the term "controlled individualism" is merely the trappings of our insistence on constructing value out of art and its surroundings. Where there is law, there is creative rebellion. Where there is no law to

spin meaning out of art, still, we rely on nostalgia - sentiments, a recollection of emotions and experiences, what is important to us, and what we desire in the past that allow us to make sense of the present and what is to come.

Therefore, what gives creativity value is *us.* The greater audience. The hivemind that seeks to manifest meaning from our volatile environment—be it contributing to graffiti by tacking stickers on an electrical box and calling it an experience, or even painstakingly spending hours on a mural only to have it removed for straying off the socially-acceptable path. These different ways to interpret the creative scene are just emblematic of a deeper human instinct: *to make meaning.* Graffiti is just a manifestation of this.

Bionote

Wu Chloe is a Psychology undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is deeply interested to understand art more deeply and to fathom the human mind.

References

Flessas, T., & Mulcahy, L. (2016). Limiting law: Art in the street and street in the art. *Law, Culture and the Humanities, 14*(2), 219–241. https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872115625951

VICE Asia (2019, August 9). *The 'legal' street art in Singapore* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF6SXfsH-EQ

Volume 1, issue 1

Joshua Tan Wei Jun*

Happiness: What Can We Learn from the Underprivileged?

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303740

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

I walked past a group of migrant workers gathered on grass patches just outside their dormitory. They were squatting in circles, beer cans clinking and their boisterous laughter punctuating the air. It was mesmerising to witness the joy on their faces the fact that they just finished a hard day at work. Other passersby hurried past them, some with darted gazes, seemingly dismissing their presence. The migrant workers did not seem to mind the suspicious look on people's faces. They embraced their space, shifting around to ensure that they were not of inconvenience to passersby, perhaps out of habit or concern for others.

Underneath those dim streetlights amidst the cooling night breeze, their conversations and laughter echoes with sincerity and warmth. Their faces lit up in joy as they exchanged jokes and banters through a blend of languages I could not understand. The pungent smell of alcohol coated the gentle night air, adding an informal yet comforting atmosphere to their tired souls. I peeked through their eyes, and I saw what was hidden beneath: homesickness due to being away from their families for a long time, yet courageous enough to carry on with life in a foreign soil. "We miss our family very much, but when we, as friends, come together, cook, and sing, we feel this is family", uttered Al Amil Iqbal, a construction worker from Bangladesh. They illustrate camaraderie. They embody perseverance. They cultivate willingness to go through tough times. This made me wonder: How are they able to find joy, whilst living in such a dire environment? And how can a simple contentment of those less privileged shape the way we view happiness?

Ng (2015) brings us through the life of the migrant workers behind the scenes through her heart-warming interviews with migrant workers in Singapore. Ng (2015) pays tribute to the foreign workers and seeks to find out their hopes and dreams. What I learned from those interviews were tremendously eye-opening. While we desire to gain more material wealth as indicators of success that boosts our ego, migrant workers prioritise the basic needs of their

*__Corresponding Author (Joshua Tan Wei Jun__, Sport Science Management undergraduate, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, nie24.jtwj@e.ntu.edu.sg)

families back in their home country, rather than themselves. Almost 80% of their salary are remitted back home while the remaining amount is spread throughout the month to buy their needs in a country with one of the highest costs of living worldwide. While we are turning down jobs that don't seem to meet our requirements for standard of living, migrant workers are left with no choice but to bravely confront a filthy, dusty, and laborious job on a daily basis. While we enjoy the comfort of life in condominiums, and desire to get a nice car and a mansion, migrant workers focus their goals in giving their children a decent education in a faraway village in their country as the legacy they can leave them with, and as a way of extracting their families from poverty, through their regular remittances. Guilt haunts me for undertaking part-time jobs, the salary and perks of which only myself is partaking since I cannot remember buying something for my parents from such a job. If Singaporeans demand privilege and entitlement whilst migrant workers find joy in the dearth of life, would this possibly shape and change the way we view contentment and happiness?

In a separate article, Tan et al. (2020) shared the key challenges that migrant workers face: wage discrimination, deportability, and poor mental health. Working under time pressure, they only receive around $1,400 per month which is way below the average salary of Singaporean citizens; however, they maintain such commendable resilience and enduring perseverance so that they can provide the needs of their families back in their home country. They find joy in their forged friendships and build strength and camaraderie in adversity. They are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, workplace hazards, and deportation, but they keep the courage to remain in Singapore because of a hefty sum to pay their employers and to ensure that their families back in their home country will survive. The severity of their situation cannot be overstated, yet they carry on living and sacrificing in order to send remittances to their family back home as a testament of their worth, and an apparent source of joy and fulfilment as fathers looking after their family at a distance.

Their dire situation and lack of emotional support exacerbate mental health problems that are difficult to bear; however, with their forged friendships and the shared struggle to carry on with life, they find joy in the simple pleasures such as sharing a few cans of beer after a long day's work, or sipping cups of *kopi* on a lawn away from the prying eyes of the crowd. Joy and happiness can come from life's simplest pleasures, and this is what the migrant workers embody. A steaming cup of *kopi* or an ice-cold beer, is more than just a refreshment. It exhibits a cherished escape from the demands of their hard labour each day. The simple joy derived from playing cricket in available public parks and cooking together in their makeshift dormitories turn strangers into a tightly knit community, a brotherhood of sorts. Their daily interactions offer

emotional sustenance as they seek to constantly renew their resolve every day, willing to face each day with faith, bravery, and enthusiasm. Simple things that are deemed as a necessity in our lives bring about the most happiness amongst the migrant workers, highlighting an expanding divide between *them* and *us*. Are they aware of this? I do not know. Do they mind this discrepancy? This seemingly palpable social gap between *them* and *us*? I am not sure. What I know is that the community they are forging is much stronger, closer, happier. Their bond is envious, their brotherhood inspiring.

Both Ng (2015) and Tan et al. (2020) provide insights into how miserable the living conditions of migrant workers in Singapore are. While Tan et al., (2020) offer a more focused view on the poor living conditions of migrant workers highlighting the key problems they face, Ng (2015) goes even further by interviewing the workers and understanding them on a deeper emotional level, finding out what drives their courage and perseverance to find joy in such dire circumstances and hard labour. “If this were a sign, what does it signify” I asked myself. Constant rumination allowed me to arrest a fundamental value that embodies these migrant workers – selflessness, their deep concern for the needs of their children and families back home, such that they sacrifice living and working in a foreign land despite being under the heat of the scorching sun or being drenched by sudden rain, despite the pain, despite mental suffering, despite anxiety and depression.

