

# The Oblation on Our Minds: Teaching the Oblation in the Time of the Pandemic

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## **ABSTRACT**

Following Judy Celine Ick’s suggestion that storytelling is the mode of pedagogy in a Humanities classroom, this study attempts to explore how an artwork becomes a myriad of possible stories and concepts related to the nature of art even if studied from a distance. By way of analyzing the narratives, myths, discourses, and constructs surrounding the UP Oblation among selected freshman students of ARTS 1 in First Semester 2020-2021, the study discovered the epistemic binaries that exist within the body of the statue. This proves that the Oblation is always already a historical construction of ritualization and profanity. It also delves into realizing a method by which students can read against the grain of the dominant story on the statue’s surface by adapting the dialogical or problem-posing method in Paulo Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It reveals how students can voice the story of art and thereby unearth and/or foreground the possibilities of critical reflection and personal action through digital archives, digital stories, and story threads. This study proposes that assessments on artistic and theoretical concepts in the Humanities can be done through personal narratives and thus resist the passivity promoted by a banker-educator/depositor-student relationship that currently exists on online platforms. Also, it provides insight to the possibility of a future digital archive about UPLB which focuses on narratives, icons, art, history, places of memory, and people of the UPLB community.

## **KEYWORDS**

dialogical education, Oblation, mythologies, problem-posing education, reading against the grain

Professor Judy Celine Ick from the Department of English and Comparative Literature laments in a webinar, “[n]othing is normal. It’s all abnormal. We’re living through a horribly managed pandemic in this country with very real effects” (“Resisting the Rubric” 23:20-23:22).

The webinar was entitled “Resisting the Rubric” and was attended by faculty members from the Arts and Humanities cluster of the University of the Philippines who were still preparing course packs a week away from the beginning of classes in September 2020. Other panel members included the dean of the College of Music in UP Diliman who shared how the shift has affected face-to-face recital classes and a professor of Multimedia Studies who shared her experiences in online assessment for her design classes at the UP Open University.

During the open forum, one professor commented that “UP is showing compassion to students but not to UP profs” (“Resisting the Rubric” 36:26-36:42). Personally, after listening to that webinar, I have come to realize that the current situation has forced and challenged me into learning, unlearning, and relearning methods in adapting to a new setup that is centrally contradicted with time and space.

Distance learning denotes separation between learner and teacher/facilitator in any stage of the lesson as defined in 2002 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to be “any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print” (Moore et al. 22).

It is worth noting that learners and teachers' communication in a distance learning set up are mediated by multimedia.

On the other hand, online learning has several types such as correspondence through e-mails with little interaction, radio or television broadcast courses, CD-ROM or DVD courses, internet-based courses delivered in virtual classrooms synchronously or asynchronously, and mobile learning which utilizes cellular phones, personal digital assistants, and digital audio players (Stern 1). Furthermore, distance between learner and instructor "is not a defining characteristic of e-learning" (Sarah Guri-Rosenblit 470). Online learning, with the use of new information and communication technologies in virtual and online spaces, encourages direct interaction between a small number of students and an expert teacher (Guri-Rosenblit 475). In fact, experiences in the field show that it can be more effectively utilized by an on-campus student than a distance learner (475).

In the context of teaching, the effects of mixing distance and online learning in the middle of a pandemic had a huge implication on how I taught face-to-face classroom content in an online form. I assumed that online classes were synonymous to self-paced learning in a distance set up when in actualization the two paradigms differed.

Last September 2020, I taught a compulsory General Education course in the Department of Humanities called ARTS 1 or Critical Perspectives in the Arts for the First Semester 2020-2021. The first two weeks of classes were devoted for students to browse through and be acquainted with the Course Pack. It was in these weeks where I met my 115 students in ARTS 1, both through email communications and through Zoom meetings. Seventy-five percent of the enrolled students (86 of 115 students) were composed of freshman students (*see table 1 below*), which identifies them as the majority of learners in my classes. Also, 91% or 105 students preferred online learning while 9% or 10 students of the 115 enrolled students preferred the offline mode of learning (*see table 2 below*). Another challenge was the class size where I handled the largest number of students among the ARTS 1 sections. We were given options by the ARTS 1 GE coordinator to overload and expand class size. I allowed to open my classrooms to at most 40 students because before the beginning of classes there was high amount of student demand for this GE Course especially with new freshman students that enrolled in the first semester.

