SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

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We welcome you to Issue 2 of Simbolismo! Underpinned by the theme, “Myth, Perception, and Time”, we offer you a research article, a few essays, and a few artwork that explore the world of myths and how our perception of reality, identity and time is entangled with such power of myths to transcend space, place, and time enabling us to achieve a deeper understanding of the world in which we live.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2, 2025

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

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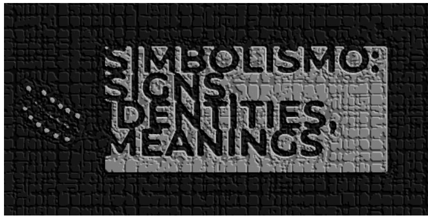


Volume 1, issue 2

Editor's Note

We welcome you to Issue 2 of Simbolismo!

Underpinned by the theme, "Myth, Perception, and Time", we offer you a research article, a few essays, and a few artwork that explore the world of myths and how our perception of reality, identity and time is entangled with such power of myths to transcend space, place, and time enabling us to achieve a deeper understanding of the world in which we live.

Nimrod Delante presents a semiotic exploration and interpretation of descriptive accounts *of* and *about* aswang in the academic texts. He performed a critical reading of 28 articles on aswang and utilised Peircean semiotics as a lens through which aswang significations are captured in his interpretation. Seven striking themes that stand for something bigger (signs) emerged with their possible interpretations (objects). Nimrod shares thought-provoking insights about how aswang has permeated the Filipino ways of seeing and knowing, and what we can do about this seemingly disturbing phenomenon residing deeply in the Filipino consciousness on the levels of theory or abstraction, state of mind and behaviour, cultural practice, pedagogy, and choice.

Edwin Tuazon explains how *kapre* (a tree-dwelling creature) symbolises the Filipinos' rampant use *of* and engagement *with* prohibited drugs in the Philippines. The wickedness and power of the drug lords have tremendously added societal pressure and intensified the entangled relationship between corruption, drug involvement, and drug addiction. This nonstop sniffing of the *tabako* of the *kapre* symbolises perverse addiction, a human frailty that consumes and destroys the very soul of drug users. Edwin also shares his symbolic interpretation of *sigbin* or *amamayong.* More than *sigbin's* paralysing effect on its target, in which it can attack it with just one sniff, is *sigbin's* symbolic representation of a corrupt government that controls, manipulates, and annihilates people's desires, hopes and dreams. *Sigbin* seems to be a signification of political paralysis that obliterates effective leadership and the courage of the Filipino to make things better and live a good life.

In exploring the cyclical nature of time, **Mehra Prisha** pursues the question, "In a place where land is limited and history is integrated with steel and glass, what happens if we, as a society, keep foregoing history in the name of modernity and progress? What if detachment becomes more palpable than a stronger link to the past?" She argues that maybe modernity doesn't have to erase memory. Maybe forgetting isn't as complete as it seems. The past lingers — in gestures, in objects, in rituals, in musings, in people who remember. And time seems to be cyclical, moving back and forth like a helix. Forgetting isn't neutral; it reveals what a society chooses to value. The question is not whether progress should move forward, but whether it can do so without leaving its past behind, especially if the act of remembering is not only individual, but a collective of consciousness, boldness and being courageous enough to refuse to forget.

Similarly, **Celeste Ruth Chia Yu Xuan** explores how the erosion of collective memory mirrors the gradual decay of natural landmarks like the Pengerang Volcanics—and why time seems to dull society's urgency to preserve the stories of suffering that forged the liberty they now inherit. She is saddened by how we, as a people, can seem to forget the past and history so easily. She argues that memory, though at times eroded, can endure as geological testaments to time's passage, earth's history, and human consciousness. Singapore's history, no matter how unpleasant, must be made more vivid in its streets and shores. Without more plaques and gravestones to acknowledge the sacrifices made by its ancestors, the nation's achievements might become morally and ethically shallow. Hence, Singapore must gain the courage to remember and not to easily forget. Not only will preserving the nation's darkest past and stories impel Singapore to honour the sacrifices made to shape its liberty, but it will also ensure that its future is rooted in more than concrete and pixels.

In an effort to capture tradition and heritage on paper, **Nimrod Delante** tried his best to connect with a lone family of women in his hometown of Bool in Culaba, Biliran, the Philippines, to witness and document an ancient tradition of breadmaking popularly known as *pahan*, the local equivalent of the *pandesal* that is common in cities. Nimrod has been mesmerised by how these women are confronting the odds just so they can keep a tradition alive. In an interview, Inay Violeta shared, "This is what we learned from our mother, and I promised her that I would keep this baking tradition for as long as I live. This makes me excited every day. This makes me keep breathing, living, hoping. This is our life.

This is who we are." Nimrod was humbled with the realisation that Inay Violeta, her sister, Tiya Manding, and her daughter, Mary Grace, are a living symbol of someone who holds on to an ancient tradition, someone who exudes not only strength of spirit and character but also reverence for the wisdom of her parents and ancestors. Frail and old, they symbolise the courage to hold on to the past and make it alive, to keep a heritage that is on the brink of collapse, and carry it forward with conviction, dignity and grace. They also symbolise the purity of the soul and the authenticity of the self. They are people who try to persist and carry on even if things have changed drastically, and even if the remaining option is to let go. After all, in this world of chaos, disruption, and fear, "perhaps what we need is to stick to a tradition that defines us and draws us together as one big family, a tradition that compels us toward our honest, authentic, and humble selves, a tradition that makes us feel safe, and a tradition in which we feel we belong", Nimrod proclaims.

Driven by his devotion to accept and celebrate the tremendous influence of his parents over time as esteemed academics, **Jesus Rafael Jarata** declares that he is the unwilling next generation in service, who follows in his parents' footsteps with a blend of piety and intransigence, asking himself: What does it mean to teach in a place where your own becoming is buried beneath someone else's legacy? In a college in which his parents served all their lives, Jesus argues that this is where his father gave his heart, and where his mother found her voice. This is where he keeps returning, hoping, believing —not out of nostalgia— but in continuity. He persists not because he has to, but because he is able. After all, there is meaning in persisting. And there is so much meaning to carry on the legacy that our parents have started for the future generation.

Mabel Tan Jia Wei, on the other hand, has been torn between the past and her future, and how the forces of nostalgia bring back a mixture of emotions that envelope her senses – some light, some heavy. Her persistent interrogation about nostalgia has led her to the question: Why are we so drawn to revisit the past and hold on to what once was, despite knowing what lies ahead with the relentless tide of modernisation? She argues that nostalgia is not simply a back-and-forth motion, but instead, a dynamic relationship of tension; one that holds on, even as it implores us to let go. It is a rhythmic movement, a tug towards the past, followed by a release into the present. It is not a linear movement, but a dance of motion and memory that we are caught in, oscillating between revisiting our unattainable past and imagining an unforeseen future.

Consequently, in his attempt to paint a picture about freedom, **Rithvik Ravikumar** ignites our imagination about how freedom is viewed by those people who are serving time in prison, and what happens to this view of freedom when they go out, as well as their perception of their identity. Rithvik uncovers a myth that prison release promises freedom and emotional restoration because those frequent encounters with freedom through family visits make it feel more like an illusion rather than a reality. Freedom becomes psychologically unachievable, and people in prison will decide to ease the pain by emotionally detaching from the concept of freedom altogether. An unfortunate irony continues because upon their release, many ex-inmates feel alienated from a world that pushes them away. When freedom is stigmatised, it turns into a disabling force. Freedom gives movement without purpose; it provides presence but refuses space and place. It also worsens alienation instead of reinstating identity, courage and will. Rithvik asserts that rehabilitation does not start at the prison entrance, but in a society that is determined to help reintegrate those who were once cast out. In a city where freedom catches flight daily, freedom is a real test that lies not in departure but in return.

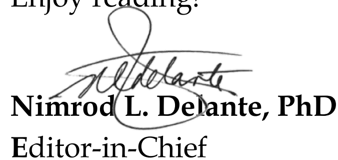
Back to exploring identity and becoming, **Keeley Canama** proclaims the value of looking people in the eye. As a famous saying goes, "The eyes are a mirror to one's soul", Keeley confesses that it does not pain us if we could slow down a bit in life, if we could cherish those moments we spend with our friends and loved ones, and if we could "see" them more as human beings with emotions, stories, and struggles. Perhaps this is our way of saying, "I feel you. I see you. You are not alone."

In the same vein, **Mike Ethan Florentino** admonishes the adults of this generation to examine the masks that people around us wear, especially children, because they have so much impact on their identity and becoming. He retorts that children wear invisible masks because they could be hiding strong or vulnerable emotions growing inside of them because of fear of being misunderstood, excluded, or cast out. Sometimes, this mask acts as a disguise, a deceiving veil that we, adults, seem to ignore most of the time, perhaps because we don't try enough to notice. Navigating a difficult world around them, wearing a mask will help conceal the anxiety growing deep inside them. This mask allows them to navigate the boundaries of fear and bravery, of rejection and acceptance, of make-believe and reality. They use the mask as a survival tool, yet, at times, they are drawn into the tension of

keeping this make-believe self from the real, inner self that longs to be seen, heard, and understood.

And in a world of chaos and disruption, these tough times in which we somehow lose grounding and positionality in the world in which we live, **Kaithe Izhabel Montilla** impels us to go back to our humble beginnings and appreciate the serenity of a simple house surrounded by trees and flowers. A small, airy bungalow built with a balanced combination of native and modern materials is perhaps what we need. With a roof of red clay tiles or nipa leaves to cool the house all day long, huge windows with shell panels or sliding glass to let the cool breeze from the mountains in, and a patio and backyard lushed with orchids, bougainvillaea, daisies, roses, and other flowers and fruit trees, what else could we ask for? Isn't this the kind of life worth living? A bucolic life that we often desire so that we can regain our balance in this chaotic world?

Enjoy reading!



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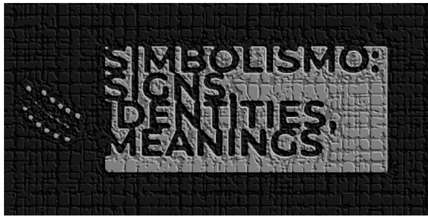

Volume 1, issue 2

Celeste Ruth Chia Yu Xuan*

Singapore's dangerous trade-off: When progress erases the past

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

Abstract: I stroll peacefully along Punggol Promenade, admiring the beautiful sunset and the sound of waves crashing rhythmically against the rocks. The sound drowns out the city's noise and distracts me from the creaking of the boardwalk beneath my feet. Occasionally, gusts of wind sweep by and carry children's laughter from a distant playground. Just up ahead lay soft, natural-coloured sands filled with clusters of weathered boulders. These rough, jagged boulders stick out like ancient ruins, which contrast with the modern skyline behind them.

Keywords: progress, time, memory, past

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I stroll peacefully along Punggol Promenade, admiring the beautiful sunset and the sound of waves crashing rhythmically against the rocks. The sound drowns out the city's noise and distracts me from the creaking of the boardwalk beneath my feet. Occasionally, gusts of wind sweep by and carry children's laughter from a distant playground. Just up ahead lay soft, natural-coloured sands filled with clusters of weathered boulders. These rough, jagged boulders stick out like ancient ruins, which contrast with the modern skyline behind them.

I crouch down beside a boulder and run my fingers over its eroded surface. Its exterior felt rough and slightly slippery due to patches of seaweed. The air smells like salt and moss, but for a moment, it smells somewhat metallic and rancid, leaving me feeling unsettled. Beyond the rocks, the sea glitters under the sun, but my attention is still on their quiet and steady forms. They feel like a portal to some forgotten time that I cannot seem to grasp.

Later, I learn that these boulders belong to the Pengerang Volcanics, an ancient volcano that is older than Singapore itself. They witnessed the Sook Ching Massacre taking place during World War II. Hundreds of innocent lives were stolen here, their blood seeping into the sand now trampled upon by visitors. It is hard to wrap my head around the huge contrast between this tragic history brought by the war and the laughter that echoes all around me. The place holds such a heartbreaking and meaningful past, yet there is no memorial here and only a couple of subtle markers and plaques to honour the innocent people who were tortured and killed. It is as though their suffering has been forgotten.

Although the rocks are ancient, they are not eternal. The tides are slowly wearing away at the rocks, creating grooves on them, similar to how memory fades with time and neglect. The laughter of children in the distance only amplifies the tension: their world thrives unaware of the ghosts here. How many generations until tragedy becomes a myth?

A young couple caught my eye as they took selfies against the boulders, smiling. The stones stand silent in the background of their photos, their edges softened by relentless waves. Singapore's development mirrors this erosion. Graves and sufferings are hidden under the weight of progress, but at what cost?

I came looking for tranquility, yet I found a paradox—a sanctuary and a graveyard. The boulders, which were once a scenic prop to me, now feel like tombstones. At first, I assumed that nature and history coexist here. How naive and wrong I was; they actually collide.

As the sun begins to set, the horizon blends into shades of amber and violet. The boulders fade to silhouettes, and their forms dissolve like the names of the Sook Ching victims. Both are erased—one by neglect, and the other by nature's indifference.

Memory, like these worn-down rocks, is fragile and requires tending. Without it, freedom loses its meaning and people become disconnected from the struggles that shaped it. The waves are slow but inevitable, and they will never stop slamming into the boulders. Will we let the sea wash the past away, or will we press our palms to the stones and listen?

This leads me to wonder, how does the erosion of collective memory mirror the gradual decay of natural landmarks like the Pengerang Volcanics—and why does time seem to dull society's urgency to preserve the stories of suffering that forged the liberty they now inherit?

Singapore's fast-paced society has reshaped its landscape, often at the expense of its history and tradition. The tension through Punggol's transformation is illustrated in Michelle Chan Yun Yee's *Punggol: Waves of Recreation* (2018). Chan (2018) asserts that Punggol was once a "waterfront recreational retreat" with European bungalows and bustling seafood villages, but it then turned into a site of wartime violence during the Japanese Occupation. After the war, redevelopment took place and rebranded the area as a "waterfront town of the 21st century". Chan observes that the younger generations are more drawn to Punggol's scenic beauty and are increasingly becoming disconnected from its traumatic past. Her saddening remark on how "younger Singaporeans see only [Punggol's] beautiful view of the sea" emphasises that societal liberty, built on unacknowledged suffering, risks becoming hollow.

This phenomenon is not just limited to Punggol. Other natural landmarks shaped by centuries of wind and waves, like the Pengerang Volcanics, are eroding, like how memories of their histories are being forgotten as the nation rapidly moves forward. For instance, Kranji Reservoir was once a place where many soldiers fought and died defending Singapore due to fierce battles that took place during World War II. Yet, its wartime significance is seldom brought up, concealed by its role in water management. As the tides wear down stone, societal indifference reduces the importance of acknowledging history and remembering the past. Can a nation truly thrive if it forgets the sacrifices that forged its identity and liberty?

Chan (2018) also provides a localised case study that shows how urban development prioritises economic utility over historical reckoning. However, her focus on Punggol's Sook

Ching Massacre brings attention to the ethical cost of progress, but her framework disregarded the basic efforts to preserve memory, like oral history projects at Punggol Settlement. Although these initiatives are minor, they still resist the seemingly state-driven erasure by reviving and preserving marginalised stories. These projects slow memory's erosion as they turn fragile stories into lasting records and encourage society to recall the suffering behind its freedom. Without them, apathy and neglect will silence history.

Gaik Cheng Khoo's *of Diminishing Memories and Old Places* (2013) expands this critique by framing memory erosion as a systemic issue tied to neoliberal governance. Khoo elaborated on state-led digitisation projects such as the Singapore Memory Project (SMP), which gathers the public to share their personal stories to construct a depoliticised "national memory". She then contrasts these with simple efforts like the Bukit Brown Cemetery documentation, where activists photograph graves and record oral histories to combat state-led historical erasure. Khoo warns that "memory cannot be stored forever… time lives on outside the archives in the Singapore landscape" (2013, p. 50). While these sites decay as memories fade, their tangible presence demands that we pay attention. Unlike digital files that are stored away, real-world landmarks compel us to confront the past. They not only hold memories but also make remembering an active responsibility.

Both Chan (2018) and Khoo (2013) hint at the paradox of liberty in Singapore. Chan's focus on Punggol's cyclical reinvention, where trauma is buried under modern infrastructure, complements Khoo's analysis of digitisation as a "premature archive" that mourns loss while allowing complacency. Both authors emphasise time's dual role to serve as a force of decay and a catalyst for urgency.

However, both differ when it comes to their solutions. Khoo (2013) implies that an increase in physical markers would educate more people about the histories behind certain places, while Chan (2018) encourages the government to balance efficiency and historical preservation as much as possible, and not to always take shortcuts to save costs, as it will fail to educate society on the country's history in a more meaningful way. Together, they challenge Singapore, a nation admired for its efficiency yet haunted by its historical past, to confront this existential dilemma.

The erosion of memory and landscape in Singapore reflects a global dilemma to balance progress with conservation. Chan (2018) and Khoo (2013) remind us that memory, like the rocks from Pengerang Volcanics, demands active care or they will deteriorate faster.

Though eroded, they can endure as geological testaments to time's passage and earth's history. Likewise, Singapore's history, no matter how unpleasant, must be made more vivid in its streets and shores. Without more plaques and gravestones to acknowledge the sacrifices made by its ancestors, the nation's achievements will become morally and ethically shallow. Hence, Singapore must gain the courage to remember and not to easily forget. Not only will preserving the nation's darkest past and stories ensure that Singapore honours the sacrifices made to shape its liberty, but it will also ensure that its future is rooted in more than concrete and pixels.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Celeste Ruth Chia Yu Xuan is an undergraduate student of Nanyang Technological University Singapore, undertaking Mechanical Engineering.