The workers earn a meagre wage and oftentimes, they send most of it to their families back home, leaving themselves with almost nothing. “How can they survive with such dearth of life?” I wondered. The last time I recalled feeling uncomfortable would have to be in National Service where I constantly associated my time to be restless. I was counting every tick of the clock until I could book out – for relief from the demands of the service. However, the migrant workers can find contentment and joy even if they are only afforded the briefest respite from hard labour. They find the purest of joy through the simplest of pleasures that life can offer – a cup of *kopi* and toasted bread to begin a laborious day, and a can of beer to end it anticipating for another cup of *kopi* the next day. This routine means a lot to them because deep in their hearts and souls are their families giving them the inspiration to find meaning in what they do.

Thinking deeper, I recognised that my frustration in National Service and in life, in general, was rooted in entitlement. I was expecting comfort and convenience to be a basic right and not a privilege. Yet, despite having a better life, caring parents, higher salary, and better living conditions, we often find ourselves disdained rather than happy, complaining rather than having gratitude in our hearts, indignant rather than having a calm disposition. This stark contrast in our aspirations raises an uncomfortable yet necessary question: Are we truly

happier than them? We, who constantly chase higher salaries, living in high-end condominiums, and excited for the next luxurious purchase to validate our socio-economic positions, and our existence with the world? Have we then overlooked the pure joy of being happy, and being content with life?

The migrant workers showcasing important values such as sacrifice, struggle, courage, resilience and gratitude seem to summon us to reevaluate our priorities. Their humble and innocent souls serve as a stark reminder that joy and happiness are not exclusive to the wealthy or affluent. The poor and the underprivileged can be happy because they choose to be, and because they want to, and they are living it. It is in this courage to live each day, and accepting life is it unfolds that allows them to experience joy in their hearts. If migrant workers who are living another day can find joy in the dearth of life, why is it difficult for the wealthy or the comfortable to experience such joy? Perhaps there is a need to look within ourselves and assess why we feel entitled while many more in the world are deprived of the necessities to survive and have a decent life. Perhaps, what we need is to peek into the lens of the underprivileged for us to see life differently. In this world of constant pursuit of wealth and social validation, perhaps what we need is to look into the lives of the marginalised and the underprivileged. Who knows they have something to offer, and we are just ignoring it. Perhaps it is about time that we notice this.

Bionote

Joshua Tan Wei Jun is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Sport Science Management at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. Beyond academics is his strong passion for sports and an active and balanced lifestyle. He finds joy in sports and in appreciating the simple pleasures of life, whether it is a quiet walk, conversations with friends, or moments of reflection amidst a hectic day. Joshua believes that one of the greatest ways to gain a deeper understanding of the world is through observing and talking to people. Observation is a window into the human soul teaching us the values of empathy, patience, and compassion. This mindset has made him naturally curious about different peoples and cultures.

References

Ng, K. (2015, December 5). The Big Read: Searching for the good life, miles from home. *TODAY*. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-searching-good-life-miles-home-0

Tan, Q., Davis, C., Sidhu, D., & Nagpaul, T. (2020). *Crisis and connection*. Lien Centre for Social Innovation, Singapore Management University. https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=lien_reports

Volume 1, issue 1

Lim Kee Boon*

Seeking Comfort in the Unchanging: To Feel Good Is a Human Need We Must Cherish

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303910

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

In Newton Hawker Centre, there is a feeling I am unable to shake, a feeling of familiarity. Despite the tempting diversity of food stalls around me, I am pulled back to the same spot, the same meal. It is not that I do not love variety or the possibility of trying something new; it is that, in this crazy, hectic world, there is something so comforting about returning to something familiar. It is as though, in those instances of sitting in front of a steaming hot bowl of laksa or biting into the perfect satay, I am grounding myself in something that feels safe, stable, and permanent.

These food choices at Newton Hawker Centre are more than just about satisfying hunger. They are wrapped up in recollections, in time spent with friends, in humour and conversations that extend far beyond the meal itself. I have been coming here for years, and each food place I order somehow feels like it carries a part of my past with it. The satay stall is where I first went with friends after a long day of school. The laksa is the food place that reminds me of quiet Sundays spent with family wandering through the stalls, slowing down for just a moment. These are not just meals; they are snapshots of my life, moments that have stayed with me and shaped my connection to this place.

What I am surprised at, though, is how simple it is. There is so much here, yet I always order the same. It is as though my brain is craving simplicity in the midst of distraction and chaos. Going back to what I know, the options are second nature, and no mental effort goes into the decision. My head gets a brief respite from the never-ending flow of choices, the never-ending change. The world may change around me, but by simply returning to the same food place, and the same uncle to speak to, everything feels like it has stayed the same, though for a moment.

It is this desire for constancy that makes me return. With everything else changing around me, new technology, new trends, and new experiences, there's something profoundly stabilising about returning to the unchanging. It is like a quiet rebellion against the mad pace of

*__Corresponding Author (Lim Kee Boon__, Computer Engineering undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, klim157@e.ntu.edu.sg)

life, a chance to rest in the stability of what I know. In Newton Hawker Centre, however, that feeling of stability is not only sustenance, but also a reminder that even though life goes forward, there are still moments of peace to be found in the familiar.

So why is it that, despite the abundance of choices and the evolution of food trends, we often find ourselves returning to the same familiar food place as if seeking comfort in the unchanging?

This pull toward the familiar is not unique to me. In fact, cognitive science suggests that my habit of returning to the same food place is rooted in something much deeper, our brain's natural tendency toward familiarity. One explanation comes from profound investigations of the cognitive sciences, particularly within the heuristic-preference model by Mir-Artigues (2022). In this detailed framework, brains depend on cognitive heuristics that streamline choices made. When faced with an overwhelming number of choices, we tend to gravitate toward what we already know. Familiarity turns into a psychological anchor, lowering cognitive strain. It also renders decisions quite effortless. This is the key reason people, when in great overwhelm, often revert back to their most familiar preferences, be those in food, brands, or daily routines.

It becomes quite clear why I gravitate toward the same food places repeatedly. It has something to do with being gravitated to what is familiar to me and how I like navigating such a space of the unchanging. Each visit, I follow such a mental path to certain choices, foregoing the need to evaluate many options. This pattern is not just me, it is quite common for many people, as it happens throughout all areas, such as picking a cafe, or doing groceries, along with other consumer habits.

Nevertheless, Mir-Artigues's (2022) model provides only half of the story. Cognitive heuristics can be used to explain how people make decisions, but they are not able to account for why some of those decisions carry a deeper emotional resonance. Simpson et al. (2024) offer a valuable counterpoint by examining how nostalgia aids in the consolidation of attachment to food spaces, places, or other things. They argued that familiar foods carry an emotional weight that goes beyond cognitive efficiency. People return to food places because of the memories, relationships, traditions, and sense of identity tied to them. In short, people return to food places because of nostalgia.