Year Level	C4	W1	Y2	TOTAL	%
New Freshmen	29	28	29	86	75
Continuing Freshmen	2	6	2	10	9
Sophomore	5	4	7	16	14
Junior	1	1	0	2	2
Senior	1	0	0	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 1 Year Level of Students**

Preference of Learning	C4	W1	Y2	TOTAL	%
Online Mode of Learning	35	34	36	105	91
Offline Mode of Learning (Delivered Course Packs)	3	5	2	10	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2 Preference of Learning Modality**

Given that there is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learners, the majority of which are new to the university, I attempted to explore how to teach art from a distance. The challenge with the fixed and one size fits all course pack was the lack of flexibility to explore other materials and icons that are close to the UP identity and the changes that may happen based on the learner's abilities per section.

Adapting Brazilian revolutionary and educator Paulo Freire's method of a dialogical or problem-posing education in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), I broke away from the conventions of teaching art through memorization of facts and through objective assessments (quizzes and exams) which demand a fixed answer. Freire called it the banking concept of education which was the dominant method of teaching in the world. Freire observed that "everything in this *ready-to-wear approach* serves to obviate thinking" (76; my italics).

In the banking method, the educator believes that "outcomes" and "rubrics" are the very tools by which a student's improvement and learning can be measured.

Today, we still hear the same vocabulary in the university system. Prof. Ick has pointed out the ominous vocabularies of memos on shift to online and remote learning, highlighting the mechanistic method which obviates thinking of the logic of the word in a polysemy, the possibility of a myriad of immeasurable meanings. The rubric, she described, "is too much database" and instead, in the Humanities, a faculty teaching a concept weaves the ideas as storytelling. "We are story tellers... connections between points in a story are far more complex than can be contained in any table or bullet points" (Ick).

Storytelling echoes Freire's "problem-posing education". Instead of being docile listeners to the printed word, students become "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire 81). For Freire, dialogue achieves significance between speakers when it is founded on *reflection* and *action*, the opposite of depositing ideas to be consumed and responded by the students. It exists because of love, humility, faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking among women and men, in communion with each other with the goal of abolishing dehumanizing discourses. (Freire 89-92) Moreover, critical thinking for Freire is not an individualistic nor an imposing kind of thought but that which discerns and perceives solidarity, reality, and immersion/unity "in temporality without fear of the risks involved" (Freire 92).

The dialogical character of education informed me of the need to dialogue with people about their views and our views as teachers, writers, and critics. It is through critical thinking that a student discovers "each other to be 'in a situation'... they can come to perceive it as an objective-problematic situation—only then can commitment exist" (Freire 109). This commitment is found in the achievement or result of a *conscientização* or critical consciousness, the "deepening of the attitude of awareness" (Freire 109).

Inspired by Freire and Ick, I attempted to put into practice the suggestion of storytelling as a way of introducing concepts in an art class. I would like to discover how do we develop a method to teach an artwork as a narrative which allows students to become critically conscious storytellers themselves?

Given the fact that the majority of students come from the freshman batch, I had to resituate concepts in the readings to be grasped in the Oblation so as to explore if students can achieve a "deepening of the attitude of awareness" in spite of and despite of remoteness.

Freire and Ick's views are similarly tied to the principles of the constructivist theory of pedagogy e. Developed from the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Jerome Bruner, constructivism believes that instead of banking ideas, learning is an active process of knowledge construction. Cultural, personal, and social experiences of the learners become important factors in learning. James Pelech and Gail W. Pieper summarize in detail the characteristics of this theory:

1. People of all ages do not discover knowledge; rather, they construct it or make it.
2. People create knowledge by relating or connecting it to their previous knowledge.