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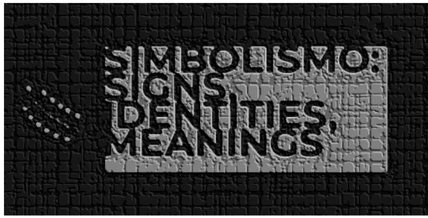

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Rithvik Ravikumar*

The unfortunate irony of freedom from the lens of those who have been to prison

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

Abstract: Changi Airport is always a bustling place, yet you can feel a sense of tranquility. I could smell the scent of orchid flowers mingled with the warmth of freshly brewed coffee in the air. At its core lies the Jewel, where the Rain Vortex pours like a ribbon of silk, creating a misty environment with a surreal chill. I felt so rejuvenated, as if I was stepping into an alternate reality, a temporary shelter from Singapore's unforgiving tropical climate. Children on the sky train were mesmerised by the divine beauty of the scenic waterfall.

Keywords: freedom, imprisonment, emancipation

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Changi Airport is always a bustling place, yet you can feel a sense of tranquility. I could smell the scent of orchid flowers mingled with the warmth of freshly brewed coffee in the air. At its core lies the Jewel, where the rain vortex pours like a ribbon of silk, creating a misty environment with a surreal chill. I felt so rejuvenated, as if I was stepping into an alternate reality, a temporary shelter from Singapore's unforgiving tropical climate. Children on the sky train were mesmerised by the divine beauty of the scenic waterfall.

The airport is more than just an aviation transit hub; it is an extensive portal to the unknown, an area where people fly between destinations with freedom that flows like background music, penetrating almost every corner that sound can penetrate. The panoramic greenery of the Shiseido Forest Valley forms an illusion of endlessness. I could hear crisp announcements echoing through the atmosphere, emphasising a world where freedom is an entitlement so intrinsic and abstract that it almost feels non-existent and unimaginable.

Beyond the vision of immersive freedom, Changi Prison exists where freedom does not move but completely stops. The prison creates a shadow extending past its thick concrete walls. The atmosphere here is stock-still, thickened by an unspoken burden and regret. Residue of monsoon rains has stained the prison metal gates, paying testimony to years of imprisonment. As I walked along Upper Changi Road North, some vehicles slowed down as passengers took unsettling gazes at the prison structure. A passerby took a quick glance at the prison walls, then briskly walked away. It was as if distance alone could help eradicate the prison's silent grip over their freedom.

Inside Changi Prison, time drags on. The air is dry, emphasising an environment where freedom seems nowhere to be felt or found. The overhead lights buzz, making the prison atmosphere bleached in cold monotony, creating shadows that never change. A YouTube video from SBS Dateline shows an inmate sleeping on a concrete floor. The hard surface carved into his back like stone. Sleep does not become an easy task, even a small movement may cause painful aches through his shoulders and limbs. Sleeping one night comfortably is a luxury that exists only outside the prison cell. Beyond the prison walls, life moves on, unfazed by the prisoners' sufferings. The clear distinction between the vibrant world at Changi Airport and the prison walls of Changi Prison implies that imprisonment is not only a loss of freedom but also a radical detachment from life itself. This begs the question: How

do imprisoned individuals view freedom, and what happens to this view when they leave prison?

In "Freedom so Close but yet so Far: The Impact of the Ongoing Confrontation with Freedom on the Perceived Severity of Punishment", De Vos and Gilbert (2017) posited that constant visits of families intensify the inmate's frustration at being confined in a cell as they develop hopelessness in the desperate act of experiencing freedom. The most direct confrontations with freedom in a closed prison are leaves and visits from family and other persons important to the prisoner, making freedom of the "self" more palpable in their minds. This twisted perspective of freedom affects inmates' psychological state, which turns into hopelessness as they become more desperate to experience full freedom. This repeated encounter with freedom does not liberate prisoners; it rather reinforces their powerlessness. When they become familiarised with a life structured by regimentation and control, their craving for freedom diminishes. What remains behind is the concept of freedom that becomes increasingly abstract, distant, and elusive.

De Vos and Gilbert (2017) offer a powerful insight into how freedom becomes an increasingly abstract and elusive concept for inmates. Frequent family visits exacerbate the prisoners' suffering by reminding them of what they no longer have access to. Slowly, freedom becomes a mirage to the inmates that is visible and recognisable yet unreachable. Some inmates emotionally relinquish freedom instead of craving for it, a coping strategy that transforms how inmates understand freedom. It signals a deep institutional effect; the system indoctrinates inmates into emotional detachment, normalising the absence of freedom. De Vos and Gilbert (2017) challenged the presumption that the inmates' desire for freedom remains constant; however, some inmates will slowly acclimatise to survive without it, so some of them stop thinking about it. They reassess freedom as a fragile internal state that is shaped by mental conditioning and the physical barriers of the prison.

In "Sensing Freedom: Insights into Long-term Prisoners' Perception of the Outside World", Irene Marti (2021) explains how sensory exposure to the outside world can alter prisoners' experience of imprisonment and their perspective of freedom after release. Prisoners from the Switzerland prison facility had the opportunity to view "mountain peaks and woods, and not just a narrowly defined piece of sky", helping them to stay briefly attached to the outside world. Marti (2021) argues that this exposure can create a profound sense of

alienation. Some prisoners may experience temporary autonomy, but others may perceive them as painful reminders of a world they no longer belong to, a world that, for most of them, has become a figment of memory. This emotional detachment exposes how incarceration is not only physical confinement but a painful process that alienates prisoners from everyday life, and this alienation will not stop after release. For many ex-inmates, the outside world still feels strange and overwhelming, reframing freedom not as immediate happiness and peace, but as a challenging reintegration into a world that has drastically moved on without them. This reintegration is filled with psychological distance and broken connections. Marti (2021) reinforces the belief that freedom is not only about physical release but also the capability to fully engage with the world past the prison walls.

Marti's (2021) article strongly asserts that freedom can alienate instead of liberating ex-prisoners. She expressed how the very notion of freedom becomes agonising as it represents a world that has neglected and stigmatised ex-prisoners. However, Marti's powerful conclusion lies in what happens after the inmates are released; freedom is not a return to normal life, but a conflict with society that continuously and pervasively stigmatises them. Even though ex-inmates are free, they still feel socially and emotionally left out. Social rejection, employment boundaries, and public opinion create an outside world as captive and controlling as prison, thereby galvanising a faux sense of community for them. As a result, many begin to detach not because they reject reintegration but because freedom after prison itself feels belligerent, dehumanising, and painful. Imprisonment not only detaches people from society but also changes how they connect to society altogether. Freedom that was once desired now requires reintegration into a world that is not willing to welcome them back, a world that has somehow condemned them for their doing. This challenges any notion that freedom is permanently redemptive; instead, it can be a part of further marginalisation and oppression, further othering these ex-inmates in such a judgmental world.

De Vos and Gilbert (2017) and Marti (2021) uncover a myth that prison release promises freedom and emotional restoration. De Vos and Gilbert explain how inmates' frequent encounters with freedom through family visits make it feel more like a fantasy or illusion than a reality. Freedom becomes psychologically unachievable. Hence, some inmates decide to ease the pain by emotionally detaching from freedom altogether. Marti expands this by emphasising how, after prison release, many ex-inmates feel alienated from a world that

pushes them away. They disclose an unfortunate paradox: when freedom is stigmatised, it turns into a disabling force. Freedom gives movement without purpose; it provides presence but refuses space and place. It also worsens alienation instead of reinstating identity. Ex-inmates not only return to society, but they are also exposed to public opinion, prohibition, and condemnation. Without removing stigmatisation and restoring social acceptance, freedom remains an empty idea, moot, and senseless. Rehabilitation does not start at the prison entrance, but in a society that is determined to help reintegrate those who were once cast out. In a city where freedom catches flight daily, freedom is a real test that lies not in departure but in return.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Rithvik Ravikumar is an undergraduate student at Nanyang Technological University Singapore, undertaking Mechanical Engineering. He has a deep interest in social issues.

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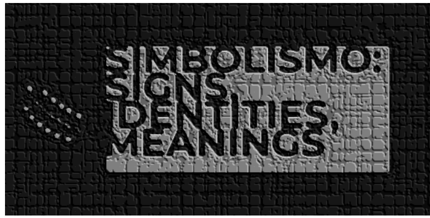

Volume 1, issue 2

Jesus Rafael Jarata*

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

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

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

Keywords: semiotics, vocation, legacy, becoming

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

I teach at the same state university where my father had a role—not simply as an employee, but as someone whose commitment to the university deeply embedded him in its mission. He passed away in 2020, but remnants remain— not in statues or plaques— but in the reflections, from colleagues who knew him for decades, in the institutional habits he institutionalised, and in the knowing glances some people throw at me, seeming to expect to hear imprints of my father's voice within mine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And so, I persist.

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

Because there is meaning in persisting.

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

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

This is my vocation.

Not loud. Not perfect. But lived.

Chalk dust on sleeves. Footprints to follow.

Signs, everywhere.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

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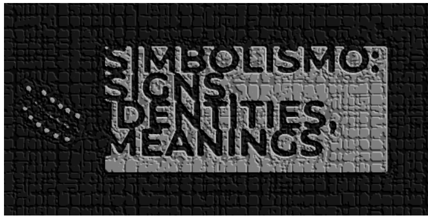

Volume 1, issue 2

Mehra Prisha*

A city that moves, a memory that stays

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

Abstract: As I walked on the polished floors of Orchard's famous Ngee Ann City, I could vividly see the reflections of people bustling in and out of shops. Their footsteps blended with the hum of escalators. No one stopped. The modern façade of this massive building offers no clues - no plaque, no memorial, not even a hint in the mall's sleek design - of the history buried beneath it: a history that once held the resting place of over 30,000 souls. But someone did stop. A man sat near the fountain, staring into space. At first, I thought he was just tired from shopping like everyone else. But soon I noticed his lips moving as if he was chanting a prayer with some fruits and flowers in his hands, and his unfocused eyes seemed to look beyond the polished floors, into something deeper, perhaps something or someone that no longer existed. Perhaps he was thinking about the cemetery stretched quietly beneath the open sky, the gravestones standing among the lush banyan trees, the air thick with the scent of incense, the whispering of prayers of the loved ones who came to honour the dead and its staggering contrast to the new building that has risen with its steel and glass having replaced the stone and soil.

Keywords: time, memory, past, present

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As I walked on the polished floors of Orchard's famous Ngee Ann City, I could vividly see the reflections of people bustling in and out of shops. Their footsteps blended with the hum of escalators. No one stopped. The modern façade of this massive building offers no clues - no plaque, no memorial, not even a hint in the mall's sleek design - of the history buried beneath it: a history that once held the resting place of over 30,000 souls.

But someone did stop. A man sat near the fountain, staring into space. At first, I thought he was just tired from shopping like everyone else. But soon I noticed his lips moving as if he was chanting a prayer with some fruits and flowers in his hands, and his unfocused eyes seemed to look beyond the polished floors, into something deeper, perhaps something or someone that no longer existed. Perhaps he was thinking about the cemetery stretched quietly beneath the open sky, the gravestones standing among the lush banyan trees, the air thick with the scent of incense, the whispering of prayers of the loved ones who came to honour the dead and its staggering contrast to the new building that has risen with its steel and glass having replaced the stone and soil.

Watching him mourn reminded me of my grandmother. What if she, too, was buried here? Would I be stuck in the same turmoil as him? I realised that as she passed away, even I started to cling to the little things that remind me of her, as if her warmth still lingers in those small reminders.

Change is constant in a city like Singapore. There is little space, and redevelopment overshadows preservation —housing estates replace kampongs, highways cut through hills, and malls like Ngee Ann City rise from cemeteries. This transition to a retail destination has been so seamless that most people remain unaware of what once lay beneath their feet.

I wondered if the man remembered. Maybe, decades ago, he had stood here for a different reason. Maybe he had once walked these grounds as a son visiting his father's grave. Now the past had been paved over, his memories reduced to nothing more than ghosts in his mind. He never moved, and several shoppers passed him without a second glance. I, too, found myself walking past him, disappearing into the crowd.

The sombre reality of what was here contrasts sharply with the vibrant commercial activity surrounding me. How easily we move on, forgetting the past in pursuit of convenience and

consumption. This site, once filled with life and stories, now serves as a backdrop for shopping and entertainment, a testament to urban development often overshadowing historical significance.

In a place where land is limited and history is integrated with steel and glass, what happens if we, as a society, keep foregoing history in the name of modernity and progress? What if detachment becomes more palpable than a stronger link to the past?

In "Modernity is a Qualitative, not a Chronological Category", Peter Osborne (1992) argues that modernity cannot be thought of merely as a historical period but as a qualitative rupture from the past. For him, modernity does not simply follow from the past but reconfigures historical consciousness by continuously redefining itself through an ever-renewing present. He defines modernity as "not, as such, a project," but rather "a form of historical consciousness… which, in totalizing history from the standpoint of an ever-vanishing, ever-present present, embraces a conflicting plurality of projects" (Osborne, 1992, p. 80). Places once filled with history are reshaped into symbols of progress. What remains is not a connection to the past but a carefully curated narrative, one that selectively preserves elements that align with modern priorities while discarding the rest. The transformation of Orchard Road from a sacred burial ground into a world-renowned shopping district is not merely a chronological development or extension of space, but a rupture. The physical removal of the cemetery represents more than just the loss of land—it signifies a cultural and historical detachment. In Osborne's (1992) terms, this break with the past serves the present by prioritising economic progress and urban development over historical and emotional memory.

However, Osborne (1992) overlooks the emotional and cultural consequences of this transformation. His focus on the intellectual and philosophical aspects abstracts away from the real-world impact on communities that become severed from their historical ties. The removal of cemeteries for development, for instance, is not just a practical decision; it carries deep emotional weight. He treats the loss of history as a rational process but fails to acknowledge the emotional toll of historical amnesia. Prioritising progress over memory does not necessarily free or liberate people; it can leave them disconnected from their heritage and their sense of identity and belonging.

In "Global Modernisation: Rethinking the Project of Modernity", Martinelli (2005) expands the discussion by examining modernisation as an ongoing, multi-faceted global phenomenon rather than a fixed historical stage. He argues that modernity extends beyond technological and economic progress, that is, it represents a broader shift in societal structures, often at the cost of traditional ways of life. He introduces the concept of "global homogenization," where local cultures are either diminished or restructured to fit a universal model of modernity. He highlights the tangible consequences for societies forced to abandon their cultural roots. He argues that when history is repurposed to serve progress, what is lost is not merely a place, but an entire way of relating to the past, which challenges the assumption that modernity is beneficial universally to all.

But is it? My grandmother's memory lives on through the smallest of objects, reminding me that history is not always lost; it can be carried forward in those who choose to remember. I think of her stories, her cooking, her sari folded neatly in my drawer. Her nose ring, on my nose. She lives on, not in marble or monuments, but in the small rituals of my day. The man by the fountain, lost in mourning, too, proves that even in spaces designed to erase memory, history persists. He embodies the tension Martinelli (2005) describes (between the homogenization of space and the deeply personal act of remembering). What he underestimates is the resilience of remembrance. Modernisation may attempt to sever the past, but people find ways to hold onto it no matter what.

Martinelli's (2005) analysis is particularly useful in understanding how modernisation can lead to the erosion of historical identity. He emphasises its societal impact, particularly how advancements in technology and urbanisation often result in the destruction of historical sites for economic gain. The consequences of leaving history behind are that it underscores how modernisation compels societies to distance themselves from their past. He captures the struggle of communities forced to detach from their roots, yet he assumes that this process is inevitable.

While both Osborne (1992) and Martinelli (2005) provide valuable insights into modernity's effects on history, their perspectives can be expanded. Osborne sees history as being actively reshaped to fit modern needs, but he underestimates the emotional consequences of detachment. Martinelli, on the other hand, critiques modernisation's tendency to erase personal identities but does not explore potential ways to integrate historical preservation

into progress. If modernity's breach with history is not absolute, then cities like Singapore could find ways for modernity, history and memory to coexist, ensuring that progress does not come at the cost of complete historical erasure.

Perhaps, the true test of progress is not measured by how much we build but by how well we remember. If modernity continues to erase history without pause, what will remain of the collective stories that define a place? But if we find ways to weave memory into the fabric of urban life, then history does not have to be the cost of development—it can be its foundation. Maybe modernity doesn't have to erase memory. Maybe forgetting isn't as complete as it seems. The past lingers — in gestures, in objects, in rituals, in musings, in people who remember. Forgetting isn't neutral; it reveals what a society chooses to value. The question is not whether progress should move forward, but whether it can do so without leaving its past behind, especially if the act of remembering is not only individual, but a collective of consciousness, boldness and being courageous enough to refuse to forget.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

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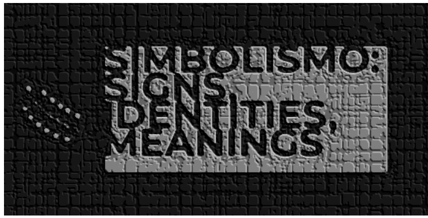

Volume 1, issue 2

Mabel Tan Jia Wei*

The double-edged sword of nostalgia: Holding on while letting go

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

Abstract: Nestled among the private estates and towering HDB apartments, Kampong Lorong Buangkok was a time capsule dating from 1956, buried in plain sight. An oddity in this city-state, which seems to have been engulfed by the ever-advancing era of modernity, serves as a tantalising reminder of the fleeting nature of history and time. The distant hum of cars and the amalgam of city noise in the background were a stark contrast to the tranquility before me, pulling me into a soothing embrace of serenity and calmness. As I ventured inside, the noise seemed to quieten down, replaced by the soft clucking of chickens, rhythmic chirping of the crickets, and the gritty crunch of gravel road beneath my feet. I took a deep breath, and immediately, the unmistakable perfume of the earth stung my nose—the slightly musty scent of petrichor in the air as rain freckled the ground.