A food place may not only be chosen out of convenience but also because it represents a piece of home, a past experience, or a connection to friends and loved ones. This is evident in how people abroad look for native foods, not just for taste but for familiarity of something that is sought within an unfamiliar place. Dining at Newton Hawker Centre goes beyond consumption, it transcends to become an experience invoking so many memories deposited in my nostalgic

brain. Every bite revives hearty laughter, familiar faces, and memories of past Sundays. I am not going back because of habit but because I want to relive that very sense of comfort and revisit memories that are parts of home – beautiful, at times even melancholic. Even with new choices around, it's that emotional pull, the quiet joy of the familiar, that keeps drawing me back and it seems that I don't mind doing this over and over again.

A clear distinction emerges between the two sources. Mir-Artigues (2022) presents familiarity as a practical cognitive shortcut, while Simpson et al. (2024) suggest that familiarity carries a profound emotional resonance that reinforces our identity and belonging. The difference raises an important question: But which factor is more dominant? Do people return to food places primarily out of convenience or is nostalgia the stronger force?

The answer is not straightforward. In some cases, cognitive efficiency may take precedence. In short, people may revisit a food place simply because it is the easiest option. In other cases, nostalgia may override cognitive ease; someone may go out of their way to visit a childhood restaurant even if it is far, inconvenient, and agonising. What is most likely, however, is that both factors work together. Familiarity reduces cognitive load, making habitual choices easier, while emotional significance strengthens the bond, making those choices more meaningful.

But neither source quite gets at the question of why we actively maintain these rituals. Not just habit or cognitive shortcut, but something else, our desire to feel a connection, to retain the comfort of familiarity. But if there is something, an object that these rituals signify, then, what is it? Returning to a hawker centre or beloved food stall is not only about ease, but also about sustaining a part of ourselves, reinforcing our belonging in a shared, invisible network of human connection. Cultivating familiar bonds can enrich lives, strengthen communities, and offer stability in a changing world.

And here I am sitting in the same booth, and with the first bite, I know the answer was always in the ritual. The allure of the familiar is not at all about being convenient or nostalgic, it's about the want for belonging, for something to stay the same when everything else around you keep changing. But this is only half of the story. Mir-Artigues (2022) and Simpson et al. (2024) might have missed the sensual pleasure of use, the carnal enjoyment of taste, warmth, and feel. I reckon choosing to eat at familiar places is not just a shortcut or nostalgic haven, but rather, this repetitive act generates joy, reminding ourselves that, as human beings, we deserve to feel good, and to enjoy moments of feeling good. We do not merely return to our favourite food stall for remembrance or security, we return since eating is an enjoyable activity. That familiar burst of flavour, the satisfaction of a warm, delectable dish, these small pleasures ground us in the

moment and remind us of what it means to feel human, to be human. And this may be the clearest reason we continue doing the same thing, like eating the same meal from the same food stall, because it brings joy on every level. A steady joy that does not need to be chased or reinvented. It is the joy of knowing what to expect, recognising a part of yourself in the act, and returning to something that satisfies both heart and senses. In that familiar bowl or plate lies more than flavour; it holds the comfort of consistency and the quiet happiness of simply feeling good.

Bionote

Lim Kee Boon is a Computer Engineering student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. He is interested in how memory, daily routines, and a sense of community shape the way people interact with places and with one another. Through writing, he explores how small, familiar rituals can offer stability and meaning in a world of constant change, while staying committed to a lifelong culture of learning.

References

Mir-Artigues, P. (2022). A heuristic–perceptive model of consumer choice. *Evolutionary and Institutional Economics Review, 19*(2), 459–486. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40844-022-00234-8

Simpson, K., Angus, D. J., & Lee, M. F. (2024). 'Nostalgic food heals for us': A qualitative exploration of experiences with nostalgia, food, and mood. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia,* 35(4), 1343-1351. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hpja.873

Volume 1, issue 1

Lim Ray'En*

Immersive Anticipation: Navigating the Boundaries of Experience and Obsession

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15303959

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

I stepped into the arcade and was struck by the glow of the rainbow neon lights reflecting off the polished arcade floors and glass ceilings. This feeling of being overwhelmed, through the chaotic mix of overlapping machine soundtracks, occasional outbursts of excitement, and joystick squeaks reinstalled the same joy I felt a decade ago. A floral jasmine scent lingers throughout the arcade which was oddly refreshing despite all the chaos. I took a deep breath, letting it all sink in before I was rudely interrupted by the sound of a mini siren.

Rows of claw machines stand like glass fortresses, each containing prizes ranging from plush toys, keychains, to sweets. As I turned towards the sounds of the siren, I saw a couple carefully manoeuvring the joystick, eyes locked in on the purple stuffed bunny before descending the claw to grip the prize. I saw their faces turn from excitement to disappointment as the bunny slipped through at the final second. A groan of frustration accompanied the loss, but the tap of the arcade card had already been registered for another play. That adrenaline rush and excitement of near success and the belief that "I'll get lucky on the next attempt" is undeniable.

Farther in, I could feel the crowd tighten around two adjacent machines that promised joy and rare collectible cards. The light on each machine flashed frantically, luring players to tap their arcade cards over and over again. Hands moved with practised familiarity over the greasy and worn-down buttons, ignoring the occasional jammed button that required repeated force. A variety of reactions painted the scene as impatient arcade users were eager to play the machine, yet the frustrated players who received common cards tapped their arcade credits away for another wishful attempt, to no avail once again.

The arcade thrives on these moments of risk and reward where each attempt feeds the player with a surge of adrenaline, keeping them locked in a cycle of anticipation, will and determination. I was struck by the way excitement consistently outweighs caution. It is almost

*__Corresponding Author (Lim Ray'En__, Computing and Data Science undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, rlim094@e.ntu.edu.sg)

as if you could understand the human tendencies towards their own risk, reward, and emotional investment. Even small victories would be sufficient to justify the next tap with a promise of a better outcome, and near-wins only fuel the players to keep playing, convincing themselves that the right time will come, yet frustration envelopes their senses and grows immensely inside of them because winning and getting a prized gift seems to be elusive. This leads me to a question: What sustains our attraction towards uncertain rewards despite the vicious cycle of loss?

Natasha Dow Schüll (2014) explains this sustained attraction as an interplay of carefully engineered environmental and psychological manipulation. Her research reveals how gambling machines strategically exploit cognitive biases and vulnerabilities by employing tactics such as unpredictable rewards and near misses. Players are psychologically immersed, entering a state defined by Schüll (2014) as “machine zone,” a dissociative state where players lose touch with reality, believing strongly that their next attempt might be a reward. Schüll (2014) quotes a gambler describing their mindset during a play: "You aren’t really there—you’re with the machine and that’s all you're with" (p. 2). Such strategies are not confined to casinos as I saw similar mechanisms in an arcade environment where near success continuously prompted players to invest more yet consistently led them to disappointments.