3. Knowledge is autonomous and subjective construction.
4. Learning involves active restructuring of how one thinks.
5. People use personal experiences and social interaction to create knowledge; thus, one's learning and ability to learn are influenced by previous experiences.
6. Cognitive growth is stimulated when people are confronted with practical, contextual problems or personal problems that present situations that require a new way to think. (8)

In the constructivist approach, educators are guides or managers of the learning environment. They act as facilitator or coach and not as transmitter or banker of knowledge. In classroom applications, constructivism led to the creation of active learning methods, reciprocal teaching, project-based learning, teacher or peer scaffolding, and collaborative learning (University of Toronto Libraries).

Also, because these students are more exposed to digital media, it is more appropriate to regard their exposure to images as interested in the sites of contemporary visual cultures: the television, the internet, popular cultures, videos, and online talk. Access to the Oblation is through digital media. Visual culture in Art Education is primarily “concerned with the contexts of texts, the real, material conditions of image production, distribution and use” (Duncum 17).

To imagine ways by which a fine art object, such as the Oblation, is circulated, perceived, interpreted, analyzed, and appreciated from a distance, an educator of visual cultures incorporates in the discussion of the canon a broad account of other representations of the image that appeal to other senses within the virtual sense, a paradigmatic combination of gesture, behavior, ideology, thinking, disposition, sound, written, and spoken texts (Duncum 17). Another strand concerned in the study of visual cultures is the “visuality” of images, “the process of attributing meaning to what we see” (Duncum 18), that which involves different ways of looking, gazing, or seeing the object of pleasure, profane subjects in art, and sacred artifacts. Following Raymond Williams’ concept of cultural materialism, images are read not only as texts themselves but as social practice, where meanings are not singular but are negotiated and resisted in different historical contexts of looking or seeing the image (Duncum 19).

In the classroom context, to teach the Oblation in the VCAE context is not only to learn the semiotic meanings attached to the Oblation but also the institution that produced such image, the archive of contradicting histories of its creation, the purposes of its stakeholders in erecting the image, the meanings that people have attached to this image, the reproductions that were made from its inauguration, and the present mythologies that surround the Oblation text among student narratives. The sites and objects by which we see the icon reproduced also refer to generational differences especially from digital natives. As Paul Duncum asserts, visual culture must be taught through a “critical pedagogy” (21), one which validates the need to criticize representation of class, gender, race, and unequal relations but also one which validates the lived experiences of students exposed to hyperreal and simulated images from the internet. It also raises questions about the differences between the aesthetic experience of a focused investigation on a sculpture over the intense, ephemeral, and fast-paced glances on a hyperreal or virtual image.

Because my lesson is in line with the first module of the course which focuses on the Nature of Art, I attempted to explore ways of teaching an icon that migrates and multiplies in various contexts, and an icon which we can engage and dialogue with preconceived notions of art. I began by unearthing previous textual and archival discourses surrounding it. As an example, I used the Oblation.

### **In the beginning...**

Our story begins with the Oblation, a representation of the *iskolar ng bayan*, an icon that is a symbol of public service and mythologizes our “selfless offering of oneself to the country” (Ongkiko 26).

The visage reveals the dialectic. A man in open arms signifies the intersecting lines on crucifixes or atrial crosses. He stands at 3.5 meters tall, signifying the 350 years of Spanish colonization.

His eyes closed, his head looking up to the sky, and his lips murmuring a prayer-like hum which we will never know for it is a statue whose silence speaks a lot about a divinelike sacrificial symbol. The body, chiseled at the arms, the core, the back, and the buttocks, deliberately emphasizes its own nakedness in the middle of a grassy lawn, heightened even with its genitals covered by a fig leaf. The work represents the conflation of mimetic anatomical detail in the “conflation of Beaux arts neoclassicism and Modernist nationalism that [Guillermo Tolentino] acquired from his graduate studies in Italy” (Cañete 9). Wrapped on its legs is the figure of the katakataka as symbolism of resilience, and his feet, mimicking the contrapposto of Italian statues, stands on a pedestal of rocks that signify the Philippine islands. It stands as a symbolic figure of the university, either in front of the administration building or in the middle of the campus. It gestures as a visual sight that opens us to the idea of self-sacrifice or offering of the self to the nation, translated in Cebuano as that word which signifies dedication of the self, stemming from the core, the deep, and the spirit, “pagpahinungod.”