Keywords: nostalgia, time, memory, past

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Nestled among the private estates and towering HDB apartments, Kampong Lorong Buangkok was a time capsule dating from 1956, buried in plain sight.

An oddity in this city-state, which seems to have been engulfed by the ever-advancing era of modernity, serves as a tantalising reminder of the fleeting nature of history and time. The distant hum of cars and the amalgam of city noise in the background were a stark contrast to the tranquility before me, pulling me into a soothing embrace of serenity and calmness.

As I ventured inside, the noise seemed to quieten down, replaced by the soft clucking of chickens, rhythmic chirping of the crickets, and the gritty crunch of gravel road beneath my feet. I took a deep breath, and immediately, the unmistakable perfume of the earth stung my nose—the slightly musty scent of petrichor in the air as rain freckled the ground.

Down the narrow dirt path were old but vibrant, coloured wooden houses and their tin roofs rusting at the edges, looking worn yet still full of life. Some doors were left open, revealing glimpses into the life and memories each house carried – a child's laughter drifting through the air, home-cooked food overflowing the dining table, and old china and plastic tableware lined the shelves. It exuded a quiet warmth, as though inviting me into a world, one of stillness, simplicity, and beauty.

This refreshing contrast to the fast-paced life in Singapore stirred familiar memories of the simple, unhurried life back home—of Kampung Guar Kepah in Malaysia. I tried to ignore the familiar ache of longing in my chest. As if stepping into a memory I hadn't realised, I was already desperately grasping onto vivid images of home that were flooding my mind. The slow early mornings echo with warm greetings. The fresh smell of laundry in the backyard, and the rhythmic symphony of steel clanging in the kitchen as my grandmother tosses ingredients in a wok, creating a mouth-watering cacophony of sounds. I craved the comforting chaos of my family gathered around the dining table and the warmth of home-cooked meals.

This lingering feeling of homesickness and longing intensified, giving me some pain, some discomfort. I don't know why.

Feeling as though I had just travelled back in time, I wondered why we cling to what once was, longing for the past, even as time relentlessly moves forward. As time once again reminded me of its fundamental transience, I wonder: Why are we so drawn to revisit the past and hold onto what once was, despite knowing what lies ahead with the relentless tide of modernisation?

Clay Routledge (2016) and Jean Starobinski (1966) argue that an underlying scientific reason is behind why we feel nostalgia by tracing its evolution from medical origins to psychological dimensions. Nostalgia, coined from the Greek words "nostos" for homecoming and "algos" for pain or longing, was originally regarded as a merciless disease, attacking Swiss mercenaries serving abroad (Routledge, 2016). Labelled as a strange physiological illness which caused mental distress, specific sounds, melodies, and possible triggers were prohibited in an effort to prevent evoking a profound longing for their homeland (Routledge, 2016). The 18th century saw a surge in worldwide migration, and it was observed that all social classes were vulnerable to this dreadful disease, "nostalgia" (Starobinski, 1966). By the early 20th century, psychologists regarded nostalgia as a psychological condition akin to depression, theorising that it reflected challenges in progressing beyond one's childhood (Routledge, 2016).

Conversations about home resonate deeply wherever we go because vivid recollections of home draw us back to our humble beginnings. With countless sensory triggers and cues that link us back to the past, the past often invokes us to look back; it is coming back in fragments, hitting us out of nowhere. Time passes, and we continue living, but we never let our past slip away, at least not completely. Nostalgia, which leads to painful memories and emotions resurfacing, happens unexpectedly at times, and sometimes, even if we are not sure why, we want to keep those memories close and intact despite how aching they can be.

In the subsequent decades until today, the interpretation of nostalgia has broadened significantly, being reframed as a psychological phenomenon, one that we all share (Starobinski, 1966). With the advancement of medical science, nostalgia began to be recognised as a beneficial emotional state marked by a longing for the past, regarded as a heartfelt and pleasurable experience; a significant shift in understanding (Routledge, 2016). Aspects of our pasts—such as cuisines, aromas, and flavours—engage our senses and ignite our imagination, initiating a series of vivid and intense sensory and imagery associations (Routledge, 2016). Nostalgia possesses the ability to trigger associated recollections that can evoke emotions, be it pleasure or pain, with an intensity comparable to their original experience (Starobinski, 1966).

In a hawker centre, the first bite of the Penang Hokkien mee I ordered dulled my longing for home and instantly filled me with warmth. The lingering hunger I had softened with each bite, soothing the emotional void I carried with me. It afforded me a sense of fulfilment and brought out the comfort and familiarity of home that I was longing for. In

tough moments or unfamiliar places, the memory of home shines brighter than ever—like a lighthouse that offers light amid the thickness of fog. And when coupled with an insatiable thirst for a sense of familiarity and comfort, which can only be quenched in the refuge we call our past, I find myself turning back into my past, seeking not an escape, but to stay grounded. Nostalgia is such a continuity, not escapism; one that allows us to move forward while carrying pieces of the past with us.

Nostalgia holds to be a protective buffer or a double-edged sword. It is a complex emotional state that can recreate sensations of grief and sorrow; however, when navigated effectively, it can yield benefits (Routledge, 2016). Serving as a healing mechanism for coping with the time we have lost, it revives the recollections of our happiest experiences, thereby improving our overall well-being (Starobinski, 1966). Nostalgia enables us to progress and avoid remaining anchored in the past, a powerful tool for cultivating confidence and motivation to confront an uncertain future, reminding us of the inherent meaning and worth of our lives (Routledge, 2016).

Birthdays, a celebration of life, a poignant reminder of my existence in the world, signify the passage of another year. Despite it being a joyous occasion, I could not dismiss the growing anxiety I feel about turning twenty this year. Stemming from the myriad unknowns and uncertainties, I fear the future that my twenties may hold. The mounting pressure to transition into adulthood weighed heavily on me, further intensified by the melancholic realisation that I must relinquish the distinctive identity I once had during my childhood. A transition which evoked a complex mix of emotions, forcing me to navigate the delicate balance between remembering my meaningful past and confronting the challenges ahead.

As I gazed outside the window from my apartment, my eyes were drawn to a group of children playing on the swings at the nearby playground. Their joyful laughter echoed through the once tranquil neighbourhood, accompanied by the rhythmic creaking of the swing chains as they swung to and fro. It was at that very moment that memories of my childhood came to life in an instant, allowing me to relive a fragment of my past in Penang that I shared with my family, before it slipped away to a vivid imagination of an inevitable future I will have to face. Such a weight of emotions that I have to bear.

Nostalgia is a complex emotion that emerges fleetingly from the depths of forgotten memories. A continuum in which we relish in the warmth of the past and imagine what our future could be. A conscious decision which we make, to either shift our focus to what's

right in front of us by appreciating the past and living in the now or be anchored by the weight of what once was, blinded by our past and unable to move forward.

Regardless of our earnest efforts to alter its course, the passage of time is inevitable, and it will continue moving unabated. Nostalgia, which operates akin to a yo-yo, is not simply a back-and-forth motion, but instead, a dynamic relationship of tension; one that holds on, even as it implores us to let go. A rhythmic movement, a tug towards the past, followed by a release into the present. It is not a linear movement, but a dance of motion and memory that we are caught in, oscillating between revisiting our unattainable past and imagining an unforeseen future.

Yet, despite that, we do have a choice. It is normal to worry about the future and about lost time; however, I have come to understand the importance of concentrating on the present.

Nostalgia is not about staying stuck in the past, but about learning when to hold on tight and when to let go to find that delicate balance. Yes, time never fails to remind us of its omnipresence, and neither does life of its inherent impermanence. But neither does it forget to remind us of the value our memories hold, the depth of our connections with our ancestors, and the love we have received, guiding us to navigate life with insights acquired through managing what once was.

This is the beauty of nostalgia, which lies not in clinging to what once was, but in carrying it forward, like a quiet shadow that walks with us, accompanying us every step of the way.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

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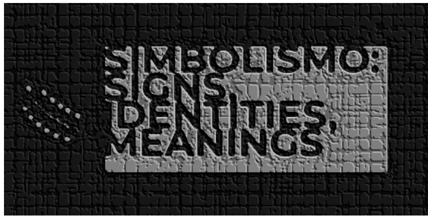

Volume 1, issue 2

Gan Yu Xuan Charissa*

Duty versus desire: The duality of what it takes to fuel a burning passion

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

Abstract: The fire station loomed before me, a fortress of bold red and blue. This was not built of stone, but by flesh and will, built by those who defy the instinct to flee. The very air surrounding it was thick, laced with the acrid bite of smoke. I could hear the soft whispers from the embers, curling in the air, calling for those who would dare to answer. A puddle sat still amidst the brittle grass field; a glistening mirage situated amongst the yellow grasslands. It reflected the station's bold colours, painting a pool of illusory purity. But as I stepped closer, the illusion shattered. As the ripples broke the water's surface, its true form was revealed – clouded, ashy, tainted by what it had consumed. Some things, once touched by fire, can never really be the same again.

Keywords: fire, dualism, heroism, passion, desire

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The fire station loomed before me, a fortress of bold red and blue. This was not built of stone, but by flesh and will, built by those who defy the instinct to flee. The very air surrounding it was thick, laced with the acrid bite of smoke. I could hear the soft whispers from the embers, curling in the air, calling for those who would dare to answer.

A puddle sat still amidst the brittle grass field; a glistening mirage situated amongst the yellow grasslands. It reflected the station's bold colours, painting a pool of illusory purity. But as I stepped closer, the illusion shattered. As the ripples broke the water's surface, its true form was revealed – clouded, ashy, tainted by what it had consumed. Some things, once touched by fire, can never really be the same again.

I looked up to see a firefighter waiting at the bus stop, his neon orange uniform sticking out like a sore thumb as he hurriedly tried to scrape off the ashy dirt caked onto his boots, a futile attempt to shed the remnants of his battles. As he stepped into the vehicle, the sunset caught his uniform, wrapping him in gold and crimson. For a moment, he glowed, just like a phoenix. But the fire was watching, waiting. It will call him back, just like it always did.

Sometimes I think about how we think they are indestructible, rising from the ashes as they carry our loved ones out of the bellowing fire. I was told by some that they chose to be a phoenix, and by others that these are the people who are born naturally courageous. But how do you naturally overcome the innate biological instinct that shrieks at you to run? More importantly, why would you run straight into the fire without any hesitation, even when you know that you will never rise from the ashes, you are not a phoenix, and you cannot ever be reborn from your ashes?

Firmin et al. (2018) identified three key reasons for entering the profession of firefighting: the thrill of the job, flexible work schedules, and—most importantly—altruism. They used the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain why firefighters remain committed to such a high-risk profession to date. SDT states that human motivation is driven by three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Altruism, within the framework of SDT is not merely just a moral choice but a psychological drive that fulfils a firefighter's need for the mastery of life-saving skills in high-risk situations (competence), the voluntary commitment to protect others (autonomy) and the deep bonds or "brotherhood" formed with colleagues and the people they serve (relatedness).

This perspective mainly sheds light on the noble and self-sacrificing aspects of firefighting, painting a largely simplistic and optimistic view. The emphasis on altruism is attractive, but it does not fully explain why some individuals are prepared to face life-threatening risks. After all, many professions involve helping others. Doctors, nurses, teachers, all engage in altruistic service—yet they do not sprint headfirst into burning buildings.

Clearly, there is something more.

Rosca et al. (2021) introduce a more unsettling reality: some firefighters are not just running into the fire to save others. They do it because they want to. They explored the Dark Triad Personality Traits (DTPT), namely Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Narcissism, and how they then influence risk-taking behaviour. Their findings surprisingly suggest that most firefighters have high psychopathy scores, due to their active liking or inclination to seek out danger. No, they are not apathetic, but something in them craves the intensity and high-stakes moments where everything is on the line. This challenges the traditional notion of heroism stemming from purely altruistic means, introducing a more psychologically complex construct—where heroism may emerge not only from a desire to help, but also from a craving for risk and recognition. Perhaps it is not only the fire they run to, but the fire that calls out to them, conversing with them, enticing them with its ruthless, all-consuming hunger. This creates another undeniable tension: is firefighting an act of self-sacrifice, or an act of self-fulfilment?

It is easy and tempting to believe that courage and selflessness are the same. But are they really? If a firefighter rushes into the flames just because they feel a deep personal calling, is their bravery for others or for themselves? Does heroism require the purity of intent, or simply extraordinary commitment in the face of risk? We are forced to confront the duality of courage: that it can stem from both selflessness and self-interest, from both duty and ego.

Still yet, I think that this complexity does not, and should not, diminish their bravery—it humanises it. It reminds us that heroism is not an abstract ideal, but a deep human experience, fuelled by layered and sometimes conflicting motivations.

Consider why we cling to the myth of the phoenix—because it allows us to see them as being indestructible, being able to be reborn from every fire unscathed. It really is a convenient illusion, one that spares us from confronting the duality of their existence: that they are both saviours and survivors, that they bear the weight of their choices long after the flames have died. We glorify them not just for their willingness to face the fire, but because we know we would never do the same.

Firefighters are not purely selfless heroes nor reckless thrill-seekers. They exist at the intersection of duty and danger, of both sacrifice and calculated risk. A manipulative firefighter might just be the furthest vocabulary you had in mind if I told you to pick an adjective right now to describe them. What could possibly be a good reason to explain the high score for Machiavellianism in the study? Often overlooked, firefighters must also master the art of persuasion. After all, how do you convince someone standing on the edge that their life is worth saving? The ability to navigate life-or-death negotiations, to skilfully manipulate fear into compliance, is an often-overlooked aspect of this profession. The fire is not always literal. Sometimes, it is the fire of despair, of hopelessness. Sometimes the firefighter's job is not just to save lives, but to convince someone that their life is worth saving.

Perhaps this is the real paradox of firefighting: self-sacrifice versus self-preservation. They are asked to sacrifice themselves, and yet they must remain whole enough to pull others back from destruction, both physical and emotional. They must risk their own lives but never lose sight of why. They must be willing to charge into danger but also know when not to.

So, why do firefighters run towards the fire? Is it for them or for others? Is it a calling or an addiction? A duty or a need?

Well, first, I think that we should definitely rethink how we define heroism.

Firefighters do not simply rise from ashes like mythical phoenixes, untouched and indestructible. They carry the weight of every rescue. Because fire is never silent. For most, it lingers, it whispers, and it always calls them back. But the fire always takes something from them, no matter how small, no matter how invincible it may seem.

And yet, they return to the flames, again and again.

Because someone has to.

And in that choice—in that willingness to bear the burden of saving others, no matter the cost—I think lies the closest definition we have to true heroism.

Because in the end, while they may not be phoenixes, they are the reason others get to rise again.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

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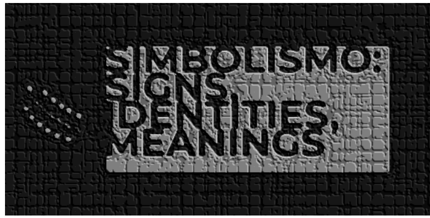

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Nimrod L. Delante*

Pahan-making: Weaving identity, tradition, and the courage to hold on to the past

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Abstract: You might not know where Biliran Island is, or the way of life of the people there. But here's one fact: living there for most of my childhood and teenage years, and witnessing its growth over time, one thing remains: the simplicity of a bucolic life away from the chaos of the world. Biliran is endowed with majestic falls, commanding mountains, ravishing rivers, rustic white beaches, and turquoise oceans. Despite advancements in technology, banking and commerce, the local people still fish or farm, enjoying the gift of the vastness of the seas and the richness of the earth. However, over the past decade, every time I would have the opportunity to visit my parents back in Biliran, I realised that I have been consistently beleaguered by one lingering thought: *On this island of simplicity, beauty and grace, what customs are still being practised, who are holding on to these customs, and for what reasons?* I kept asking this question because a custom that possesses deeper cultural and communal meanings deserves recognition and preservation. It is a thread that connects the past with the present, and it gives people a sense of belonging and continuity, reminding them that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Keywords: pahan, *pan de coco*, *diskastro*, identity, tradition, past

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You might not know where Biliran Island is, or the way of life of the people there. But here's one fact: living there for most of my childhood and teenage years, and witnessing its growth over time, one thing remains: the simplicity of a bucolic life away from the chaos of the world.

Biliran is endowed with majestic falls, commanding mountains, ravishing rivers, rustic white beaches, and turquoise oceans. Despite advancements in technology, banking and commerce, the local people still fish or farm, enjoying the gift of the vastness of the seas and the richness of the earth.