Schüll (2014) provided a compelling exploration on how the environment and psychological manipulation sustain an individual’s attraction towards uncertain rewards in gambling. Her detailed examination of machine design creates a structure for unpredictable rewards, near-misses and an immersive sensory experience. By documenting on “machine zone”, she reveals that the main attraction is not the desire to win itself but the dissociative state of continuous play. This powerfully addresses my research question and demonstrates the engineered experience that compels players to persist despite their evident losses. However, while Schüll (2014) captures the design and psychological absorption, her study can be extended to discuss the individual differences in susceptibility to these tactics

Dr. Carolyn Hawley (2022) emphasizes a neurological dimension where she incorporates real-word examples through her counselling practices, demonstrating how gamblers became captivated by dopamine-induced excitement just for uncertain rewards. Her analysis further shows how neurological mechanisms sustain attraction towards gambling despite obvious negative results, explaining how gamblers persist even after a series of losses. Hawley (2022) underscores this phenomenon concisely - “just the anticipation of a reward produces a high” which is often more rewarding than the reward itself. Her neurological perspective is proven by observing the behaviours of frequent casino-goers repeatedly spending

their money, seemingly addicted to the thrill and anticipation of potential rewards rather than the rewards themselves.

Hawley (2022) draws on real-world clinical examples to prove how the "high" from anticipation can be more reinforcing than the reward itself, effectively proving why gamblers continue to persist even after repeated losses. The behaviours of regular casino goers supported this conclusion making her argument not only persuasive but also alarming. However, while her argument on the neurological mechanism is robust, it may risk oversimplifying gambling behaviour by not addressing the social contexts, the personality of players, and cognitive biases that contribute to addictive gambling.

Insights from Schüll (2014) and Hawley (2022) led me to a deeper understanding on how our attraction towards uncertain rewards is sustained not only through psychological or neurological factors but also through a process I call "anticipatory immersion." This concept complements Schüll's "machine zone" immersion with Hawley's dopamine-driven anticipation. I contend that our attraction is reinforced by deeply immersive experience of anticipation rather than the gameplay or reward outcomes. In other words, players can be immersed deeply because the act of anticipating an uncertain reward is so psychologically and neurologically engaging that it outweighs one's rational awareness of continuous losses.

Anticipatory immersion explains why players in the arcade persist despite dwindling balances and the full emotional and neurological experience of the cycle of hope, excitement, disappointment, and renewed anticipation. Each attempt at uncertain rewards intensifies the immersive anticipation, becoming an end rather than a means to achieve certain victories. So, by recognizing immersive anticipation, it holds for broader discussion beyond the arcades and casinos, potentially applying to other facets of human behaviour influenced by uncertainty, such as social media interactions or speculative investments including betting or lottery. Understanding the power of immersive anticipation might help us better control its addictive potential and develop healthier environments or engage in other more meaningful activities that recognize human weaknesses while fostering informed decision-making and psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that our attraction towards uncertain rewards, despite the vicious cycle of losses, reveals something deeply human. Initially I thought that the arcade was a place for people to relive their carefree childhood days, or simply for people of all ages and from all walks of life to have fun. However, witnessing and experiencing the relentless attempts at the claw machines and collectible card dispensers allowed me to unravel a deeper

story. Our persistent attempts, despite repeated disappointments, are not purely about winning but also about how deeply we become immersed in the sensation of anticipation itself.

I saw myself again in the arcade. My heart racing before a card drops, the excitement magnifying before revealing the rarity of the card and this feeling of being captivated is often more thrilling than winning a prize from the machine. Yet realising this led me to question the ethics behind such manipulative designs. If casinos and arcades purposefully exploit our human nature of psychological and neurological tendencies, should we reconsider how these environments are regulated or structured? I believe that acknowledging anticipatory immersion could empower us, not to remove these experiences entirely but to be strongly aware of the design factor and manipulative intent that trap players in those destructive loops of disappointment and losses.

I have become more mindful of my own emotional responses to uncertain rewards. By recognising how deeply immerse I can be in the act of anticipation as I perform a game in a claw machine, I will learn to enjoy these experiences responsibly and with caution. This is because, every time I enter an arcade, my self-awareness becomes a control mechanism or a stick to poke me when it is time to surrender and leave. Perhaps, if we collectively become more aware of our susceptibility to the vicious cycle of loss, we could better navigate the fine line between harmless entertainment and obsessive habits. Ultimately, the goal is not to demonise these enjoyable moments or deny people from the thrill of excitement, uncertainty, and adrenaline rush. Instead, it is to understand why we are attracted to risk, learning how to engage thoughtfully, and ensuring that excitement enriches rather than diminishes our lives.

Bionote

Lim Ray'En is an undergraduate student pursuing Computing and Data Science at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore.

References

Hawley, C. (2022, November). *How anticipation primes the brain for problem gambling* [Video]. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/carolyn_hawley_how_anticipation_primes_the_brain_for_problem_gambling

Schüll, N. D. (2014). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas.* Princeton University Press.

Volume 1, issue 1

Jayanty Maha Ananya*

Familiarity in the Unfamiliar: The Cyclical Nature of Time

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15304004

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

The gentle sea breeze swept the locks of my hair from my eyes as I was greeted by the sight of an island off the coast of Singapore. The children on the ferry exclaimed jovially as their eyes gazed upon Pulau Ubin. As the ferry docked at berth, I looked out to see myself surrounded by hundreds of towering tropical trees. “Stop running lah!”, a voice thundered as a father called out to his rowdy children. He lunged forward to hold their hands, causing the children to furrow their eyebrows in displeasure. As I looked down to get a clearer glimpse of their faces, I noticed a family of grunting wild boars crossing the narrow and muddy pathway. Despite being very different at first glance, I chuckled at the uncanny similarities between both family units. As I began to make my way into the deeper parts of the island, my eyes were drawn towards a man seated by the side of a pavement. With a large wooden canvas propped upon a stand, he sat calmly with his eyes focused on his art. He appeared as though he was in a trance, completely and wholly transported into the world depicted on his canvas, a dimension mirroring the one around him, freezing the moment, immortalising it in time.

As I walked along the narrow dirt path, the scent of the damp earth filled up my lungs; a scent that had lingered on the island for thousands of years. The high-rise settlements that I was used to on the mainland seemed to be missing and were instead replaced with wooden houses with visible marks on the paint and moss growing in the cracks, a testament to how it has stood the tests of time. People on this island strongly prefer using bicycles instead of the motorised vehicles that I am extremely comfortable using on the mainland, sparking my imagination of a time where cars did not even exist - a glimpse into the distant past. As I walked past many shops on the island, I heard shopkeepers conversing in their own mother tongues, just like the way it would have been decades ago before the English language was introduced here both formally and informally. As I walked along the jetty, the wooden planks creaked under my flip flops, and I started to ponder more on the generations who walked on these planks

*Corresponding Author (Jayanty Maha Ananya, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering undergraduate, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, mahaanan001@e.ntu.edu.sg)

before me. I stared out into the vast sea, and I heard unfamiliar whispers in my mind, as if I my ancestors were whispering words in my ears. Did they also appreciate the way the sunset painted the kaleidoscopic skies with hues of crimson as it dipped into the horizon? Were they also enchanted with how the stars scattered across the night sky? Did they also feel a sense of peace as they retired into the night with the calming chirps of crickets and the hoots of owls? The experiences of different people from different walks of life have been intricately woven into the foundation of the island. Despite never experiencing a life like this before, the unfamiliarity of Pulau Ubin had become strangely intimate, as though I had returned to a place that I had known before, as though I had been here some time ago. This made me wonder: Is the familiarity that we find in the unfamiliar a testament to the possibility of a cyclical nature to time – the constant repetition of history in new forms?