If we will look beyond the monument, we will see how it was reproduced today in various media and icons. We see the Oblation in logos, shirts, mugs, lanyards, application documents, and many more objects, widely disseminated for whoever glances, accidentally sees it, or intentionally experiences it.

Contrary to the idea that a monumental artwork “can be an overwhelming or alienating experience” (“What is Public Art?”), I argue that those who see it function as both active consumer of the image and active producers of meaning. These audiences, who signify themselves in the idea of an *iskolar ng bayan*, contribute to the production of power in the myths constructing both the sacrificial and the secular identity of the sculptural text.

I adopt here the questions raised by art critic Patrick Flores on public artworks in the university which have avowedly religious meanings and were incidentally made by National Artists,

Bilang mga sining pampubliko, paano ipinahihiwatig ng mga ito ang simulaing magsilbi bilang bahagi ng kolektibong karanasan? Paano nakikisangkot ang mga ito sa usapin patungkol sa edukasyon, sining at relihiyon? Paano binubuo ng persepsiyon na ang sining ng akademya ay maaari ring tangkilikin ng publiko? (De la Paz and Flores 90)

In 2009, scholar Reuben Ramas Cañete concluded that the Oblation is a site of “invented tradition” (adapted from Eric Hobsbawm). These sacrificial traditions, which are concurrently also sites of consent and resistance to authorities of the university, perform rituals and sacrifices that signify doubled or split concepts of the UP identity. As an instructor in the Humanities, I was struck by the idea of the Oblation as a concept which had fissures in the dominant, residual, and emergent ideologies of our time. To imagine the Oblation as both sacred and profane, as representation of authority and resistance, of being double-bind or split in its nature is to engage in the historical construction of Oblation myth.

### **...There were Authors and Mythmakers...**

Informed by the readings of Freire, Cañete, and Flores, I began introducing the nature of art to my classes by using the Oblation as a springboard piece. Before the pandemic, I had been using the Oblation as a springboard piece for my face-to-face classes. One of the first few activities we had was to caption an artwork in the style of an art book. I showed the original photograph of the UP Oblation which is found at the top floor of the University of the Philippines Main Library at UP Diliman. Their task back then was to caption the title of the piece, the original artist, the dimensions, the site of the sculpture, and the copyright of the photograph. Students were encouraged to use Google as a source for information in order to look for various information on different databases.

I applied the same activity for my ARTS 1 students by giving it as an assignment that can be answered asynchronously within a set deadline. Instead of using the image of the UP Oblation at the

UP Main Library in UP Diliman, I used an old personal photograph of the UP Los Baños replica of the Oblation.

To continue the momentum, I followed up the activity through a discussion board using the Google Classroom's comment section. I encouraged spontaneity by asking "What do you know about the Oblation?" The fact that students can answer this any time on their own pace during the first two weeks encouraged asynchronicity. Students told the first thing that came into their minds. It is through this online chat box, answered by 83 members of 115 students in my ARTS 1 classes, in the guise of an online conversation, where I discovered assumptions and notions surrounding the Oblation. In summary, they saw the Oblation through the following motifs<sup>1</sup>:

- 1. Oblation as selfless sacrifice**      The Oblation is a representation of the sacrificial body, a selfless identity imbued in the dialectic of sufferance, or a vision of the self as a martyr for the nation, fellow countrymen, and people (often alternative discourses of inclusivity, of sacrificing the body/self to the different identities beyond the masculine embodiment of the sacrifice). Often, it connotes "selfless sacrifice", the Tagalog "paghahandog", and the Visayan/Cebuano word which approximates dedication and offering of the self, "pahunungod."
- 2. Oblation as the model/  
Oblation as anatomical**      In these statements, Oblation is always problematized with the model from which it was based. There is always a debate between the original models from which Guillermo Tolentino based the Oblation, among Anastacio Caedo, Virgilio Raymundo, and Fernando Poe, Sr.
- 3. Oblation as heroism,  
patriotism, and nationalism**      All these statements refer to the martyric visions of heroic sufferance. Many of these statements refer to Jose Rizal's second verse of the "Mi Ultimo Adios", as translated by Bonifacio, and Rizal's poem dedicated to the youth, "A la Juventud Filipina," as part of the art historical narrative, that the whole statue is a spiritual translation of selfless sacrifice or offering of the self to the concrete. Aside from that, there are references too to the unveiling of the original statue during the National Heroes' Day of 1934 or 1935. Also included here is the symbolism of the rock which form the pedestal, that according to University interview and trivia, are purportedly culled from Montalban, Rizal, the site of the battle between the Filipino guerillas and the Japanese army during World War II. The Oblation is seen as a dedication to the martyrs that built the nation.
- 4. Oblation as secular  
representation**      Oblation is the representation of the student body, the ideals of academic freedom, student protest actions, and UP activists who redefined and re-signified the Oblation as markers of assertive militancy and resistance against dictatorships, corruption in the bureaucracy (both national and local), lack of academic freedom and State subsidy, and US imperialism. They re-interpreted Oblation as liberally minded students who engage in national transformation and social progress. Included too in these statements are the annual Oblation Run by the Alpha Phi Omega Fraternity.
- 5. Oblation as the myth of  
academic delay**      These statements refer to the Oblation as a mythical/magical emblem that causes "delay" in graduation or "failure" in the University of the Philippines College Admissions Test. The act of taking a photograph or having a selfie with the Oblation is purportedly rumored to curse the student from graduating on time.
- 6. Oblation as aura (presence in  
time and space)**      The auratic quality of Oblation is highlighted in these statements emphasizing when the original was transferred from UP Manila to UP Diliman (as a markers of the Oblation's exodus) and where the original Oblation is (at the third floor of the Gonzalez Hall in UP Diliman, the former U.P. College of Fine Arts).

- 7. Oblation as symbolisms** Each part of the Oblation was given significance by these students. Each part had its symbolism (from the katakataka leaves wrapped around the foot embodies resilience, to the height of the Oblation which symbolizes 350 years of colonization, and its other controversial/conservative parts, such as the fig leaf which was a later addition by President Jorge Bocobo to Guillermo Tolentino's design). Other statements also highlighted the symbolism of nakedness, its gesture of open submission and prayer-like murmuring lips, its crucifix form that references Jesus Christ, and its pedestal that refers back to the heroism of the Filipino martyrs who founded this nation. The historical significance alluded to each part echoes back to Cañete's reading of the Oblation as a doubled/split "sacrificial body."
- 8. Oblation as collective patronage** These statements refer to the birthing of the Oblation, a project commissioned by the then UP President Rafael Palma and/or President Jorge Bocobo (because University literature have different versions). It also narrates how the University Student Council class of 1936, which students emphasized that Ferdinand Marcos was also part of, raised P2,000 to fund the sculpture. According to the narratives, contributions came from students, officials, alumni, and employees of the university. Moreover, there are facts related to the material used (reinforced concrete) and the cast (made of bronze in Italy).
- 9. Oblation as sundial** The sundial at the College of Engineering was supposedly the university's icon before the creation of the Oblation in 1935. There are also rumors circulating that taking a picture with the sundial will also make a student fail in the exam.
- 10. Oblation as replica** Various appropriations of the Oblation's iconography are disseminated through its replicas, which among these students remember as the Oblation at the University of the Philippines Los Baños by National Artist Napoleon Abueva (1983) and the Oblation at the University of the Philippines Open University by Grace Javier Alfonso (2004). Students are fascinated by the "uniqueness" of the ribbon-like structure surrounding the Oblation at the UPOU. They also mention other reproductions of the Oblation as a fiberglass statuette sold by the UP College of Law Batch of 1985 for 10,000 pesos.