The town of Culaba in the province of Biliran. (Photo: BiliranIsland.com)

The people of Bool and Culaba continue to fish using motorised boats as their primary means of making a living. (Photo: www.culaba.ph)

Rice production remains one of the primary agricultural activities of the people of Biliran. (Photo: BiliransIsland.com)

Sambawan Island (Photo: BiliranIsland.com)

Ulan-Ulan Falls (Photo.www.biliran.gov.ph)

However, over the past decade, every time I would have the opportunity to visit my parents back in Biliran, I realised that I have been consistently beleaguered by one lingering thought: *On this island of simplicity, beauty and grace, what customs are still being practised, who are holding on to these customs, and for what reasons?* I kept asking this question because a custom that possesses deeper cultural and communal meanings deserves recognition and preservation. It is a thread that connects the past with the present, and it gives people a sense of belonging and continuity, reminding them that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Then I found that one family in the western part of a small community of Bool in Culaba, an old town in Biliran, has been continuing an ancient tradition of breadmaking popularly known as *pahan*, the local equivalent of the *pandesal* that is common in cities and has also been penetrating those remote areas of the Philippines in the past three decades. *Pahan* is made of all-purpose local flour, raw brown sugar, dry yeast, milk, eggs, a few pinches of salt, vegetable lard, and butter or margarine. The way it is being prepared follows these

steps: (1) Mix the yeast, brown sugar, milk and warm water and wait until they are bubbly. (2) Make the dough by combining the flour, brown sugar, lard, and a few pinches of salt in a big bowl, and mixing them thoroughly. (3) Add the yeast mixture, butter or margarine, and beaten eggs. Knead this until it becomes smooth and elastic, preferably within 15-20 minutes. (4) Cover the dough with a white cloth, preferably with a clean canvas sack of the flour used, and let it rise for about an hour until it doubles in size. (5) Divide the dough into smaller portions shaped into elongated ovals, with both ends thinner and the middle plump. (6) Arrange them on a greased and lightly flamed banana leaf, cover them with the same white canvas cloth, and let them rise again for about 30-40 minutes. (7) When ready, bake them in a wood-fired or charcoal-fired *pugon* oven made of either clay or aluminium, giving them a distinctly rich, fragrant, and smoky flavour.

Inay Violeta believes in the power of holding on to one's tradition, despite how the world changes drastically.

Tiya Manding's strength and vigour to continue the bread-making tradition is an epitome of the courage to hold on.

This lone family also continues to include in their offerings the rounded *pan de coco* that comes in two types: one is thick, stuffy and plump, and another is thin and flattened (locally called *diskastro* coined by the locals from the sport discus throw, a track and field event where an athlete throws a heavy rounded disc called a discus as far as possible). The ingredients for the *pan de coco* are almost the same as *pahan* including how dough is prepared, except that it requires freshly grated coconut or desiccated coconut, cooked with muscovado (raw, unrefined brown sugar from sugarcane), in which a spoonful is placed inside each portion of the dough, sealed and shaped into round-like balls, one plump, the other flattened.

As life and business partners, Tiya Manding and Mary Grace ensure the quality of *pahan, pan de coco* and *diskastro* because it is in the smiles and satisfaction of customers that they find inspiration to keep their strength and the tradition alive.

Pan de coco (left) and *diskastro* (right), along with *pahan*, remain as all-time favourites for the people of Bool.

Earlier this year, I finally got a chance to speak to this lone family that keeps this traditional breadmaking alive in this small town. I was lucky to get the opportunity to witness their baking process from preparation to the final product. It all started with the first light of day seeping across the horizon, painting the sky in a soft canvas of rose, gold, and lavender, as coconut trees stood like silhouettes against the awakening glow of the rising sun.

"What really makes you continue this tradition?" I asked Inay Violeta. She used to be the *panadera* or main baker of the family, but she had to rest and pass the role to her sister, Tiya Manding, due to old age. Frail but with a sharp sense of hearing and smell, Inay Violeta replied, "This is what we learned from our mother, and I promised her that I would keep this baking tradition for as long as I live. This makes me excited every day. This makes me keep breathing, living, hoping. This is our life. This is who we are." I felt a deep sense of

wonder, admiration, humility, and respect. She is a living symbol of someone who holds on to an ancient tradition, someone who exudes not only strength of spirit and character but also reverence for the wisdom of her parents and ancestors. She symbolises the courage to hold on to the past and make it alive, to keep a heritage that is on the brink of collapse, and carry it forward with conviction, dignity and grace. She also symbolises the purity of the soul and the authenticity of the self. To her, this breadmaking tradition is devotion arrested in the silence of worship, and an invisible link to their ancestors.

Rolled and shaped into an oval, *pahan* is placed on greased and flamed banana leaves. They are perfectly cooked when they turn slightly brown. They are best eaten warm with coffee or *sikwate* (traditional hot chocolate drink made from pure cacao).

Dried cacao seeds (Photo: Philippine News Agency)

Tablea is made from freshly ground roasted cacao seeds.

Mary Grace, Inay Violeta's daughter, who helped accommodate my request, joined our conversation while she was preparing the dough for the *pan de coco* and *diskastro*. "Although

life is hard, we continue this legacy because this speaks so much about our past, and about who we are. *Pahan* has been a staple since I was a little child. Witnessing my mother and my aunt graciously make the dough and bake it in our *pugon* almost every day has always been mesmerising to me. I don't know until when we can keep this tradition, but for as long as I live, I will carry on, no matter what happens." I looked Mary Grace in the eye and felt the sincerity of those words because of so much love she has for her mother and aunt, and the age-old breadmaking tradition. Every word she uttered was a testament to how much she cares for them and how much she holds on to such a tradition so deeply embedded in her soul. Belonging to the third generation of her family, her courage to hold on to this tradition signifies strength in spirit and character, and the power of choice. After all, "when culture dies, and the tradition dies, existence seems to fade and lose meaning", she declared.

Tiya Manding added, "And you, Sir, who continues to believe in this tradition, and who keeps ordering from us in large amounts, and even takes these to Singapore, you don't only help us earn but also galvanise this tradition and let it live on by sharing it with your family and by allowing people on social media to know. You help us weave our identity here as a humble community of hardworking people, this age-old breadmaking tradition that speaks so much of who we are, and the courage and strength to cling to our past despite how difficult it is sometimes. And despite how far you have gone in life, you do not fail to look back."

Pahan, pan de coco, and *diskasrto* are cooked in pugon, a manmade oven from either aluminium or clay using firewood, dry coconut husks, or charcoal, either from wood or coconut shells.

That was deep wisdom reverberating in my ears. I looked at Tiya Manding, Inay Violeta and Mary Grace, and it made me happy to see that despite their daily struggles, they emerged as empowered women, always ready to face the battles of life. They embody the *bayanihan* spirit, always ready to help and support each other. Yet, I also realised that age and time made Tiya Manding look thinner, with her back slightly bent with age, carrying the heavy weight of so many years of struggle. Her hair, once dark, has turned into soft grey strands, tied neatly and covered with a toque blanche, especially because she was the one preparing the dough and baking the *pahan* in *pugon*. Fine lines and deep wrinkles map her face, each crease telling stories of hardships, pain, resilience, as well as joy and fulfilment. Her hands are thin but strong, calloused from decades of work, but her eyes still shine with a steady, enduring kindness, which makes her look even more beautiful. "This is us. This is a legacy we can leave the young people of Bool, and we are always proud of this," Tiya Manding proclaimed with so much conviction.

Yet, as the young generation of their family is rapidly assimilated into modern society, this *pahan*-making, like many other traditions, might soon lose its practical value, receding into a purely cultural symbol of Bool that is in danger of being forgotten, in danger of becoming a tinge of memory. I could only hope that a young member of the family will value it and keep it alive with the passage of time. I heard that one of their grandchildren, a young male working currently in Manila, has acquired such extraordinary baking skills. What choices would he make? Is he coming home soon to continue this legacy? I could only hope for what is best for our local culture and heritage, with the whole family rooting for him to embrace this tradition, including myself.

To those who seem to ignore the beauty, richness, and struggle embedded in this breadmaking tradition, *pahan* may be nothing more than a piece of bread, but for those who are aware of the origin of this tradition that stands the test of time, *pahan*-making can be viewed as an enduring testament to a culture and people who hold on to the past as a bridge to the future; people who try and persist to carry on even if things have changed drastically, and even if the remaining option is to let go. After all, in this world of chaos, disruption, and fear, perhaps what we need is to stick to a tradition that defines us and draws us together as one big family, a tradition that compels us toward our honest, authentic, and humble selves, a tradition that makes us feel safe, and a tradition in which we feel we belong.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

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Nimrod L. Delante*

Exploring the Signs and Objects in Aswang Accounts and Descriptions in Academic Texts: A Semiotic and Critical Interpretation

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Abstract: Aswang narratives have vigorously permeated online spaces of intellectual discourse, such as books, journal articles, and films, a testament that this indigenous folklore is a cultural capital vividly establishing its position in the literature, preserved for the Filipino heritage and traditional knowledge to live on. I performed a critical reading of 28 articles on aswang and utilised Peircean semiotics as a lens through which aswang significations are captured in my interpretation. Seven striking themes that stand for something bigger (signs) emerged in my reading, with their possible interpretations (objects). First, both old and current aswang articles have predominantly described typologies, classifications, or categories of aswang, which had resulted in aswang's multifaceted nature signifying the continuity of the myth. Second, Filipina shamans and priestesses during the Spanish colonisation, who had been heavily maligned and demonised, along with aswang appearing prevalently as a monstrous female, signifies oppression, subversion, and Othering of women in an unabatingly patriarchal society. Third, the ubiquity of aswang as a symbol of invasion, manipulation, and colonisation suggests a call to awareness and discernment as a way of breaking the contorted belief that it exists if in reality it does not, as well as imploring the Filipino people to see the "real" aswang right in front of their eyes.

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Believing in the myth and perpetuating this belief appears to be a social ill, suggesting delusion, self-deception, and an unfortunate acceptance of ignorance or enslavement by a distorted logic. Moreover, the ominous and appalling audibility of sounds and soundscapes in aswang descriptions, along with their gruesome images, suggests that aswang is a metaphor for an abusive, dysfunctional, deviant, perverted, and corrupt society in which we live and the perpetuation of abuse of power. However, descriptions in current literature have displayed aswang's shapeshifting, hybrid, liminal, and transcendent nature (i.e., the traditional aswang as a blood-sucking female creature versus modern-day aswang as blood-hungry dominant men in politics and power), urging us to believe that we can reinvent our logic and imagination by carefully noticing our very reality rather than dwelling on the myth. Both in its folkloric understanding and transcendent nature, aswang emerges to be a symbol of fear, anxiety, intimidation, terror, and trauma, illustrating the destructive nature of aswang embodied by a subtle but insidious hegemonic power in an increasingly dysfunctional Philippine society. Nonetheless, despite the horrors of aswang symbolised by colonialism and trauma, there remains the courage of the Filipino to arrest such painful experiences in memory by continuing the act of remembering. This is possibly because, as a people, they are drawn to revisit distant pain and grief despite how aswang has vehemently destroyed their very consciousness. The Filipino people somehow dwell with distant pain and suffering rather than forget, because dwelling with pain is their way of healing.

Keywords: aswang, signs, objects, Peircean semiotics, critical analysis

Introduction

Aswang is a multifaceted fictional character in Philippine mythology and folklore that constitutes these equally mythical creatures, such as *tikbalang, tiyanak, manananggal, manggagaway, wakwak, bampira, kapre, sigbin, santelmo, kikik, tiktik, engkanto, diwata, duwende, nuno sa punso, masamang espirito, maligno, white lady, and mumo,* to name a few. As an all-encompassing term, aswang and the many versions of its stories, depictions, illustrations, and anecdotes are feared by most children and youths in the Philippines who are introduced to this folkloric, mythical, and supernatural creature at an early age. These stories of aswang as a demonic monster have pervaded the Philippines' rich mythology and folklore since the earliest times of human settlement in the Philippines. The permeating oral narratives about this grotesque, evil, and mysterious creature had since been heard as early as the 13th century when Malayan people came to the Philippines for trade and commerce and brought with them their supernatural beliefs; the impact of which had some bearing on the lives of the Filipino *babaylans* and the Filipino people's belief in *maligno, diwata, bathala* and *anito* (McCoy, 1982; Nadeau, 2020; Scott, 1988; Ramos, 1969). These stories had tremendously gained traction and popularity in the 16th century when the Spanish conquerors created the first record of this monstrous being in written form making the aswang the most feared creature in Philippine folklore perhaps due to its ugly, hideous, and mutilated face shared in strikingly visual forms in written accounts (Lynch, 1949; Pertierra, 1983; Ramos, 1969; Scott, 2018). Driven by their colonialist motives (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2020), the Spanish friars sowed immense fear of this creature which had grown enormously because not only could the Filipino people hear stories and create images of aswang in their minds but more vividly, they could see these images teeming with gothic representations in distinctly visual forms and shapes.

Stories about aswang are tremendously diverse and constantly changing across the Philippine archipelago, considering the vastly segregated islands where almost 90 languages are spoken. These stories are almost always thrilling, mesmerising, yet sinister and scary to many Filipinos, especially to children and the youth. These stories are shared by various communities and are retold among members of these communities. Through word of mouth, these stories are passed on from one storyteller to a listener, who later becomes the new storyteller, and from one town to another, and the cycle does not stop. These stories cannot be attributed to any one specific author or community, yet their authenticity and seemingly twisted sense of power are drawn from their ghostly quality as an effective means of relaying horror and fear (Bender, 2021; Vicerra & Javier, 2013). These stories naturally

come out during supper, and such stories become even more frightening when told in the eerie, dark, and quiet evenings in the remote islands or provinces in the country, compared to hearing them in cosmopolitan, well-lighted cities. Aswang accounts and narratives also permeate those occasions such as All Souls Day, All Saints Day, Halloween, Holy Week, or when there is a death in the family, of which the family of the deceased, their relatives and neighbours converge for 40 days of wake. These are times when all we can do is listen attentively to what unfolds in the aswang story, in which all our senses are awakened, paranoid of the prying eyes of the gruesome creature gazing at us from an uncanny, and dark distance despite it being a myth constructed by the Spanish conquerors who wanted to perpetuate their power over the Filipinos.

This article intends to enliven the interest, curiosity, and critical thinking of the Filipino people by revisiting the many stories, accounts, depictions, or descriptions of aswang in academic literature. In this modern day and age in which we are experiencing a rapid loss of traditional knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices, it is epistemologically, ontologically, and praxeologically imperative that we explore the symbolic and metaphorical representations of aswang as a creature, object, concept, myth, and symbol as our way of performing, preserving, and appropriating a Filipino heritage that is deeply entrenched in the Filipino psyche and way of life, and more importantly, as our way of problematising this phenomenon with the intent of breaking the shackles of ignorance, deception, and distorted logic, and demystifying the discourse of power and hegemony.

Guided by semiotics as a methodological and theoretical lens, exploring the symbolic tropes, characterisations, and representations of aswang in the academic literature will also help us ascribe value, validity, meaning, and suspicion to this ancient belief that has established its baleful presence and influence in our political, sociocultural and sociopsychological traditions, and constantly permeates both conversational and intellectual occasions for which we engage in meaningful discourse, debate, and contestation. Some of us question its position and legitimacy in narratives and communities, and view its existence in our lifeworld as suspect, while others sincerely believe that the myth is real, for which contention and dispute, although warranted, lose grounding and meaning. It is also the intent of this article to map the change in how the Filipinos perceive aswang with the passage of time as well as with the drastic changes in the ways in which we view aswang as we continue to face these rapid changes, and as we constantly make sense of such difficult challenges in human settlements in particular, and the social, cultural, and political world in which we live in general.

Semiotics as a Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within the semiotic tradition of communication theory, which views communication (e.g., accounts, descriptions of events, phenomena, objects, or concepts such as aswang in academic literature) as the intersubjective mediation by signs (Craig, 1999). Communication theorised in this way explains the use of language (written, spoken, or nonverbal), symbols, icons, images, portrayals, and other sign systems to mediate between different perspectives (Craig, 1999). Intersubjectivity refers to the common-sense meanings constructed in interactions; in this case, how those articles about aswang are in conversation with each other, what patterns emerge, what insights they share, and what reactions you and I have as readers gleaning over these articles. Intersubjectivity is used as a resource to interpret deeper meanings that permeate our social, cultural, and political life. Semiotics posits that signs construct their users or subject positions, that meanings are public and indeterminate, that understanding is a practical gesture, and that codes and media of communication are not merely neutral structures or channels for the transmission of meanings (Craig, 1999), but possess sign-like properties of their own, i.e., the code shapes the content and the medium itself becomes a message, or *the* message (McLuhan, 1967).

Semiotics takes advantage of the power of descriptive and narrative accounts about an object, concept, event, or phenomenon captured in the hermeneutic code (Allen, 2003). In Roland Barthes's words, the hermeneutic code implicit in descriptions and narratives offers a sombre yet palpable and scathing enigma for the readers, making them react through questions and deeper interpretations (as cited in Felluga, 2015). The vibrant lifeworld of descriptions of lived experiences and narrative accounts suspends or delays surprise, deliberately evades truths, prolongs the offering of answers, and acknowledges insolubility. Discourse must be open to arrest and sustain the enigma that narratives and descriptions must possess. Semiotics, according to Barthes, bodes well with narratives and descriptions of phenomena because it allows interpretants to seize deeper structural principles that help organise and categorize meanings by way of intersubjective mediation by signs (Craig, 1999) which can emerge in forms of words or speech utterances, antithetical terms, or a mixture or conciliation of such terms, codes and other sign systems in the material and intangible culture for deeper meanings to come to the fore (as cited in Felluga, 2015).