In his book, "Philosophies of India" (1952), renowned German Indologist and linguist, Heinrich Zimmer, provided a comprehensive guide on how Indian philosophy conceptualises time as cyclical and not linear, essentially mirroring natural rhythms. According to Jain philosophy, the universe is governed by endless cosmic cycles of time and is eternal. Due to the continual repetition of time, events will occur in a similar pattern despite happening in different forms every time. Our ability to recognise such patterns is deeply embedded in our consciousness and manifests in the form of experiencing familiarity even in the unfamiliar. The philosophy of Samsara in Buddhism strengthens the idea of how everything in the universe relates to one another while also constantly repeating; we do not experience new things but instead experience the echoes of past lives; and we thrive in these repeated experiences. This constant mixing of the past and future helps us to view time as a cyclical structure where we are constantly re-living the experiences of our souls in our past lives. In Hindu philosophy, there are four cosmic ages (yugas), which repeat indefinitely. Zimmer's (1952) analysis of various Indian philosophies advances a worldview in which time is not linear but pays an ode to the idea of the constant resurgence of ideas and experiences with the passage of time.

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist, widely renowned for his book, "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious" (1968) believed that collective consciousness is something that we are born with and is structured around archetypes that mould the way in which we analyse this life that we are living and the world around us. Certain places and historical events have the ability to trigger memories that have been inherited from generations before us, resulting in us experiencing moments of déjà vu. Since our ancestors have constantly experienced similar environments, their experiences, thoughts and emotions may be deeply rooted in our collective unconscious which allows us to feel connected to places, spaces, and circumstances that we

may have never been to before. For example, when walking along the creaky planks near the jetty or observing the magnificent sunset in the skies of Pulau Ubin, I may have felt a strange sense of belonging to the place because its forces, energy, and symbolism has been embedded into my very psyche! If the collective unconscious stores the remnants of past experiences, every new age is a resurrection of historical patterns, simply in a different form. This idea draws a parallel to the philosophical view that time is indeed a cyclical concept (as opposed to how we often perceive it to be a linear construct), with each epoch echoing the ones that preceded them.

Zimmer's (1952) philosophy on cyclical time and Jung's (1968) theory of collective unconscious both reveal that the familiarity that we find in the unfamiliar may be a testament to the deep, recurring patterns of human existence. Despite the same underlying message, their approaches are made from different perspectives. Zimmer (1952) approaches this idea by showing that our souls are experiencing the same frame of time over and again, whether it be due to reincarnation or the actual repetition of time. However, Jung (1968) makes the claim that we are reliving the experiences that our ancestors have gone through due to their memories being passed down, a form of epigenetics in a way.

Both the authors have supported the idea that the sense of familiarity that we may feel in unfamiliar places could be a result of echoes of the past in one way or the other due to the cyclical nature of time. However, what if the feeling of familiarity was truly not related to time at all?

The creaking of the planks as I walk past the jetty, the vibrant colours of the sunset, and constellations in the sky pose a stark juxtaposition to that of the life that I live – an absolute pandemonium. From the moment we arrive on the planet to the second that we leave, we are in a constant state of frenzy - exposed to the harsh realities of our rapidly changing world. As we start to take in the environment around us, we are always greeted by something new.

What if the idea of familiarity to us is adjacent to the idea of a mirage to dehydrated vagabonds wandering about a vast desert? Maybe my consciousness in this world mirrors the state of a tree desperately gripping onto thin soil, grabbing onto anything to be able to stand. If we are able to find comfort in familiarity, is there a possibility for us to also find a sense of familiarity in comfort? The feeling of comfort perpetrated by the illusion of familiarity may indeed be a way for our souls to find a sense of solace in this ever-changing world - our attempt to stay grounded in experience and existence, even as they unfold within the unfamiliar, the ever-changing, and the impermanent. Like shadows dancing on the walls of our memory, this familiarity offers warmth not because it is true, but because it is ours.

Bionote

Jayanty Maha Ananya is a passionate learner currently pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering with a Second Major in Data Analytics at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. With a strong appreciation for both technical knowledge and creative expression, she enjoys exploring the intersections between science, art, and human experience. She is an avid guitarist and tennis player and often finds inspiration from these experiences to shape her personal growth. She believes in staying open to new perspectives and challenges, viewing each experience as an opportunity to learn and evolve. In the future, she hopes to combine her engineering background with her creative interests to contribute meaningfully to both technical innovation and the broader conversations that connect people across disciplines and cultures.

References

Zimmer, H. (1952). *Philosophies of India*. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G. (1968). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*. Routledge.

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

John Michael Caneda*

Slowly but Surely: A Journey of Strength and Purpose

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309685

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

*Corresponding author (John Michael Caneda, JMDA, johnmichaelcaneda@gmail.com)

This artwork reflects my personal journey as a man searching for purpose and the true meaning of strength. Like the turtle, my path has not been fast, but it has been steady, guided by faith and perseverance. For a time, I believed that success was measured by achievements, wealth, and material possessions — and for some, that is a beautiful and meaningful path. However, as I walked (and crawled) through life's challenges, I realized that for me, strength is not about how much we have, but how much we can endure, how much we can grow, and how much faith we hold on to when the road gets tough. Faith has been my compass, a quiet but powerful force that has kept me going. Along the way, I have come to value what truly matters: time with loved ones, good health, family, and peace of mind**.** These are the treasures I now seek and value.

The turtle in this artwork reminds me that even slow progress is progress. That every small step taken with purpose and heart brings me closer to who I am meant to be, and to where my destiny leads me. The turtle also symbolises courage, strength and purpose. That despite how slow we can be in life; we can reach our destination because we have a sense of purpose, we hold on to our dreams, and we persist despite the odds, just like the turtle. We carry on and face obstacles despite how difficult they can be, just like the turtle. The smile on the face of the boy is also symbolic of optimism. That despite the struggles, suffering and pain, he always wears a smile on his face, a subtle indication of positivity, seeing the silver lining in the midst of darkness and despair.