Given that students answered this formative activity asynchronously through an online discussion forum, I assumed most of them culled sources from the internet, by memory, or word of mouth. These mythologies surrounding the Oblation became my entry point into talking about the nature of art.

### **...And Storytellers who Taught...**

From these responses, I decided to introduce critical vocabularies that students in ARTS 1 must be exposed to before reading a text: *representation, expression, aesthetics, significant form, text, context, construct, sign, signifier, signified, signification, signifying practice, binary oppositions, difference, dominant reading, supplement/alternative reading, silenced, unconscious, gaps, reading against the grain or oppositional reading, and deconstruction.*

Reading against the grain, the method emphasized in reading the artistic text, foregrounds the oppositional or alternative discourses in the Oblation. I challenged the students that instead of settling on their initial responses, they must respond to the unsaid, the unpopular readings of the Oblation, and the unconscious in the Oblation. By way of deconstruction, students can "unpack the discourses that surround the dichotomous views" in order to critique the disinterested aesthetics of Modernism and the elitist ideologies that has seeped in throughout the teaching of art (Emery 52).

Using Cañete's paper as source for information on the Oblation, I highlighted in a video lesson the dichotomies of sacred/sacrificial and secular that are present in the Oblation text using historical sources. After this discussion, I invited students to engage in critical reflection through writing. Using a separate comments section in the Google Classroom, I invited students to highlight what they

realized in the discussion of the Oblation. They are tasked to juxtapose or use these realizations based on the concept taught in Module 1 of the ARTS 1 Course Pack. It is through these critical reflections<sup>2</sup>, the fissures by which they were able to merge or bridge concepts, that they were able to weave novel significance to the sculptural text. Some opinions I highlight here point out to two themes: realization of plural meanings despite the widely-accepted meanings of a text and the possibility of subverting meanings in the future.

Plurality of meanings and intertextual relationships is seen in one of my student's reflection. Here the student confesses that reading and consuming art is not only remembering the historical facts and the author of the text, "what we have to take into consideration more is the 'context' and not the specific 'meaning,' because in which, we can create our own personal definition and gain a perception that is based on our own interpretation." Another student sees that by ownership of meaning; they do not succumb to the illness of assumption or those conditioned by history, institutions, or society as naturally-accepted. She proposes "to read against the grain, think critically and deconstruct the domination of one signifying concept over the other and explore its opposition", the purpose of this text and people's perception and reception to it. Another student highlights the sociohistorical dimension of sculpture whose significations come from the society where it was installed. This made another student realize that Oblation is not anymore about being delayed when somebody takes a selfie but about the representation of the students and their struggles. To be involved or engaged in the icon, this freshman student wrote: "since its erection, the Oblation, through being part of many radical incidents, has earned numerous representations which people may relate, identify with, or serve as a reminder of the past—a true vantage for the history it has experienced."

The other responses show that meanings can fulfill or reach its extreme limit. It can also be subverted when students in the aftermath of the iconoclasm of slaver sculptures in the Black Lives Matter Movement and having knowledge of university history on the protest performances surrounding the Oblation in the 1950s to the 1970s asked these questions: "Would it be also possible that after several decades, the Oblation will have a negative meaning attached to it? Such recreations include putting placards on the hands that were widespread, painting it red, and placing black cloth on it... can turn concrete into a model that is surrounded by different signs and meanings"; and, "Over time, will the symbol of resistance be a dominant point of view and will a new meaning resurface? Going on in this path, will we ever reach a point where we have uncovered all the meanings the Oblation could possibly hold and by then, will there still be a privileged and a marginalized meaning?"

### **... "All We Read and Unravel, is a Word-Weave, a Text-Tale."**

I noticed that the answers are yet submitted within the banking concept of education. Its character is anti-dialogical because the lecture becomes the center of thought and the teacher becomes the center of meaning. There was no true exchange of ideas for an authentic dialogue must exist not in the virtual submission of a comment or a memorized idea. I have yet to pose a problem, a representation of the world that these students are living in.