In a broad sense, descriptions and narrative accounts are deeply immersed in our way of life, and they are a semiotic representation of a series of events semantically related in a temporal, causal, historical, cultural, symbolic, and meaningful way. Stories, accounts, descriptions, images, portrayals, and anecdotes about aswang can be constructed using a

wide range of semiotic environments: the written and spoken word in narration, visual images or illustrations, gestures and actions, symbolic representations and nuances in text, specific vocabulary and metaphors, or a combination of these, bringing with them the enigma that continuously excites the imagination of the Filipinos. Any semiotic construct, anything made of characters or captured in written forms or oral traditions, such as aswang as a mythical creature and a concept, can be called a text. Consequently, texts can be linguistic, non-verbal, theatrical, pictorial, graphic, filmed, or symbolic (Allen, 2003). That is, all texts that we experience have a story of their own. All texts that we experience create semiotic representations or sign-object connections because of the vivid descriptions that they carry. Examples of these texts are published articles, documents or written accounts that share imposing narrations, descriptions, and explications of aswang being a popular topic, object, concept, or myth shared among Filipinos, either in informal conversations or intellectual discourses or within the intersubjective psyche of the individual.

Chatman (1978) argued that by creating conditions in which an event, character, concept, or setting emerges, a meaningless text becomes meaningful, a vague text becomes understood, or a boring text takes some shape, form, and substance. For example, those grotesquely striking visual representations of aswang in comic books, magazines, and journals will have some bearing and will create meaningful discourse when introduced in specific contexts and for specific purposes, e.g., creating a learning module in a Philippine mythology course, conducting a community storytelling event attended by children, or facilitating a simple storytelling at home by a parent to a child for educational, cultural, psychological, and disciplinary reasons.

Peircean Semiotics

In uncovering the signs and symbols in narrative accounts in the larger body of texts, Peirce (1955) suggested a simple strategy: to determine the sign (signifier), the object (the signified), and the interpretant. In one of his many definitions of a sign, Peirce (1955) shared a fundamental view: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former". Peirce claimed that signs consist of three interrelated parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant.

In theoretical and interpretive studies such as this study on aswang, one might argue that an individual's strong advocacy and passion for aswang studies and stories (sign) signify his deep care and responsibility (object) to raise people's consciousness of the real aswang that aggressively, deliberately, and sadistically destroys the very humanity of its

people. The object is best thought of as what is signified, e.g., the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, such that a Filipino citizen's visceral anger (sign) towards a corrupt government suggests something deeper, i.e., he has great concern for justice and the common good and he truly cares for his people and desire for their better lives (object). If anger is the sign, care for others is the object it signifies. Therefore, a sign is anything that stands for or represents something else. It can be a word, image, object, or gesture. The object is the entity or concept that the sign represents. It can be anything that exists in the physical and abstract world, driven by our interpretation of the sign. The interpretant, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's semiotics, is the understanding that arises from the sign-object relations (Atkin, 2013; Craig, 1999). The interpretant is the mental representation of the sign that is created in the mind of the person interpreting it. The sign triggers an interpretation in the mind of the observer, which becomes the interpretant. The interpretant is influenced by both the sign and the object it represents. It also mediates the relationship between the sign and the object. The importance of the interpretant is the stance that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users (Pharies, 1985).

These elements, the sign, the object, and the final interpretant in semiotic interpretation, emerged helpful in my critical analysis of 28 articles (journal articles, book chapters, theses, reviews, and essays) narrating, describing, and analysing aswang as a creature, object, concept, and mythical phenomenon in many different ways, some literal, some metaphorical, some critical, some rhetorical, some cultural, some political, and some sociopsychological.

Myths and Semiotics

In *Myth and Meaning*, Claude Levi-Strauss (1978) postulates that, as myths abound in different parts of the world, permeating different cultures, parallels of mythical categorisations can be discerned, allowing us to make sense of the world through our human senses. Myths are complex systems of meaning that reveal deep structures of human thought. Like language being governed by the underlying structures of grammar and syntax, myths are also governed by underlying structures and organising systems enabling the human mind to grapple with fundamental questions about the self, existence, society and the natural world. Although symbolic and interpretative, myths utilise cognitive processes to represent different ways of organising and interpreting beliefs, symbols,

concepts, and experience. Although metaphorical, myths employ categorisation, analogy, and binary oppositions to arrive at an idea, thought, or explanation. Myths are concerned with particularities and relationships between phenomena. Mirroring Peirce (1955), mediation is central to understanding myths; they do not simply reflect oppositions that are observable in life, but also actively work to resolve them through symbolic means, creating a sense of order and coherence in a world that is bombarded with chaos, disruptions, contradictions, and conflicts (Levi-Strauss, 1978). Myths are a way of thinking about the world that invites people to make sense of binary oppositions and their experiences in the lifeworld (e.g., war-peace, men-women, chaos-order, fantasy-reality, escape-confrontation). Myths are not bound by chronological time, but they exist in a kind of eternal present - transcendental, enduring, and cyclical - where the past, present, and future are entangled, thereby addressing perennial human concerns that are not limited to a specific historical moment or period of time. Myths transcend space, place, and time because they deal with universal dilemmas, and they capitalise on interpreting signs and symbols that trigger human thought. When cultures and peoples address them, myths become relevant across generations and time. Thus, myths transform historical events into symbolic narratives that, despite their complexities, allow societies to integrate historical experiences into their collective consciousness, giving meaning and significance beyond their immediate context. Since myths abound in different parts of the world, permeating different cultures, parallels of mythical categorisations can be discerned, allowing us to make sense of our dispositions and worldviews. For instance, *aswang* in the Philippines meets a categorical equivalent of *pontianak* in Malaysia and Indonesia, *krasue* in Cambodia and Thailand, *jiangshi* in China, *chedipe* in India, *obayifo* in West Africa, and *clarimond*e in France, to name a few. Different contexts and cultures create versions of their vampires or witches as products of their folkloric, symbolic and metaphorical signification of the chaos, disruption, and complexity of the world in which they live.

However, in an attempt to discover the universal and transcendental nature of myths, their metalanguage might take over reality, as Roland Barthes (1957) theorised. Myths have the power to deform and de-historicize the original connection between the signifier and the signified. In an attempt to "empty" or distort reality, myths can establish a world "without depth" and can "naturalise" history (Barthes, 1957). For example, in the post-World War II era, the French bourgeoisie can present their own ideas, interests, and motives as those of the nation as universal, although looking deep within, this denotes serving the purpose of ideology, in naturalising all forms of oppression, marginalisation,

and subjugation into what people think of as commonsensical, and therefore, valid or legitimate. Because myths are beliefs or conceptions of what used to be, we might fail to see what lies underneath, such that a society that presents its own ideas, interests, and motives as those of the nation being universal can lead to creating a faux sense of community as it conceals almost all forms of oppression, marginalisation, and subjugation into what people think as commonsensical even if they warrant interrogation and debate.

The Limitations of Myths

Malinowski (1926) argued that if we want to understand myths, we look at what myths *do,* not what they *say.* Aswang, for instance, as a mythical creature, seems to be a disciplinary tool of some sort because telling stories about it keeps children from wandering in the evenings. Because aswang seems to be deeply entrenched in the minds of children, believing it is true, and fearing an encounter with it, children stay inside their homes for their own safety. This increasing perception of aswang, shared and passed on to various communities in the Philippines, has bearing on the sociology, religion, customs, and outlook of the Filipinos, making them discern what this story means to them as natives of their country and how it can permeate their very lives. What the aswang myth does is teach children to follow the order of their parents to stay indoors when darkness comes. It does not only instil discipline but also sows fear. A more potent level of meaning exists not from the mythmaker but from how what is spoken is received or understood (metalanguage), how the aswang myth affects children, and how it functions in the larger society (Malinowski, 1926).

However, bodily experience seems to summon children to be in sync with their reality. Context might determine the meaning of the aswang myth derived from the meaning of words constituted in the language and perpetuated in the stories of the locals (metalanguage), but reality posits the non-existence of aswang in the natural world – it is not seen nor heard in its empirical, physical or material sense. It is only a figment of the human imagination, made more sinister in stories. Acknowledging this binary of existence/non-existence of aswang is one step away from delving into deception or delusion, teaching children to question the aswang's existence both in their minds and in the real world.

Malinowski (1926) asserts that society is better off if people believe what myths portray, even if false, rather than if people lose such hope in reunion with lost loved ones and the existence of an afterlife. Such myths keep human hope alive, and with it, human society seems to thrive. So long as people need the noble lies that Malinowski (1926) equates with myths, and so long as people live through self-deception, then taking his words to

heart can be powerful for people to carry on with their struggles. However, in the context of aswang stories in the Philippines, a pervasive spectral delusion (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996) emerges that stymies the power of the Filipino mind to investigate, probe, and question. What can thrive is deception rather than truth perceived in the reality of experience, and delusion rather than a critical consciousness emerging from an awareness of the suffering of the human condition. Perhaps it is not hope that the aswang myth affords, but an escape from the clamant chaos of the world and the suffering of man. Nonetheless, the Filipino mind cannot always choose to escape when things go awry; they have to face the perils of a troubled world and the painful reality of existence to emancipate their minds and souls. Aswang seems to be a social ill (Cabodil & Tango, 2022) and a spectral delusion that warrants an awakening of the Filipino spirit so that its grim impact on the Filipino mind, life, and experience is curtailed.

Myths, therefore, have limitations. Mythology seems to harmonise with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create. It renders itself ambiguous as it claims to understand reality, yet has some complicity with it. As Barthes (1957) expressed, the metalanguage of myths "acts nothing; at the most, it unveils – or does it? To whom?" (p. 156). Any myth with some degree of generality is, in fact, ambiguous because it represents the very humanity of those who, have nothing, have borrowed it. The Filipino poor, for example, who hope and wish to make their lives better, and hold on to the enigma and metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional. Delving into the myth of aswang, which is hugely folkloric and fictitious, unveils unimaginable solutions and an unforeseeable synthesis to the Filipino mind, the latter being a critical way of viewing how the world works, grounded in the reality of existence, and the truths behind their living conditions. Some communities that rely on the symbolic meanings of myths may take for granted natural, geological or meteorological explanations for disasters, thereby slowing down the adoption of modern science and promoting fatalism and inaction. For instance, seeing disasters as divine punishment, a bad fate, or the work of supernatural beings might develop the idea that nothing can be done to mitigate these disasters using human intervention, a fatalistic view that can cloud reality and action. It is not only from the chaos of the public and enormous social ills that one becomes estranged or alienated, but it is sometimes also from the very object signified by the myth (Barthes, 1957). The mechanic, engineer, or scientist speaks about the object from an empirical perspective, the mythologist is somehow condemned to metalanguage – an ideologism, a set of beliefs attributed to a person or group of people, especially those held for reasons that are not purely about belief

in certain knowledge, in which practical elements are prominent and salient rather than abstract or symbolic ones. Ideologism and metalanguage as ways of symbolically viewing phenomena might produce a reticence of a reality inaccessible to ideology; it can resolve the contradiction of alienated reality by an amputation, not a critical synthesis (Barthes, 1957) that drives deeper consciousness and an emancipated mind.

According to Barthes (1957), the fact that we "cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless, gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it, but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified" (p. 159). It would seem that, as we continue to navigate myths in our lifeworld, "we are condemned for some time yet always to speak excessively about reality" (p. 159). This is probably because ideologism and its opposite are types of behaviour which are still magical, terrorised, blinded, and fascinated by the growing social divide. And yet, "this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between a signified metaphorical object and knowledge" (Barthes, 1957, p. 159).

Malinowski (1926) postulated that, sometimes, what people wanted and believed lay at a great depth, beyond what they were usually aware of at a given moment. Biological drives and instincts that seek hidden, unconscious functions suggest that when these unconscious levels were peeled back, we would see humanity grappling with its most elemental biological problems (Strenski, 1992). Self-deception and lack of introspective skills are common enough for us to take such things seriously, but to generalise these traits to all conduct and the phenomenon of myth would itself be a dangerous self-deception. As Strenski (1992) argued, myths were latter-day "noble lies," but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Thus, although myths are functionally or pragmatically useful in stilling human fears—mere biological palliatives— they are utterly without basis in reality. Myths act in this unconscious and direct way, speaking subrationally to our deepest instincts for survival, fuelled by our will to believe (Strenski, 1992).

Literature Review

Three key themes emerged in my review of the mythical aswang in the body of literature, namely: ignorance and entertainment, awakening and skepticism, and vulnerability and confrontation.

Ignorance and Entertainment

Past literature on aswang appeared to be hugely vivid descriptions of it and its typologies, classifications, or categories, from ghouls to viscera suckers, to weredogs, witches, vampires, and other classifications distinct in different regions of the Philippines such as *sigbin, manananggal, manggagaway, tiyanak, tikbalang, kapre, duwende, nuno,* etc. (Jocano, 1983; Lynch, 1949; Ramos, 1968/1969/1971; Sibley, 1970). Aswang is visually yet disturbingly striking both in text and images created as early as the 16th century until the 1960s to the late 1970s, and even until today. Mystique, vile, and horror are central to these aswang stories conveyed largely through oral narratives within diverse communities in different parts of the country, crystallising the psycho-geographic nature of this fictitious and folkloric creature (Cakirlar, 2023; Katarina de Jesus, personal communication, November 2023). Idiosyncrasy appears to be aswang's defining characteristic which has been foregrounded by vivid descriptions of the different desires and motives of each of these aswang species (e.g., a *tiyanak* disguises itself as an abandoned baby in order to suck blood from a mother's neck, while a *manananggal* or viscera sucker's sharp, firm, thick, and elongated tongue is always hungry for an infant's blood especially during full moon). This belief in the myth seems to be solidly entrenched in the Filipino psyche even though this remains a myth unless those sightings of aswang collectively told during family gatherings or shared in writing are proven to be true using empirical evidence. This is not to say that the authors during those periods are innocent or ignorant; rather, the persistent belief of the Filipino people in this mythical figure largely represents a disturbing form of ignorance among the Filipino people, as it galvanises a distorted logic among local communities. Such ignorance (believing in and perpetuating the myth) illustrates how many Filipinos have become unfortunate victims of self-deception and spectral delusion (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Clark & del Rosario, 2011; de leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996) exacerbated by the Spanish friars' strong colonialist resolve to demonise Filipina shamans and priestesses as a way of curtailing their strong influence to their local communities, and for Christianity to prosper (Derain, 2021; Snow, 2023; Svetich, 2005) affirming the power of mythical storytelling as a double-edged sword. These myths (the ways things have always been or believed to be true) are broadly shared among the Filipino people with little acts of resistance. Religious pursuits in the Philippines have penetrated deeply into the Filipino consciousness, and using aswang as a monstrous evil that penalises believers for their sins emerged successful in proliferating such a myth in the Filipino ideology (Jones & Flaxman, 2017; F. A. Oclarit, personal communication, April 2024). Self-deception and lack of introspective skills become common

enough for the Filipinos to take such things seriously, but to generalise these traits to all conduct and the phenomenon of myth would itself be a dangerous self-deception. As Strenski (1992) argued, myths were latter-day "noble lies," but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Nonetheless, a rather positive outcome of the strong belief in the aswang myth happens to delineate its creative, mystifying, and entertaining capacity despite the horror it brings, and how such stories congregate children at home at the twilight of day, a subtle yet effective disciplinary instrument of some sort (Imran, 2017; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2011). However, such fascination and gravitation to aswang stories could aggravate people's misconstrued belief in the myth (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996), especially children who are more vulnerable to flawed reasoning and misconstrued understanding, and at the same time exacerbate spectral delusion and deception making it a social ill that continuously plagues the public (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Rafael, 1996).

Awakening and Skepticism

Since the early 1970s until now, aswang texts draw upon the increasing relevance of skepticism: the power to question what is collectively perceived to be true, the ability to discern, and the capacity to interrogate and contest one's beliefs, to consider them suspect, and to reflect on them. Colonialism emerged as a key theme in aswang literature, surfacing both in old and contemporary articles. A metaphor in itself, aswang represents something bigger, which depicts the sociopolitical ills of a colonial Philippines (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Derain, 2021; Villarea, 2010). Colonialism and the horrors and brutality of war (Sipin, 2017; Snow, 2023; Svetich, 2005) as an aswang trope are a wake-up call for the Filipino people to discern between a mythical creature and a real aswang, the latter taking the shape of a human being, hiding in broad daylight, clothed in uniform, and holding a high position in government, willing to utilise their power and influence to silence voices through violent means – inhuman, bloody, nocuous, and grotesque (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Balce et al., 2020). This modern aswang appears to be a dominant male hungry for human blood. Unfortunately, most of these men hold positions and power in politics for which the possibility of spreading horror can be lethal to the Filipino spirit.

To be skeptical is a favour a Filipino can give to his fellow Filipinos. To be skeptical is a way to discern, to awaken one's senses, and to emancipate the mind. As a myth, aswang is a social ill (Cabodil & Tango, 2020), a chimaera, a delusion, and a deception that warrants elimination from our psyche; however, aswang's deeply rooted position and the gravity of its influence in the minds of the Filipinos have always been a nemesis never been defeated. It

is etched in the Filipino psyche, and removing it seems to be a futile endeavour. To be awakened is one thing; to act on this awakening, driven by a skeptical mind, is another; yet to educate and change the ignorant mind has always been a huge challenge to bear. Nonetheless, this perversion of the mind (Villarea, 2010; Christopher Lo, personal communication, July 2023) can be reduced if the Filipino people do not stop asking questions and scrutinising one's beliefs and mores in juxtaposition to their appalling reality. Such enslavement of a flawed mindset can be overcome when an awakened mind does not go back to a beguiling slumber, ready to be deceived again by the allure of escapism and an imagined, utopic world (de Leon, 2012). Skepticism, therefore, fuels contestation, dispute, and rationalising one's beliefs betwixt the painful, grimacing reality.