To anyone on a similar journey, keep moving forward, slowly but surely. Embrace growth and purpose. Find strength in faith and perseverance. Value what truly matters in life: time, health, family, and compassion. Be patient and have courage to face the battles of life. And don't forget to dream, and work on that dream your way. Because dreams are not a race — like the turtle, dreams are a journey deserving to be enjoyed and lived. This life is no longer a race I strive to win. The city will keep running fast, but that does not mean I have to chase it. I make my own race.

Bionote

John Michael Caneda is a freelance illustrator and graphic designer with over a decade of experience in book illustrations and visual storytelling. He is also the founder of JMDA (Jumpstart: Make Dreams Attainable), a creative initiative that promotes growth, resilience, and hope through inspiring artworks and designs.

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

Author Unknown*

A Moment of Despair, Fortitude, and Guilt

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309710

In the Personal Archives October 2018; Reviewed March 2025; Accepted April 2025; Published May 2025

*The author is not known in the Archives

"Waray ko hira matabangi! Waray ko hira masalbar han delubyo!" (I failed to help them. I failed to save them from the deluge), I told Ms Juliet Calda, then instructor of Leyte Normal University in Tacloban City, Leyte, the Philippines. The faces of my younger brother and sister are still vivid in my memory. It took time and courage for me to forgive myself and that [1]super typhoon that killed them and thousands more. This drawing is a testament of how helpless we are in times of natural disasters. Until now, the loud screams and throbbing sobs of my younger siblings still reverberate in my ears, and, as a big sister, it always pains me that I could not do anything about it, that I could not be there to save them from drowning. For a while, I lived in grief, longing, and anger, and such weight of emotions seems to linger in my consciousness, at times inundating my sense of being. I was desperate for help, too. I was hopeless. I didn't know if I could endure those ravaging waters, the violent winds, and the biting cold while I was tightly hugging that coconut tree just so I could save myself. And then I saw their faces no more. I heard their cries no more. It was total darkness. The wind was so vehement it could carry me to my death. After almost three hours of prayer and mental fortitude, the wind and waves subsided, and I could see thousands of dead bodies in my naked eyes. I was tramping the shorelines of San Jose hoping that I could find my two younger siblings, but I couldn't. I was hungry and thirsty. I was shivering. My feet were bleeding from debris scattered on the muddy grounds. I cried so hard in a corner even blaming God for our misery, and for taking my younger brother and sister too early by sending that typhoon to punish us. Tacloban was total madness. And I was asking myself repeatedly: Why am I angry with what happened? Why am I angry with God and the death of my siblings? Why am I angry with the world? I realised that this anger that has grown immensely inside of me is symbolic of something bigger: guilt. I was guilty for not being able to save my brother and sister. I was guilty of my little acts of polluting the seas of Tacloban. I was guilty that I did not contribute to the mangrove plantation movement in our community in San Jose Bay. I was guilty for not being able to really say a proper goodbye to my poor brother and sister, and this memory always crushes my heart and soul. Always. Perhaps, in time, I will be able to overcome this guilt. And when I get there, perhaps I already have the courage to forgive myself. For now, I would like to carry this guilt with me for as long as I can.

Acknowledgement and Editorial Notice
The Editors of *Simbolismo* acknowledge the help of Ms Juliet Calda for keeping this drawing with a corresponding written text (in dialogue format) and sharing this with one of the editors who kept the drawing and the text in his archives. The Editors decided to translate the written text in Waray-Waray to English, transform it into a coherent piece, and included it in this maiden issue.

[1] Referring to Haiyan or Yolanda

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

Jeric P. Lausin*

Serenity, Solace, and Simplicity of a Village Life

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309740

Received February 2025; Reviewed March 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

*Corresponding author (Jeric P. Lausin, freelance illustrator and traveller, lausinjeric@gmail.com)

This sketch is symbolic of the bittersweet memories of my childhood back in the province of Biliran. If you are a Filipino who lives, has lived, or had lived in the provinces or remote villages in the Philippines, then, this artwork speaks so much to you without the need for words, perhaps because uttering those words will ruin the moment that summons us to see, feel, and reminisce a distant past we cannot afford to forget. Let this artwork speak to you in silence. Let this be a mirror of a life you had lived or long to live in your lifetime --- serene, quiet, simple, tranquil --- away from the hustle and bustle of a chaotic city. Profoundly personal and symbolic, this artwork is a stark reminder of our difficult but peaceful life in the province of Biliran back in the late 80s to the early 2000s. We had no material wealth. No television. No radio or sound system. No electricity. No gas stove. No refrigerator. No bungalow. Only a few nipa huts with kerosene lamps to offer light in darkness when the moon was hiding from the mayhem of the world. However, despite our dire situation, our hearts were full of joy. We used to run on our great grandmother's rice paddies unminding the mud squirting on our clothes and our skin. We used to play *patintero* in the rain, or hide-and-seek during full moon. We used to listen to World War 2 stories from our grandfather who fought during the war. We used to dive in the sea almost every weekend and dip ourselves in the river while doing our laundry and enjoying our cooked rice soaked with soy sauce and cooking oil. We used to take turns straddling in the back of our *carabao* who was with us through our difficult struggles. We used to race climbing those fruit trees of our grandmother --- *cacao, caimito, santol*, mango, *balimbing*, avocado, and coconut. We used to help our grandmother plant cassava, corn, sweet potato, and yam so that we would have food on our tables. We did not get to enjoy our rice fields fully. My grandmother had to sell it because our grandfather was already dying with lung cancer. Yes, we did not have material wealth back in our province before, but we had each other --- we joked, bantered, quarrelled, and fought --- but we were together in full retaliation when someone hurt our brother, sister, or cousin. Then, every weekend, we all look forward to our grandmother's sumptuous *ginataan, biko, iraid*, or *suman* with *piniritong daing na tamban o bolinao*. We had to share these as one big family under the scorching sun, then we would all run to the sea unaware of the passage of time. We lived life as if there was no tomorrow. This sketch is symbolic of a nostalgic past I cannot afford to let go. Sometimes sweet, sometimes hurting. I will not trade such a difficult life but with enormous joy in our hearts and souls. I carry these memories wherever I go.

Bionote

Jeric P. Lausin likes to reminisce his childhood memories back in the province of Biliran through sketches using a pencil. His scenic sketches portray the simplicity of village life in the Philippines. Wherever his feet lead him, nothing beats the tug of a county life. It is always home to him, and he will keep coming back.

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 1

Esther Wansing Soo*

Our Desire to Escape is a Desire to Keep Grounded

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309768

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted April 2025; Published May 2025

*Corresponding author (**Esther Wansing Soo**, Lecturer, Language and Communication Centre, School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, wssoo@ntu.edu.sg)

We live in a fast-paced world, a world of progress, a world of speed and chaos. And when we feel the burnout, the stress, the heavy weight on our shoulders, we seek solace in our desires and imagination – to escape, to slow down, and to find relief and grounding elsewhere so as not to lose ourselves.