Vulnerability and Confrontation

Current literature on aswang (Arumpac, 2019; Balce et al., 2021; Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Casibual, 2022; Derain, 2021; Snow, 2023; Torralba, 2021) foregrounds the relentless vulnerability of the Filipinos, children, women, and men, about the increasing but disturbing metaphor, that is, aswang normalising violence (Arumpac, 2019), and escalating intimidation, terror, trauma, and fear (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Macapagal, 2021) as exercise and perpetuation of hegemonic power manifested in coercive, corrupt, and draconian leadership. Then and now, the Filipinos are defenceless and unsafe against the tyranny of a corrupt government wrapped in the symbolism that is aswang, yet they carry on with their lives for survival. Such a corrupt government that is hungry for power emerges to be a male-dominated aswang, also becoming hungry for human blood oozing out from the dead bodies of the vulnerable through [1]*tokhang* and riding in tandem operations. The palpable audibility of sounds produced both by the written texts about aswang (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Torralba, 2021) amplifies this sense of vulnerability, especially among those children in the streets of Manila, Cebu, or Davao, along with their parents who try to earn a decent sum each day to live another day. The children of the slums of Manila are vulnerable not to the mythical creature who, in its folkloric sense, is perceived to devour their flesh and suck their blood (i.e., the traditional aswang as a female witch), but by the ontological reality of aswang in the very shape and form of a human being, priding themselves of their political positions, and clothed in uniform with full armoury (i.e., the modern aswang appearing to be a male full of machismo and misogyny while remaining

[1] Local terms for knock (tuktok) and plead (hangyo) describing widespread operations that were launched by the Duterte administration in July of 2016, involving police officers going door to door to root out drug-related offenders (Asia News Network, 2019).

blood hungry), ready to shoot anyone with their guns, including the vulnerable children who are helpless victims of the rampant drug trade in the country. The real aswang lives in big cities, ready to make the lives of the poor and the vulnerable more miserable. The real aswang devours the dead, the living dead, and many more living dead.

Nonetheless, the Filipinos can fight the aswang by believing in their human senses and holding on to their awakened consciousness. "For us to see, smell, taste, and feel the tragedy happening around us—we must listen" (Arumpac, 2019). Not even children are spared by the aswang. This painful reality must indeed encourage us to "stand up and look the monster in the eye" even if we are afraid (Arumpac, 2019), and even if the last option is to run away. The transcendent aswang that continues to bully the weak by sowing terror and trauma deserves a bold confrontation and tenacious bravery. The Filipinos must fearlessly look this monster in the eye with full attention rather than look away because of being conditioned to look away (Balce et al., 2020). The voices of justice and freedom cannot find solace and cannot be amplified when aswang is always free to spread horrors to the Filipino people, both in body and in mind. "Kailangan siyang harapin!" (We need to confront it!) said Arumpac (2019).

Research Questions

In this paper, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

(1) What signs do descriptive accounts of aswang in the academic literature signify, and what objects do these significations suggest?

(2) How do these sign-object representations accomplish awareness and understanding of aswang as an intangible cultural knowledge?

(3) How do these sign-object representations change the way we perceive aswang as a popular mythical creature?

Methodology

I read and thematically and critically analysed 28 articles listed and cited on Google Scholar about aswang, sequenced from most cited to least. This was between March 2022 and January 2023, before this study was presented at the Philippine Studies Association National Conference held in Central Bicol State University of Agriculture in Pili, Camarines Sur, Naga, Philippines in March 2024. The articles are journal articles, book chapters, theses and dissertations, online magazines, reviews, and essays published in different journals, publications, websites, and new media. Key themes or insights from these articles proved helpful in arriving at honest, sincere, and profoundly illuminating interpretations guided by the fundamental principles of semiotics (sign-object identifications by Peirce, 1955) as a

hermeneutic empiricist approach to qualitative data analysis (Anderson, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Thematic Analysis

As a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), thematic analysis requires qualitative researchers to code, a process of assigning value to a foundational text of words, an interaction, description, speech, narration, or conversation (Anderson, 2008). Coding invokes researchers to engage in a tedious process of reading and rereading narrative texts so that concepts, patterns, themes, and even anomalies will come to the fore. Such concepts and themes can be broken down into subthemes, or they can be brought to a higher level of categorising by coalescing them and creating overarching thematic concerns or splitting them up to see how subthemes can emerge. Anderson (2008) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011) called this process axial coding, in which researchers dig deep into textual data, make further categorizations of subthemes emerging from the narrative data, build connections, break down core themes into more specific and interconnected categories, find revealing patterns of thought, capture illuminating insights, and decide which major themes warrant a space in the analysis. For example, after listing down significant details, codes, or themes, one can pick three or four of these themes that are most interesting, related, or revealing so that a pattern can be noticed or an overarching thematic concern can emerge. For instance, if we put together the themes "aswang as monstrous, selfish creatures", "aswang has an insatiable penchant for foetuses and human blood", "aswang is deceitful", and "aswang as a master of disguise", we can make a contention that in the sociopolitical context of the Philippines, aswang signifies fear, dread, and trauma (sign) implying a bigger sociopolitical illness of the country which is endemic greed and corruption (object). In short, aswang is an allegorical representation of a social anxiety (sign) that has grown immensely out of a scrupulous, corrupt governance (object).

Critical Analysis

Critical analysis, on the other hand, is a process that seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power, conflict, oppression, marginalisation, or subversion (Anderson, 2008; Craig, 1999), thereby intentionally revealing the destructive nature of power, power play, and its pervasive practice. In the texts being analysed, the role of the researcher is to figure out the dominant interests of social and political power (Anderson, 2008). In critical analysis, the author and authorship both recede. The author is simply the agent of the dominant. Does the article participate in the construction of the marginalised, the disadvantaged, the subaltern, and the subjugated Other? Does the tone and point of view of the narrator

question or support this perpetuation of power and hegemony in the text, such that they emanate in the written word? If so, then it rings true to how critical analysis allows us to unravel the discourse of power and hegemony that are deeply rooted in texts. Critical analysis, therefore, enables researchers to explicate and surface the oppressive nature of power and hegemony in texts (Anderson, 2008) for readers to unveil and react.

Using thematic and critical analysis and constantly mindful of the fundamental elements of semiotic interpretation, these themes and patterns emerging from descriptions in texts, along with how power, hegemony, and domination surface in those texts, helped me capture signs and symbols of aswang (ideas that stand for something bigger), and the objects they signify (their possible interpretations or concepts that the signs represent), with me, the reader and researcher, making sense of these sign-object relations and crafting an interpretant as the understanding of these sign-object relations (Peirce, 1955). I was one with the texts in this interpretive journey. I have arrived at an understanding (interpretant) that we have of this sign-object relation, and this understanding is captured both in my mind and the reader of this text right now (insofar as understanding is happening within the psychological and cognitive capacity of the reader and their awareness of the topic and context). This interpretant is influenced by both the sign and the object it represents, which, in turn, mediates the relationship between the sign and the object.

Results and Discussion

Two specific questions remained constant in my consciousness and interpretation: (1) What signs do these ideas about aswang suggest? (2) What do these signs mean? I maintained trustworthiness, fidelity, honesty, and sincerity in my thematic interpretation and semiotic exploration. I tried to sustain an honest, sincere, and truthful understanding as a reader and researcher who belongs to the diasporic Filipino community for which aswang narratives are collectively shared. As Peirce (1955) echoed, “That every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community”. I am an external sign insofar as aswang is an external sign, and my critical interpretation matters in the process of signification and meaning-making. Table 1 shows the signs and objects emerging from the thematic and critical analysis of texts. These are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 1. Signs and Objects in Aswang Literature (1960s to 2023)

Sign	Object
Aswang typologies and classifications permeate the academic literature, past and present	Continuity or constancy of the myth
Aswang is constructed as a monstrous female	Oppression, marginalisation, and Othering of women
Aswang as a symbol of colonialism	Constantly calls for an awakening of the Filipino consciousness
Persistent belief of the Filipino in the aswang as a myth	Deception, delusion, and the propagation of a distorted logic
The ominous audibility of aswang soundscapes as a symbol of fear and trauma	A representation of a corrupt and dysfunctional society, and the perpetuation of abuse of power
Aswang is hybrid, liminal, and transcendent	Calls for a reinvention of the imagination
Keeping aswang in memory and consciousness	An apt illustration of nostalgia (being drawn to distant pain and suffering)

Typology and Classification of Aswang as Continuity of the Myth

Aswang categories, classifications, and typologies permeate both old texts and current texts in the literature, in this study, from the 1960s to 2023 (see Lynch, 1963; Jocano, 1983; Ramos, 1967/1969/1971; Gaverza, 2014; Jala, 2016; Zarka, 2019; Derain, 2021). These typologies consist of the most common and popular – from *manananggal* to *kapre, tiyanak, wakwak, ghouls, weredogs, bampira, sigbin, tiktik, maligno,* etc. Typologies are accompanied by specific descriptions pertaining to the insatiable desires of each of these monsters, e.g., a tiyanak disguises itself as an abandoned baby in the woods to victimise a woman and suck blood from her neck; a manananggal or viscera sucker's sharp, firm, thick, and elongated tongue is always hungry for an infant's blood, especially during full moon; while a ghoul sneaks into a house of a dying person to satisfy his nostrils with the pungent smell of a dying human body, or dig the grave of a buried cadaver to taste its cold, dark, and thick blood.

Manananggal illustration by Gian Bernal (as cited in Lopez, 2021)

If these classifications and typologies were a sign of something bigger, then what does it signify? I figured that the strong presence of these typologies in past and current literature suggests how fluid, positioned, and constant the aswang myth was in the minds of the Filipino people then and now. There could have been a reason for this perpetuation of the aswang myth in the minds of the Filipino people. It could have been that myths are sacred narratives reproducing prima facie the natives' own classification and nomenclature, playing a "highly important cultural part" (Malinowski, 1926). Myth functions unconsciously as far as the actors in question are concerned. It functions as "an indispensable ingredient of all culture"; it fulfils objective, even biological, needs essential to the survival of the culture in question. All the elements of a cultural whole serve a necessary practical function for the survival of the institution (Strenski, 1992). However, believing in this myth rather than investigating why it came about in the first place turned out to be an unfortunate irony. It illustrates how ignorance, delusion, and enslavement by a distorted logic can happen amongst people despite the availability of science, technology, and digital information to help them verify whether their beliefs are fact or simply a cacophony of myths and superstitions. This constancy of the myth broadens the continuity of ignorance and triumph of self-deception. This continuity of the myth perpetuates the very fuel of such myth: the act of storytelling, creating thousands of versions of the aswang phenomenon in almost every Filipino home and on many online platforms. The myth is constituted in the very stories about aswang spreading throughout the archipelago. Storytelling is the fuel perpetuating the myth. Perhaps the dark tone and horror of these aswang stories, intensified by the centrality of conflict, contradiction, ambiguity, fear, and moral dilemma, have become the insidious yet pervasive source of power that such mythical stories of aswang bring.

The Construction of Aswang as a Monstrous Female Is a Form of Oppression

History shows that Filipino women shamans and priestesses were heavily maligned and demonised by the Spanish friars because of the latter's guileful desire to spread Christianity among the locals (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011; Rafael, 1996). Respected by their local communities for their indigenous knowledge to heal the sick both physically and psychologically, these shamans and priestesses became victims of hegemony, coercion, manipulation, abuse of power, and patriarchal ideology, such that they were denigrated into monstrous witches hungry for human blood (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011). Worse, for some women who stood up for their rights and voices, the Spanish colonisers irreproachably hired vagabonds to destroy these women both physically and morally by imploring these vagabonds to rape and kill them (Nadeau, 2011; Young, 2017). This could explain the

construction of aswang as a female gender, rather than being a male, and a monstrous female at that, but such monstrosity only finds hedonistic pleasure in myths, not in real life. Their perceived monstrosity was an outcome of deceitful patriarchal motives deeply ingrained in the male-dominated colonising power, hungry to spread more horrors in their colonised land. With the intent to subjugate and disempower local women, these Spanish friars emerged to be the real aswang.

Image illustration of a tiyanak or demon baby (Netflix/Trese, 2021)

Nonetheless, we wonder why it was so easy for the Spanish colonisers to disparage women and deprive them of their right to express their beliefs and practise their indigenous knowledge in their own country. What does this sign suggest? My interpretation led me to capture one idea: oppression. This evil construction of women into guileful witches illustrates an insidious patriarchal power, most fitting and beneficial for Spanish colonisers to achieve their selfish motives. These women were marginalised, subjugated, subverted, and silenced. They were an Other to the Spanish colonisers and the relatively strong patriarchal hegemony. In its mythical and folkloric sense, the aswang possesses immense power to destroy machismo, misogyny, and patriarchy illustrated by those grotesque images of seducing men, devouring them in the flesh, and sucking their blood until they die, but in the real sociopolitical world that is dominated by powerful men, the aswang depicted as a woman emerged weak, lethargic, muted, and helpless. Her voice suppressed, her rights violated, and her identity and individuality shattered. She is a subaltern. The female-gendered aswang is an object of ridicule and mockery, not a subject with the power to assert

its agency and position in the world. This Othering of women, illustrated by the evil aswang, represents how colonial power has triumphed over nationalistic spirit and consciousness, how colonial power destroyed the very humanity of the Filipino, and how colonial power has become a force of oppression, coercion, and subversion that continues to silence women until today.

Aswang illustration by HubPages/SilentReed (2013)

Aswang as a Symbol of Colonialism Calls for an Awakening of the Human Senses

Colonialism emerged to be a prevalent symbol of aswang both in ancient and current literature. Aswang became a metaphor for struggle, horrors, pain, and trauma caused by colonisation and war driven by the intense desire of the West to invade the East (C. C. P. Jean Lee, personal communication, March 2023). Aswang signifies colonialism in its ontological, epistemological, and figurative sense. Almost 65% of the articles in the literature reviewed for this study draw on how colonialism has embodied the idiosyncratic characteristics of aswang – demonic, evil, sinister, insidious, and a killing machine (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011). The Philippines is not alien to the aspect of colonisation. For more than three centuries, it was under the control of the

Spaniards, followed by the Japanese, and then the Americans. Colonisation was never a thing of beauty. It brought tremendous horror and pain to the Filipino spirit. It caused so much trauma to the point that the Filipino consciousness and identity became ambiguous, ambivalent, disjunctured, and fragmented. Colonialism symbolically appeared to be an aswang lurking in the shadows of the Philippine archipelago, sowing terror and trauma to every Filipino soul in every home. Colonialism destroyed the peace and tranquility of the Filipinos.

Nevertheless, colonialism signifying aswang has created a collective narrative that became a wake-up call for the Filipino people to emancipate their minds. Colonialism embodied in the aswang mythical character has become a staunch warning for the Filipino people to question their existence, to interrogate and reflect on their conditions and position in the world, to contest ideologies, and to awaken their senses to the realities of their sacrifice and struggle. Colonialism, as a personification of aswang, signifies that the Filipino people must summon themselves to be skeptical of the ways the foreign invaders were running their land and maltreating their people as the rightful owners of such land. Therefore, the object signified by colonialism is for the Filipino consciousness to be awakened, and for this awakening to find meaning and purpose, they need to start the habit of contesting ideologies and questioning ideals and principles, fuelled by skepticism. Skepticism matters here because it is grounded in the desire to know the unknown, to discover knowledge, and to arrest truths. Isn't it a liberating act to pursue truth if aswang implores us to free our minds from the shackles of ignorance and the dangers of misconstrued reasoning?

Believing in the Myth Is Delusion, Deception, and a Distorted Logic

Myth seems to be the nemesis of science. If science pursues knowledge by testing hypotheses through empirical evidence, the power of myths is propelled by its very own menacing nature: the allure of the human mind to find solace and escape by dwelling on the supernatural and the superstitious. Myths are latter-day "noble lies", but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Thus, although myths are functionally or pragmatically useful in stilling human fears—mere biological palliatives— they are utterly without basis in reality. Myths act in this unconscious and direct way, speaking subrationally to our deepest instincts for survival, fuelled by our will to believe (Strenski, 1992). Any myth with some degree of generality is, in fact, ambiguous because it represents the very humanity of those who, have nothing, have borrowed it. The Filipino poor, for example, who hope and wish to make their lives better,

and hold on to the enigma and metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional (Malinowski, 1926). Delving into the myth of aswang, folkloric and fictitious, unveils unimaginable solutions and an unforeseeable synthesis to the human mind, the latter being a critical way of viewing how the world works, grounded in the reality of existence, and the truths behind their living conditions.

The real danger of the habit of believing in myths lies in how people and communities share such myths in forms of stories and gossip (Azuma, 2012; Baes, 2017; F. A. Oclarit, personal communication, March 2024), and how these baseless stories inflate in large proportions constantly shared among people making such myths credible to the general but unquestioning public. These stories and gossip, constituted in the act of storytelling, perpetuate the myth and distorted logic. Using intersubjectivity as a lens, if people share a strong belief in the myth, then there is a higher chance that such a myth will be treated as real. The myth becomes reality. The imagined becomes the seen, or something that is bodily experienced by the very nature of human senses. The abstract becomes concrete despite the very fact that, until today, no one has ever seen an aswang in its ontological, material, bodily, and empirical sense. No one has ever seen it in the flesh. Every story, every sighting, every incident, was and is largely fuelled by the belief that the creature exists, if in reality, it does not. Every story, every sighting, every incident was and is make-believe. Such inciting incidents woven into these mythical stories provoke vogue following and persuade people to engage in the heightened fixation to believe without question.

If believing in the myth that is aswang is a sign, then what does it signify? My constant musing led me to argue that this strong belief in the myth is a form of spectral delusion and self-deception (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996), and what makes this utterly disturbing is that the general Filipino populace does not seem to realise that the myth renders them delusional and self-deceived. They do not seem to realise that they are holding on to and spreading a distorted logic made more sinister and devastating because it victimises the very innocence of children at home, further transforming and extending ignorance into a dangerous form of folly that transcends place, space and time.

Aswang concept by Leo Angelo Art and Illustrations (2016)

They become unfortunate slaves of their subconscious, telling them that aswang is real, while the conscious mind is being pushed to silence and mockery. Such an unfortunate paradox angers those of us who dwell on empirical data and documentary evidence as our way of understanding phenomena and arriving at truths. If to see is to believe, then why do the majority of Filipinos believe in the things they haven't seen? Why don't they stop believing in those things they haven't encountered in the physical world? Why can't they see the real aswang in its human form, hiding in broad daylight, clothed in uniform, and has coagulated a strong position in politics, powerful enough to destroy their very humanity? Why do the Filipino people continue this deception if they can stop it, because it is actually possible to do so?

The Ominous Audibility of Aswang Soundscapes Symbolises Fear and Trauma Representing a Corrupt and Dysfunctional Society, and Perpetuation of Abuse of Power

Palpable both in films and documentaries about aswang is a cacophony of sounds and soundscapes that are ominous, eerie, dark, and frightening. Even those written texts about aswang carry sounds with them if only we try to pay attention. They are horrific sounds, disturbing to the human soul. Although most of these ominous sounds are copied from the natural world (e.g., sounds of birds mimicked into sounds of aswang as perceived by people) (Derain, 2021; Ruiz & Derasin, 2019), they inject a debilitating fear into human consciousness. Such a dark and dire tapestry of sounds is intensified by grotesque images and horrific descriptions, with villains appearing to be apathetic killers of the innocent and the helpless (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021).

Baua or balatiti, a bird considered a bad omen (Jordan Clark, 2021)

This discordant mixture of sounds seems to mimic those ghastly sounds of war, colonisation, violence, torture, and abuse of the Filipino people, which had brought them intense fear, terror, and trauma that they cannot seem to forget. It stays within the deepest recesses of their minds, for which to absolve such pain in history seems nearly impossible. The lucid audibility of the sounds of war and colonisation is an allegorical and metaphorical representation of aswang, despised and dreaded by the Filipino people, yet haunts them pervasively in their sleep. Many of the Filipinos experienced the horrors of repatriation, abuse, and torture brought by colonisation and war (Nadeau, 2011; Snow, 2023). They endured the pain brought by violence, intimidation, and injustice by the Japanese, and withstood barbarism and deceit brought by the Spaniards who came and conquered the Philippines with their own religious and political agenda. Locally, in contemporary Philippines, the Filipino people are also facing the horrors of a draconian government that uses violence and intimidation to silence dissent and mute their voices. The rise of extrajudicial killings has created horrendous soundscapes in the contemporary era (e.g., thumping and knocking on doors, loud sirens, muzzling gunshots, and nonstop wailing of a mother who lost her son in a raid or *tokhang* operations) becoming a bold testament of such abusive and violent form of power to put the public into lethal paralysis, and live life in constant fear as a way of maintaining social order. This lingering cacophony of ominous soundscapes has made the Filipino people vulnerable to fear, abuse, and trauma. The modern-day aswang underscores subservience to authorities; if not, one's life is at stake. Dissent has become a memory. Voice has become fear.

What does this allegorical symbolism of the aswang as fear, terror, and trauma signify? What does it mean? Thinking deeply into this, one cannot deny the object that this

symbol reveals: a government that is dysfunctional and corrupt, using draconian leadership that is driven by perverted logic and abuse of power to suppress the voices of the people and perpetuate their reign. A government that is despotic and tyrannical, that does not seem to honour fundamental human rights such as fairness, freedom of expression, equality, equity, and justice. A government that harbours cruelty and oppressive tactics to debilitate public discourse and incapacitate dissent, human agency and autonomy.

The real aswang is a tyrannical leadership that disrespects human rights and silences the voices of the people. This aswang has not only been a mythical creature lurking in the shadows of the human imagination (traditionally represented by a female witch) but it is right in front of people (maybe in front of you right now as you read this page in the city of Manila), clothed in uniform, hiding in broad daylight, powerful enough to destroy the very humanity of the Filipino – a modern-day dominant male defying the female aswang gender stereotype and appearing stronger, more sinister, and more evil. In a democratic nation, it is unfortunate to witness that aswang embodied as draconian, incompetent leaders are put into power by the very people who suffer from aswang's atrocities. The hero, personified by a competent, humane, compassionate, strategic, and transformative leader, seems to be pushed into the peripheral margins of society, their voice muted, their dignity maligned, their identity destroyed. Paradoxically, the very people who put these draconian leaders in power are expecting real change in governance, if change is elusive because it is hindered by the very ignorance of the people. The suffering that they experience is an adverse effect of their ignorance, an unfortunate boomerang that aggravates their misery. However, some of us are already noticing these ominous soundscapes. Some of us are already understanding the increasing audibility of these sounds, such that we are now able to listen. And to listen intently is the first step to look aswang in the eye (Arumpac, 2019), to face them, to confront them despite how scary they can be.

Aswang's Hybridity, Liminality, and Transcendence Calls for a Reinvention of the Imagination

Aswang possesses the shapeshifting power of occupying a space between past and present, or logic and myth. It crosses a threshold between the imagined world and the real world, between the mythical and the literal, between the material and the abstract, between the displaced and the static, and between the female and the male gender. Aswang constitutes hybridity as it evolves in the contestation of a mixture of what is make-believe and what is empirical, of what is supernatural and what is known, of what is unseen and what is seen. Its transcendence is seen in the way that our consciousness leads us from the

mythic and folklore to the real suffering and struggles of the Filipino people in a corrupt and dysfunctional governance that uses tyranny to silence the voices of the masses. Arumpac (2019), Derain (2021), and Macapagal (2021) argued that we can recognise aswang's transcendent capacity from the mythical to the real if we only learn "to listen", "to notice", and "to see" as we envision to make a change in our lives and our communities unless we decide to remain fascinated and enamoured by its mystique that will continue to dissuade us from seeing the real aswang and from taking real actions.

Illustration of aswang transformed into a false beast by HubPages/SilentReed (2013).

Arumpac (2019) and Macapagal (2021) summoned us "to look aswang in the eye" despite how scary it can be, rather than look away because we might have been conditioned to look away. A transcendent aswang calls for a transformation of what and how we, as Filipinos, think about the world in which we live and why we think that way, and to reclaim our place in the sensemaking, valuation, and validation of a sociocultural object that somehow blinds us to our ontological reality and truth. To reinvent the imagination means making sense of our very reality – a world where inequality, poverty, oppression, subversion, perversion, and corruption permeate our very lives. These are the real aswang that most of us do not seem to see and hear. These are the real aswang that most of us do not seem to feel because we seem to have been fascinated by the very myth and the superstition that feeds into our unfortunate ignorance and numbs our sensibilities. These are the real aswang that somehow cloud our collective judgment and muddle our capacity to introspect.

Aswang's shapeshifting power, liminality, and transcendence are signs that implore a modification, reinvention, and reclaiming of our imagination that veers away from superstition and fake stories muddying our very reason. The continuity in the belief of a distorted logic behind aswang stories and accounts remains an unfortunate irony for which many Filipinos become prisoners of their seemingly flawed logic. To reinvent our imagination warrants persistent skepticism and constant interrogation of our very conditions. It calls for critical thought and an awakening of our senses. In Arumpac's (2019) words, "Gumising ka sa nakamamatay na bangungot. Magmasid. Magmunimuni. Basagin mo ang iyong pag-iisip." (Wake up from your nightmare. Observe. Introspect. Challenge your thinking.).

Source: Arumpac/The Museum of Modern Art (2024)

Keeping Aswang in Memory Despite Its Pain Illustrates Nostalgia (Being Drawn to Distant Pain and Suffering)

Despite all the pain, fear, and trauma that aswang brought to the lives of the Filipino people (personified by more than three centuries of colonisation, abuse of colonial power, and perpetuation of oppressive practices of corrupt governance), there remains a strong desire of the Filipino spirit to keep aswang and the horrors it brings deep in their memory and consciousness. Some may think this is self-induced sadism or self-incriminating behaviour, but something deeper must explain why the Filipino people keep aswang (symbolised by the horrors and pain brought by war, invasion, and colonisation) in their collective memory, deeply buried in their consciousness. "What object does this signify?" I asked myself once again in the act of sensemaking. In the words of Peirce (1955), "That

every thought is an external sign proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community". My persistent questioning bears witness to the interpretation that emerged crucial in understanding why many of the Filipino people are drawn to distant pain and suffering.

One with the texts in deep thinking, I encountered a thought that somehow signifies this deliberate act of keeping aswang in collective memory, that is, aswang illustrates nostalgia, that strong yet complex emotion for which people are drawn into the distant and painful past, trapped in that horrific past, while struggling to make sense of the present and the future. We seem to push ourselves into the pit of longing and sorrow. As Mang Caloy uttered, "Kahit na masakit, hindi siya nawawala sa isipan. Patuloy tayong kumakapit sa nakaraan" (We don't let go of pain. We keep clinging onto the vicious, torturous past.) (as cited in Delante, 2021). Clay Routledge of TED-Ed (2016) described nostalgia as a complex emotion of pain and sorrow, longing for home and the past, and an interplay of sadness and joy. In musing, I further asked myself: "Why do the Filipino people hold on to this nostalgic feeling despite the pain and trauma it brings? Why can't they let go of suffering?" A revelation came to life: that this constant act of remembering aswang symbolised by colonisation, war, invasion, and trauma is a nostalgic force that illustrates the Filipinos' penchant to savour pain and suffering as their way of emotional catharsis. We engage in a laborious purgation of our painful emotions as our way of healing, relief, and rehabilitation. To cleanse oneself is to savour the pain. We are driven to move forward, yet when we remember and feel the pain again, we engage in the process of emotional catharsis, because to dwell with renewed wounds is to savour the pain again, no matter what it takes. Such pain somehow remains in memory, moving back and moving forward like a helix. The Filipino people cannot afford to forget aswang; they cannot afford to ignore it; they cannot afford to erase it from memory because the act of remembering is much more powerful than the act of forgetting. Despite the pain, they recall; despite the trauma and horror, they remember; despite the hurt, they hold on and forgive. Such an unfortunate irony to fathom that the Filipino people decide to arrest aswang in memory because of their attachment to pain and grief, of their act of romanticising what hurts and what is ugly, more than what is beautiful. Isn't it true of the human condition that holding on to distant pain and suffering brings grief and sorrow, yet despite it all, we cling to the very act of holding on to the excruciating past because it heals us?

Theoretical Implications

Semiotics draws us into the power of hermeneutic empiricism, intersubjectivity, and sensemaking that is grounded in texts and subtexts – its elements, contexts, discourse, and meanings that constitute its totality (Anderson, 2008; Craig, 1999; Pharies, 1985). Semiotics also encourages us to see the world as symbolic of the struggles of the human condition; that there is an alternative yet valid way of understanding the world such as understanding texts that matter to our existence and are within our capacity to interpret by pinning down the signs and the objects they signify, and crystallizing how they relate to our experience in the lifeworld.

One theoretical implication we can derive from semiotics is to be more cognizant of ideas that stand for something bigger (signs), for which possible concepts or interpretations (objects) can surface. Texts contain narrative accounts and descriptions for which signs and symbols are inherently present, waiting to be deciphered. When objects are captured and arrested in crucial conversations, then critical thought is stimulated, and knowledge is discovered. To Roland Barthes (1972), as readers of stories, we need to find that enigma and hold on to that, to be patient when it is prolonged in the text because descriptions and narratives that are made more vivid, reminiscent, mesmerizing, and teeming with life and suspense is what makes them powerful and illuminating to the human soul (Felluga, 2015). Nonetheless, we need to be cognizant of which texts we are analysing semiotically and the impact of which on our sense of reason. Myths, for instance, are rich sources of ideas that allow us to make sense of our cultural beliefs and traditions, and they actively work to resolve conflicts and oppositions in observable life through symbolic means, creating a sense of order and coherence in a world that is bombarded with contradictions and confusions (Levi-Strauss, 1978); however, myths can also render themselves ambiguous as they claim to understand reality, yet have some complicity with it (Barthes, 1957). The metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional. Metalanguage as a way of symbolically viewing phenomena might produce a reticence of a reality inaccessible to ideology; it can resolve the contradiction of alienated reality by an amputation, not a critical synthesis (Barthes, 1957) that drives critical consciousness.

In my semiotic and critical interpretations of aswang texts, I realised how colonialism appeared constant in the discourse between old texts (aswang articles in the 1960s through 70s) and current ones (until the later part of 2023) (Figure 1). Colonialism, as a representation of aswang (invasion, marginalisation, oppression, and perpetuation of abuse of power), exists in a continuum, occupying old and current narratives in academic texts. This holds

bearing to the fear, trauma, and vulnerability that also appeared incessantly in old and current aswang texts and my interpretation of them. The Filipino people remain exposed to the dangers of tyranny and draconian leadership in which abuse of power is perpetuated and the voices of the marginalised are continually muted. Along with a deeply distressing and disturbing experience of living life every day, the Filipino people are not given sufficient choices to pursue freedom and liberty; rather, choices were and are made for them with or without their knowledge, and courage, strength, and resilience are somehow forced into their throats (Docot, 2024).

Figure 1. Critical Movements Captured in Aswang Texts Between 1960s and 2023

Source: Author

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note how the Filipino people are waking up from the nightmares brought by the horrific forces of colonialism. They started to realise the horrors of colonial power that continued to linger in Philippine society and how this had poisoned critical thought, reasoned judgment, and imagination. Post-colonial era, writers of aswang and the texts they produced tend to have gradually developed skepticism, a mind that questions and interrogates their conditions, a mind that contests ideologies, an emancipated mind, so to speak. However, to be skeptical is not enough; action must be taken for real change to happen, and this necessitates confrontation of the social ills symbolised by aswang, rather than keep looking away, bravery rather than retreat, courage and hope rather than despair. As Arumpac (2019) and Macapagal (2021) asserted, the Filipino people must look aswang straight in the eye. No blinking. No winking. No whining. They must gaze at them with fury accompanied by a loud scream for the aswang to realise that the Filipino is ready to fight for what is right and just.

The power of semiotics as a theoretical lens in collaboration with critical analysis is always available to be exploited. All we need is to be mindful of the signs in text, or even the

signs in our environments, in our ecologies, in our lifeworld. All we need is to notice these signs because noticing them can resurface and foreground crucial periods in history that depict the struggles and suffering of our ancestors. Noticing them can also bring to light those deeply held emotions and memories etched in our very consciousness as a people. Noticing them can mobilise action and drive collective decisions with the intent to free the Filipino mind from fear and oppression.

A Deceptive Settlement of the Mind

The Filipino people's pervasive belief in aswang appears to be an unfortunate deception and a ventral curse that settles not only within their shared communities and culture but also in the deepest recesses of their minds. The Filipino people's predilection to believing in aswang, despite not having seen one in real life, poses immense danger to this subtle yet expansive settlement in the deepest recesses of their minds. This ignorance is palpable and irreparable because aswang is assumed to be "just the way things have always been", it is assumed to be a part of a strong culture of myth and superstition, and this assumption constituted in the very stories they share is the very fuel for aswang to perpetuate in the myths and to pervasively settle in the minds of the Filipinos.

"Like God, people just seem to believe that aswang is real even if they don't see it in the flesh or hear it", expressed Fraulein Oclarit (personal communication, March 2024) and was seconded by another interviewee in Clark and del Rosario's (2011) documentary. The myth's constant presence in the mind of its growing believers amplifies its position and continuity in the shared myths and folktales, magnifying the myth and debilitating critical and pragmatic thinking. Storytelling is the fuel for such continuity of the myth because stories are constituted in aswang conversations. Such allure to stories of the unknown and the mythical propels the mind to create a seemingly utopic world in their imagination as a way of escaping a world of madness and chaos, only to be imprisoned by this very act of illusion, ignorance and deception. Arumpac (2019) could be right. She summoned the Filipinos, "Gumising ka sa nakamamatay na bangungot. Magmasid. Magmunimuni. Basagin mo ang iyong pag-iisip." (Wake up from your nightmare. Observe. Introspect. Challenge your thinking.).

Dream about aswang by Layne Sheridan (2022)

Pedagogical and Practical Implications

Storytelling does not age in time. It was and still is a fascinating medium to captivate our interests and awaken our senses through the power of a simple but compelling phrase that says, "Once upon a time" (Anderson, 2016). Storytelling has been the dynamic instrument used by writers in aswang narratives. It is the force for which scholars are able to appeal to readers' emotions and perplex their thinking through its enigmatic effect. It is through storytelling that narratives and descriptions about aswang pervade both the oral traditions and the written accounts of the Filipinos. However, storytelling appears to become a double-edged sword as it emerged to be a vehicle in which gossip, assumptions, misconstrued opinions, and make-believe narratives about aswang are etched in the very conversations of the Filipino people, and through which the myth is perpetuated in the communicative act of telling stories, thereby galvanising and continuing flawed reasoning. The act of telling and spreading these stories happens in local communities and in schools, in which folk literature has a role to play.