I painted this scene with Paris in mind, particularly an idyllic Parisian town where cycling is freedom and doing nothing but witnessing the beauty of ancient European architecture is an art. I pictured myself by the window, smelling the scent of wild roses and allowing the thick and cold wind from Montmartre Mountain to ripple through my clothes and skin. "It's beautiful" is all I could whisper to myself.

"Why do we want an escape from routine? Why do we desire to go somewhere, to travel, to leave temporarily what we are doing? What does this signify?" I would usually ask myself. In musing, I realised that travelling does not only allow us to appreciate the rich culture and history of a country and their people, but also to discover ourselves in the journey – what our desires and goals are, what we are capable of, and what else we can do for ourselves and the world.

To go there is not simply an escape, but a calling. We are responding to a call that echoes through the ages, which allows us to listen to our core, our voice, our humanity, and to keep grounded in who we are and why we keep living. Our desire to escape is a desire to keep grounded because we cannot afford to lose ourselves, and we cannot afford to forget that the world, despite disruptions and chaos, remains a beautiful place to live in. This painting is a testament that I hold on to this thought, no matter what happens.

Note: Painting by Esther Wansing Soo. Description by Nimrod L. Delante.

Bionote

Esther Wansing Soo is a lecturer at the Language and Communication Centre, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She teaches undergraduate courses such as interdisciplinary inquiry and writing, as well as engineering communication. Her current research interests include semiotics, presentation skills, critical thinking skills, and pedagogical approaches in the classroom using generative AI. Painting is a hobby she pursues when she has the time.

Volume 1, issue 1

Steneli D. Oraya*

Nanay Mariquita

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309830

Received February 2025; Reviewed March 2025; Accepted April 2025; Published May 2025

Abstract: This poem, written in Cebuano, is a painful but honest and intimate confession of a granddaughter's love to her late grandmother. A love so deep that, as grandchildren being left in this world by our beloved grandparents, we take time to look above into the vastness of the skies imagining that they are there watching over us, guiding us throughout this circle of life. A love so symbolic of purity and pain, depth and suffering, and this constant tug of holding on and letting go. A love so symbolic of permanence etched in our minds, memory, and being. A love so persevering and enduring, that despite the hurt from loss, we carry on.

Imong dughan Nanay tim-os ug lig-on,
Imong hunahuna hapsay ug mabunukon,
Ikaw kusgan, kugihan, dili kapuyon,
Kasingkasing mo maamuma ug mahigugmaon.

Sayo ka mubugtaw, sa mga apo mag-atiman,
Maaninag ko ikaw kanunay, sa kusina mangabuhan,
Siguraduhon nimo nga makakaon kaming tanan,
Bisan lang ug tinughong, basta walay apo nga magutman.

Bisan asa ka mulakaw, kuyog mo kaming imong mga apo,
Tawagon na ngani ko ni Nanay Lydia, mag ikog-ikog nako nimo,
Nahibalo ako sa tanang mga kahigalaan nimo,
Kay ug manghatag kag utan langka, sa sayal mo nagagunit ako.

*Corresponding author (**Steneli D. Oraya**, National University Polyclinics Singapore, steneli80@gmail.com)

Musagka kita sa bukid, kadaghan namong magburuyuboy,
Magpinagukuray, sinungugay, ang mapikon musutoy,
Kami imong badlungon, muhunong lang ug nagkapot kanag kahoy,
Ang atong bawong buwad ug tinughong mangatabwad, sa suba maga langoy.

Nanay gitudluan mo kami ug unsaon nga mabuhi,
Kusog nga gihatag sa Diyos, gigamit mo sa pagkugi,
Sa silingan dili manglupig apan andam mutabang pirmi,
Muhatag ug unsay naa, bisan lamang ug pinobri.

Gitudluan mo akong magsulirap arun gamiton sa atong payag,
Paghamis sa buri, ug paglimin-limin aron mahimo nga bag,
Magbaros ug silhig, maghimog duyan nga sama sa salag,
Maghawan, mag guna, manluto, Nanay imong kaalam wala ko gikawang.

Nahinumduman ko ikaw nagbaros kitag silhig kausa,
Ilawum sa lubi, kahapunon alas tres nga takna,
Kalit kong gisakmit sa akong kiliran ang maanyag nga bukad,
Kanimo gihatag ko kini, apan ang kalawum sa imong panghupaw dili matungkad.

Ako nabalaka ug kanimo Nanay ako nangutana,
Bisan ako bata pa, panuyo ko nga sabton imong problema,
Nihilak ka sa tago, nakita ko ang nahulog nimong mga luha,
Misulti kang hingbiya na sa dayon ang imong maguwang nga wala kamo nagkita.

Ako hilom nga nasakitan sa akong nahibaluan,
Bantog lang ikaw lawum ang hunahuna, mga luha gipugngan,
Mag-ilob na lang sa kasakit ug kaguol nga biniyaan,
Dili kita makalakaw ug makabisita tungod kay kita kablasanun lamang.

Akong kasingkasing Nanay tigda nga gisuriban,
Pag-eskwela ayuhon ko, akong kaugalingun gipasidan-an,
Makakat-on ug insakto aron maayong trabaho mahikaplagan,
Aron matabangan ko ikaw Nanay, sa pangandoy ko, ikaw akong kauban.

Magdalos kita sa bukid, mangharas ug mangharing sa mga patay nga sanga,
Dala nato ang gamay nga radyo, ang tingog pastilan sagarat na,
Pag-abot sa udtong takna magpahuway kita sa payag natong sa yuta nisandig na,
Dayon kong manghulbot sa imong uban, magpiyong-piyong ug taman ang imong mga mata.

Naandan mong mag-gahin sa mga prutas nato sa kabukiran,
Sabana, langka ug laing-laing saging apil na ang natundan,
Magkutkot ka dayon sa yuta kay mga prutas tan-ugan,
Kahuman sa tulo ka adlaw, paspas na kamig kaon kay imong inandaman.

Usa ka adlaw Nanay, lawas mo nanluya, ing bigay,
Ako nasubo kay ikaw dili mapatambal dakong kantidad kita waray,
Hangtod gibaligya na nimo ang kabaw nga imong sinapnay,
Naghilak ko sa hilom nga ako walay ikatabang kanimo Nanay.

Adlaw-adlaw ko ikawng gibantayan, dili ko na ikaw padigamuhon,
Tungod kay nakita ko ang imong pagda-ut, imong lawas luyahon,
Hinungitan sa imong mga medisina, nilugawan ug kanimo nagatambong,
Kusion ang akong dughan sa matag lawum nga panghupaw nga igawas mo sa hilum.