This study, therefore, warrants that we revisit and rethink the practices of teaching mythology and folklore in schools and universities in the Philippines. In the past, in the context of aswang storytelling, stories were told not only to sow fear but also to highlight the need to believe in the act of prayer so that one can be protected. Today, aswang stories are told to underscore subservience to authorities dominated by men in power. Does teaching mythology and folklore as a form of art have limitations to consider, or should it be driven by the very liberty that teachers enjoy, such that the fascination of children with the myth is perpetuated despite the risk of crippling critical thought, corrupting sense of reality, and obscuring truths? Why do we teach mythology and folklore in the first place? What is our

pedagogical intent? What happens if, in the growing mysticism, illusion, and interest of children, we fail to make them think critically about the very conditions and circumstances in which their lives exist? What happens if children would rather believe in the myth as it is perpetuated in the very stories shared about aswang because they lack the ability to question, interrogate, and just accept the myth as it is, because it is just the way things have always been? What, therefore, happens if teaching mythology and folklore creates learners who become clueless victims of delusion and self-deception, and children who seem to accept ideas or concepts at face value? These questions warrant a careful examination of the pedagogy surrounding mythology and folklore as a course that still finds its place in higher education curricula in the Philippines.

Another pedagogical implication draws on the power of rhetoric in telling stories. Aristotle defines rhetoric as a practical art of discourse and a faculty and ability in a particular case to see the available means of persuasion utilised by people consciously or unconsciously. To perform the act of persuasion in storytelling, we can argue that rhetoric plays a role in convincing people to believe in the myth by revitalising the very stories that promulgate its believability and authenticity. If this is the case, rhetoric here appears to defeat its very purpose of promoting truth and reason (Campbell et al., 2014; Keith & Lundberg, 2008). However, if rhetoric invites people to utilise reason and the credibility of the sources of information through which aswang stories pervade, we can somehow postulate how reason and persuasion are in the right direction to foster critical thinking as a way of arriving at truths. If storytelling is a double-edged sword, so too is rhetoric when its users are driven by their own selfish goals to serve their very interests. This begs the question, "Sino at ano tayo bilang tagapagsalaysay ng kwentong aswang? Saan tayo nanggagaling? Anong prinsipyo at kahalagahan ang ating ipinaglalaban?" (Who and what are we as storytellers of aswang? Where are we coming from? What principles, ideals, and values are we fighting for?).

In schools and communities in the Philippines in which aswang stories permeate, what teachers can do is to give children a safe space to share their opinions about aswang stories and use that very space to create an open and meaningful discourse. As a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge and meaning (Foucauldian sense of discourse), such a safe space will be an immense opportunity for children to think, to question, to contest their thinking and imagination, to interrogate their beliefs and their very conditions, and to engage in sensemaking. Isn't this a more desired direction we want our learners to take? Isn't this the essence of education?

Conclusion

In attempting to decipher the signs and objects present in aswang articles guided by Peircean semiotics and critical analysis, this study is able to contribute to the growing discourse and understanding of aswang as a concept, phenomenon, myth, and a sign that represents bigger ideas. Seven themes emerged as signs (ideas that stand for something bigger) with their objectifications (possible interpretations or conceptualisations) (Table 1). The sign-object significations include the following : (1) pervasive typologies, categorizations, and classifications of aswang in the literature signifies constancy and continuity of the myth, (2) the construction of a female gender into a monstrous aswang signifies Othering and oppression of women, (3) colonization, colonialism, and war as symbolic of aswang signifies the perpetuation of abuse of power and the myth itself, as well as aswang's liminal and transcendent nature that calls for a reinvention of the Filipino imagination, (4) the pervasive belief of the Filipino people in aswang despite the absence of facts and empirical evidence signifies delusion, self-deception, and a distorted settlement of the mind, (5) the ominous and lucid audibility of soundscapes in aswang narratives signifies fear and trauma therefore galvanizing the perpetuation of abuse of power by a tyrannical government, (6) aswang as being symbolic of colonialism and machismo calls for an awakening of the senses and skepticism, and (7) keeping aswang deep in memory symbolic of the terror, trauma, and pain brought by war and colonization signifies the Filipinos' attachment to a distant yet painful past for which the act of remembering is stronger than the act of forgetting, for which holding on is favoured than letting go because to go back to the past is part of an emotional purgation that relieves the troubled Filipino spirit.

Theoretically, semiotics proves helpful in surfacing the intersubjective mediation by signs in aswang texts published between the 1960s and 2023. Peircean semiotics has been very instrumental in decoding the signs and their objects through an interpretant that is one with the texts, and the understanding derived from sign-object significations. As a reader and researcher, I was engulfed in analysing aswang texts and articles confirming the sincerity, validity, subtlety, and trustworthiness of my interpretation. As Peirce (1955) echoed, "That every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community". I am an external sign insofar as aswang is an external sign, and my critical interpretation mattered in the process of signification and meaning-making. I was one with the texts in this interpretive journey. I was the understanding that we have of this sign-object relation, and this understanding is captured both in my mind and the reader

of this text right now (insofar as understanding is happening in the cognitive capacity of the readers, and their awareness of context).

Critical theory also proves useful in my attempt to unmask and demystify the forces of power, hegemony, marginalisation, and oppression innately present in the aswang texts. Through critical theory, I realised how colonialism appeared constant in discourse between old texts (aswang articles in the 1960s) and current ones (until 2023, as of this writing). Colonialism, as a representation of aswang (invasion, marginalisation, oppression, and perpetuation of abuse of power), exists in a continuum traversing old and current narratives in academic texts. Moreover, colonialism transcends the real world through the power of the written word in aswang narratives, connecting the past atrocities and the present forms of abuses of power that victimise the ordinary Filipino people. This is a testament to the perpetuation of abuse of power in the colonial era until the current government that pervasively traumatises the Filipinos and makes them vulnerable victims of oppression, marginalisation, and corruption. Such a testament is engraved in writing.

Practically, this study draws on the scathing power of storytelling. Aswang stories pervade the Filipino consciousness because the very nature of conversations fuels the power of stories to make a lasting impact on the minds of listeners, despite how distorted these stories can be. Storytelling is the fuel perpetuating the myth, and this myth gathers more power through the sense of enigma and suspense that these aswang stories hold. Perhaps the dark tone and horror of these aswang stories, intensified by the centrality of conflict, fear, and moral dilemma, have become the insidious yet pervasive source of power that such stories bring. Pedagogical intent, choice, and decisive action matter here on the part of a teacher who teaches mythology and folklore in schools and universities. Utilising the power of storytelling is one thing; perpetuating myths in the classroom with little attention to criticality is another. The former nourishes the latter, while the latter, when taught through the lens of liberal education that contests ideologies and questions the very conditions and circumstances of the people, might lead to an empowering insight and a logic that promotes reason and truth.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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Bionote

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SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, issue 2

Edwin Tuazon

Kapre (A tree-dwelling creature)

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

Oil on canvas. 48" x 36" by Edwin Tuazon (Artist)

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***Corresponding author** (**Edwin Tuazon**, Member of the San Diego Museum of Art Artists' Guild and the San Diego Watercolour Society, USA, tuazon4ed@gmail.com)

Kapre is a popular mythical creature from Philippine mythology and folklore. It is generally depicted as a tall, hairy giant sitting in trees and smoking a large cigar or *tabako*. It is typically nocturnal and omnivorous. While often mischievous (leading people astray and scaring off children), it is not always considered inherently evil; however, a part of it is ominous and sinister.

Kapre's Symbolism

I painted this illustration of a kapre in a masterpiece that connects the myth to contemporary issues in the Philippines, specifically the drug problem under former President Duterte's administration. Holding and sniffing a huge cigar, kapre symbolises the Filipinos' rampant use *of* and engagement *with* prohibited drugs in the Philippines. The wickedness and power of the "drug lords" have tremendously added societal pressure and intensified the entangled relationship between corruption, drug involvement, and drug addiction. This nonstop sniffing of the *tabako* symbolises perverse addiction, a human frailty that consumes and destroys the very soul of drug users.

Black Hawks Killing Doves

Oozing with power and strength, black hawks symbolise the menacing force of drug lords, their corrupting influence, and the harsh consequences of the drug war. Black hawks represent a destructive force, while white doves traditionally represent peace, innocence, and justice. The act of killing the doves signifies that peace and justice are destroyed due to the prevalence of drugs, the coercive and manipulative power of those who control them, and the perversion of leaders who are supposed to protect the ordinary citizens.

With additional descriptions from Nimrod L. Delante

Bionote

Edwin Tuazon is a self-taught artist whose mastery of visual storytelling will leave you spellbound. His artwork is not just a feast for the eyes; it's a captivating blend of impressionism, surrealism, and realism that resonates deeply with the human experience. Each piece tells a unique story, beckoning you to dive into a realm of emotion and imagination that is both profound and exhilarating. Tuazon's artistic journey is a shining example of passion and dedication. With an exceptional eye for detail and a fearless approach to colour, he transforms ordinary canvases into extraordinary realms that invite exploration. Whether showcasing the tranquil beauty of a landscape or the mysterious charm of a surreal scene, his art ignites a sense of wonder and introspection that is hard to forget. More about Edwin Tuazon at https://sites.google.com/view/edwintuazon/about

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, Issue 2

Edwin Tuazon (Artist)

Amamayong (Sigbin)

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

Oil on canvas. 48" x 36" by Edwin Tuazon (Artist)

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Amamayong or *sigbin* is a legendary creature in Philippine folklore. It is a nighttime creature that is said to suck blood from its victims' shadows. It is known for walking backwards with its head lowered between its front legs, a distinct ability to scan its prey because its hind legs are taller than its front legs. Amamayong has stealth abilities, powerful enough to lure and deceive its prey.

Myth has it that amamayong can control its victim from afar. It does not need to see its victim; one sniff away and the victim is paralysed in its location. It is believed to have a sixth sense, in which its single whiff might reveal not just what something is, but where it came from, how long it has been there, and how to locate it through amamayong's acute sense of smell.

Then it leans in, silently, creepily, invisible but active and present, and with just one sniff, it attacks its victim and renders them helpless.

Amamayong lives in a recluse in the remote and mountainous regions of the Philippines. Folklore has it that amamayong is actively seeking prey when dogs, even the biggest and strongest, are whining, whimpering, howling and growling in fear while cowering in their spaces. Even cats can be heard hissing out of fear. Amamayong is most active at midnight when the whole village is silent, and when most people are asleep.

But apart from it being mythical and feared by many, could we also say that amamayong is a symbol of greed and deceit? A symbol of a corrupt government that controls, manipulates, and annihilates people's desires, hopes and dreams? Could we say that amamayong is a signification of political paralysis that obliterates effective leadership and the courage of the Filipino to make things better and live a good life? How many more amamayongs will come to destroy the Filipino spirit?

With additional descriptions from Nimrod L. Delante

Bionote

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SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Volume 1, Issue 2

Kaithe Izabhel L. Montilla*

A simple life is a life worth living

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***Corresponding author (Kaithe Izabhel L. Montilla)**

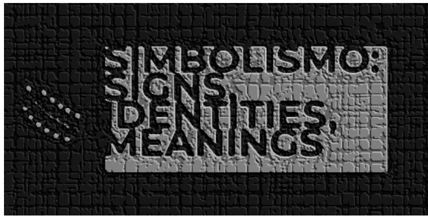
In this modern world, confronted with global problems such as famine, war, pandemics, and human greed, perhaps what we need is the serenity of a simple house surrounded by trees and flowers.

A small, airy bungalow built with a balanced combination of native and modern materials is perhaps what we need. With a roof of red clay tiles or nipa leaves to cool the house all day long, huge windows with shell panels or sliding glass to let the cool breeze from the mountains in, and a patio and backyard lushed with orchids, bougainvillaea, daisies, roses, and other flowers and fruit trees, what else could we ask for? Isn't this the kind of life worth living? A bucolic life we often desire?

During the day, all we need is the sun to dry our clothes, fish, and rice pellets. In the evenings, we look forward to a good meal fresh from the ocean and our farm and vegetable garden. As the evening goes deeper, we climb to our roofs using a veranda made of bamboo and wood to witness the beauty of the moon and the endless twinkling of the stars. Isn't this the kind of life worth fighting for, away from the chaos of the world?

Asked about why she likes to live in the countryside, Kaithe Izabhel remarked, "Because life is beautiful here, and I have my parents and younger sister with me. They are my happiness. They are more than enough".

This drawing was taken from a collection of artwork (drawings and sketches) produced by children between the ages of 7 and 14 during a Children's Art Day held on 05 July 2025 in Bool, Culaba, Biliran, the Philippines. Consent was given by Kaithe Izabhel's parent/guardian for her drawing to be published in Simbolismo. Bionote is not required, and this description was developed from a brief encounter with Kaithe Izabhel during the event.



Volume 1, Issue 2

Keeley Canama*

Sometimes, all we need is to look people in the eye!

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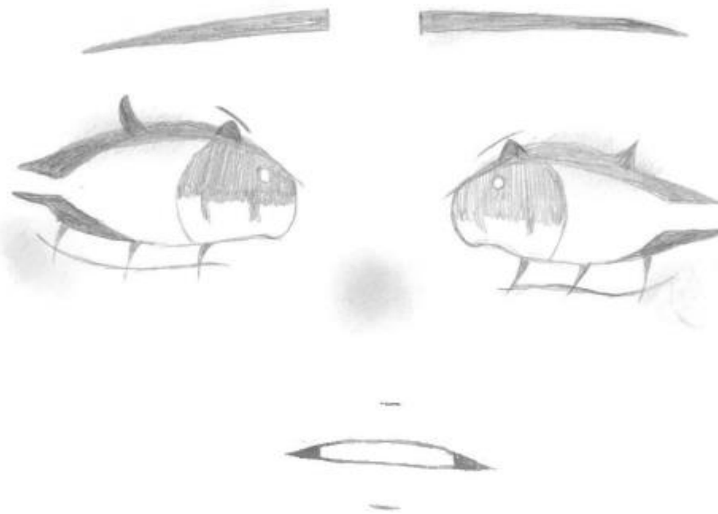

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***Corresponding author (Keeley Canama)**

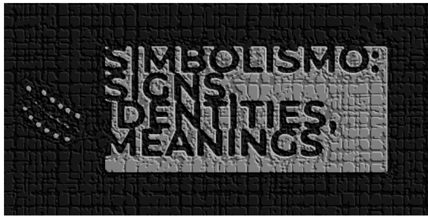
A friend can be chuckling or smiling, yet deep down inside is pain and suffering. They could be boisterously laughing, yet deep down inside, their souls are being consumed by utter loneliness. And if we are sensitive enough, if we care enough, we might want to pay attention to them, and we might be able to notice more.

Have you ever looked at your friend, brother, sister, mother, or father straight in the eye lately? Have you ever looked longer than they noticed you? What's in those eyes? What did they tell you?

As a famous saying goes, "The eyes are a mirror to one's soul", it does not pain us if we could slow down a bit in life, if we could cherish those moments we spend with our friends and loved ones, and if we could "see" them more as human beings with emotions, stories, and struggles. Perhaps this is our way of saying, "I feel you. I see you. You are not alone."

Because sometimes, all we need is to look people in the eye, to show that we care, and that we are willing to lend a helping hand. After all, aren't our eyes a symbol of honesty and truth? That, at times, we fail to conceal our vulnerability and sadness through speech or pretentious smiles and laughs because of so many painful emotions our eyes unveil?

This sketch, using pencil, was selected from a collection of artwork (drawings and sketches) produced by children between the ages of 7 and 14 during a Children's Art Day held on 05 July 2025 in Bool, Culaba, Biliran, the Philippines. Consent was given by Keeley's parent/guardian for this sketch to be published in Simbolismo. Bionote is not required, and this description was developed from a brief conversation with Keeley and her aunt, Jocelyn Canama, after the event.



Volume 1, Issue 2

Mike Ethan Florentino*

Behind the mask we wear is the "self" wanting to be seen and understood

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Ever wonder why sometimes we find it difficult to understand our children? Did you ever ask yourself why, as an adult who went through childhood and adolescence, it can be challenging to understand their behaviour and personality?

This might be the case because children can choose to wear invisible masks for specific reasons. And these masks could signify something deeper. They could be hiding strong or vulnerable emotions growing inside of them because of fear of being misunderstood, excluded, or cast out. Sometimes, this mask acts as a disguise, a deceiving veil that we, adults, seem to ignore most of the time, perhaps because we don't try enough to notice. Navigating a difficult world around them, wearing a mask will help conceal the anxiety growing deep inside them. Beneath those smiles could be pain and loneliness; deep down, that cheerfulness could be disappointment and frustration of the modern world that we, adults, have created for them. But they keep using the mask because they cannot afford to be condemned, berated, and denounced by society. Such wearing of an invisible mask symbolises this fear of being left out or excluded. Or such wearing of an invisible mask allows them to control this rage growing inside them.

And to adapt and survive, some of them develop cunning and schemes. This mask allows them to navigate the boundaries of fear and bravery, of rejection and acceptance, of make-believe and reality. They use the mask as a survival tool, yet, at times, they are drawn into the tension of keeping this make-believe self from the real, inner self that longs to be seen, heard, and understood. Until then, when the time is right, and given the circumstances that they experience, they might just let their real selves come out, with the hope that the world will accept them, whoever or whatever they are (and have become), especially by the people they love. Or, maybe, they won't.

This sketch, using pencil with added colour, was chosen from a collection of artwork (drawings and sketches) produced by children between the ages of 7 and 14 during a Children's Art Day held on 05 July 2025 in Bool, Culaba, Biliran, the Philippines. Consent was given by Mike Ethan's parent/guardian for this sketch to be published in Simbolismo. Bionote is not required, and this description was developed from a brief conversation with Mike Ethan, who was asked about his interpretation of his art piece during lunch.

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.

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