Hing abot ang takna nga akong gikahadlukan nga ikaw Nanay mubiya na,
Ang akong kinabuhi daw napawong, ang kahayag nawala,
Lawom nga kaguol, mga luha daw suba ang pag awas,
Ako muhangad sa langit, galaum nga malantaw ko ikaw sa mga dampog nga daw gapas.

Ania ako niining atong bukid naglakaw niining mga taknaa,
O Nanay hain na ang dagway mong maaghupon ako nagpangita,
Hain na ang mga kamot mo ilarum ning mga larag nga mga sanga,
Hain na ang mga halok mo ug ako mudagan padung kanimo sa payag natong guba.

Gihandom ko Nanay ikaw taliwala niining atong kabukiran,
Malantaw ko pa ang imong hulagway nga mukatawa sa kaanyag gihalaran,
Mabati ko pa kaayo mga taghoy mong sama sa mga siloy,
Mabati ko pa ang tingog mong mapanalipdanon ug kami sa kalasangan mag suroy-suroy.

Nanay sa gugma ikaw among hinalaran,
Magabakho ako sa tago ug ikaw akong mahinumduman,
Sinakmay ko ikaw sa giladmon niining akong dughan,
Sinapnay ko ikaw sa gugmang walay paglubad, walay katapusan.

Bisan pa magkatawa ang kalibutan, kaguol sa dughan ko walay kabutangan,
Luha ko magatubod tungod kay wala ka na sa akong kiliran,
Wala ako kanimo makabayad sa imong walay hunong nga pag atiman,
Mga pangandoy ko kanimo, Nanay, wala ko matuman.

Nanay, salamat sa imong pagtudlo kanamo,
Sa maayo nga pamatasan ug gugma sa isig ka tawo,
Nakat-on kaming mahimong mahigugmaon tungod kanimo,
Bisan kita kablasanun apan may lig-on nga prinsipyo.

Bionote

Steneli D. Oraya is mother, daughter, wife, and a healthcare worker. She is from Biliran Island in the Philippines but is currently living in Singapore with her family. Her strong emotions driven by life's experiences, at times hard and painful, are her vehicle to write poems of depth and meaning.

Volume 1, issue 1

Jerlyn May C. Berador*

Papa

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309887

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

Abstract: This poem, written in Cebuano, is a witty account of a little girl's relationship with her father. Rich in local colour, she narrates an exciting yet fearful act of collecting coins sliding out from his father's pocket due to her desire for a sweet and delicious candy as her sole snack to bring to the sea for a swim. Her father knew this, but he did not punish her because he knew her daughter deserves such simple joy that a life of dearth can offer.

Sa unang panahon,
Sa kadtong bata pa ko ug naghuthot pa ang sip-on,
Inig mata sa kabuntagon,
Iyang dagway akong unang lantawon.

Lawom pa iyang katulog,
Tungod kay sa gabie maghubog-hubog,
Hinay kong mukamang sa iyang kiliran bisan sige siya ug isdog,
Ug paspas ko nga puniton mga sinsilyo sa iyang bulsa nga mangahulog.

Midagan ko sa tindahan ug nagpalit sa kendi nga melon,
"Ako ning ibalon kay maligo ko sa dagat karon!"
Naglurop-lurop, nag ambak-ambak sa dagat nga taob,
Ang akong tumang kalipay sa langit kutob.

*Corresponding author (**Jerlyn May C. Berador**, aspiring teacher, jerlynmayberador10@gmail.com)

Nahikaplagan ko ang iyang dagway nga isug,
Sa baybayon naglakaw, may bitbit nga latob!
Nisalom ko sa kakulba ang akong kasing-kasing murag mahulwa!
Apan ang iyang mata daw leon ako iyang nakita.

Miduol siya kanako ug nangisog,
Apan nagpakaluoy ko sa akong tingog,
Gigunitan niya akong kamot,
Ug gilabay iyang bitbit nga latob.

Ang akong kasing-kasing nahimuot,
Kay ako naka matikod ang akong Papa buotan bisan galagot,
Muoli ko sa balay nga walay kabalaka,
Mugakos ko kaniya nga puno sa paghigugma.

Bionote
A graduate of Bachelor of Science in Technology and Livelihood Education with specialisation in Home Economics, **Jerlyn May C. Berador** is a passionate home cook and an avid reader finding deep satisfaction in crafting delicious meals and losing herself in captivating stories. Jerlyn aspires to be a teacher.

Volume 1, issue 1

Lowella Jane Cabahug Eugenio*

Intoy

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15309901

Received March 2025; Reviewed April 2025; Accepted May 2025; Published May 2025

Abstract: In this Cebuano poem, the author expresses her strong admiration to a friend who symbolises integrity, accountability, fairness, strength, and wisdom to fight against the wickedness of the world in his own little ways. “Intoy” (son) is an endearment of a mother or father to a son; but it also signifies something bigger: a David, or an underdog, who is willing to triumph over the bigger evils of society despite how difficult it can be.

Intoy, ikaw buotan nga pagkatawo,
Strikto apan puno and dughan sa kaayo,
Maalam, matarong ug lig-on ang prinsipyo,
Pipila lamang kini nga mga larawan,
Nga dili muhupas hangtod sa kahangturan.

Ang usa ka huyang nga punuan,
Igo ra mabuhi sa makadali,
Dili magdugay ug kini mabali.
Apan ug kini lig-on, bisan pa magdanguyngoy ang kagab-ihon,
Magpabilin kini nga madasigon.

Sama ni Intoy nga gikahadlukan sa kadaghanan,
Kay isog labi na sa mga walay tarong nga pamatasan,
Adunay susama nga tinubdan sa punuan,
Mahuyang man sa tago,
Manlimbasog aron mudaog sa kasubo.

*Corresponding author (**Lowella Jane Cabahug Eugenio**, pastry chef, lowellacabahug@gmail.com)

Intoy, ikaw usa ka buhing saksi,

Bisan pa dili hapsay ang dalan sa unahan,

Ug dili tanan mupapak sa mga dautan,

Mag-inusara ka nga mubarog alang sa hustisya ug kamatuoran.

Makakaplag man gani kitag tunok sa lasang,

Masamad man sa kahait sa lansang,

Dili ka gayud angay muundang.

Sama ni Intoy,

Ilubong ang kahuyang,

Ug pilion ang kalig-on sa prinsipyo ug tumang kalambuan.

Bionote

A graduate of Bachelor of Arts from the University of Cebu, **Lowella Jane Cabahug Eugenio** is now a full-time pastry chef based in Davao. She finds courage, strength, and inspiration through writing poems in her native language. She lives with her mother and continues to support her all the way. She travels when she can find time. Nature is her relief from the stresses of the world.

SIMBOLISMO

Simbolismo, a Filipino term, refers to the artistic use of a sign, symbol, or icon that has a deeper contextual, social, cultural, political, or personal meaning moving beyond the literal meaning.

Volume 1 Series of 2025