Motivated by the goal of investigating how my students will become storytellers of the Oblation and not just consumers of other ideas, I held a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with six students representing each section of my ARTS 1 classes this First Semester 2020-2021. They were chosen based on the responses they gave in the previous activities. They are composed of three boys and three girls. I also chose them based on the new insights they gave from the lecture, most of them talking about pushing the logic of the Oblation further to the extremity. They are also equally divided between those who have seen Oblation in person and those who have not seen Oblation or have not ever stepped inside any UP campus.

Using FGD, I attempted to explore further what Oblation might be for these UPLB students. Given that Cañete's study centered around the practices and cultural reappropriations of the Oblation icon in UP Diliman, I attempted to discover if there are indeed permutations of the Oblation in UPLB



from the minds of these students. I was also interested on how their reflections become stories in the context of their lives.

On the auratic experience of looking at or seeing the Oblation, only three participants have seen the Oblation in person. Meanwhile, the other three participants have not yet seen the Oblation in person but were able to view its reproduction on the internet. Some were able to know it by stories from friends, relatives, and/or family members. For those who have seen it, they felt awe, magnificence, and surreal emotions. However, they were cautious not to take photos or have a selfie with the Oblation because they have not taken the UPCAT yet. On the other hand, those who have never seen it knew it by word of mouth among peers, family members, and teachers.

These students saw different meanings about the Oblation. Before entering UP, their first perception of the Oblation was seeing it as a myth of delay, the cautionary rumor about UP students taking a selfie and not passing in the UPCAT or not graduating on time. This myth is connected to the idea of UP-as-selfless-sacrifice but not in the personal level anymore but in a wider perspective, that which elevates the Oblation to the service in the national scale (“para sa bayan”). The masculine form itself embodies this sacrifice through strength, heroism, and bravery. Most of them saw the Oblation as representation not only of UP students but also the youth in general. As UP’s icon, student representation is reproduced and embodied through performances (such as the UP Pep Squad and the Oblation Run). It also signifies freedom, openness, and liberation that make them see their education not only as privilege but as a right.

Access to these meanings were passed through storytelling. The students pointed out the family (parents, siblings, and relatives) as first sources of knowing the Oblation. Some were able to know the meanings of Oblation through academic spaces (e.g. schools, organizations, debate groups, seniors, ates/kuyas in the university, and recorded class lectures on Oblation). Others knew of the Oblation through their peers or friends by word of mouth. Many of them also learn of the meanings of Oblation through the internet and the social media (e.g. tweets, Facebook posts on the UPCAT by UP CDC assistant professor JM Embate, video of summa cum laude Tiffany Uy, and group chats). Moreover, they were able to arrive at a nuanced meaning of Oblation not only through external sources but also by way of self-reflection or internalized meanings.

In addition, they see the Oblation has migrated and multiplied to other icons, performances, myths, spaces, and groups in the University of the Philippines Los Baños. Most of their responses refer to seeing its meanings (selfless sacrifice, openness, academic freedom, liberation, masculinity, and protest action) in the Pagaraw, the Oblation Run, the Fertility, the Freedom Park, and the UPLB Babaylan. Another myth also identifies the Oblation and the Mariang Banga statue to come down from their pedestal at night to meet with each other at the Fertility Tree and/or Sperm Bridge. For those who have not seen the Oblation or have never visited the university spaces, their observations vary based on the surface. The Oblation can be seen as reference of the atrial crosses (crucifixes) in religious iconography. Another identifies Oblation in icons and characters from popular culture such as Rose and Jack in open arms of the film *Titanic* (1997) and the character of Ligaya in the hit musical *Ang Huling El Bimbo* (2019).

Embodying the present collective meanings of the Oblation, these students saw the Oblation as acts of selfless sacrifice. They discussed that the “pagpahinungod” (selfless sacrifice or offering of oneself) is performed by caring of the self or the body (sleeping well to be able to help others and staying-at-home so as not to be at risk of the coronavirus). Another “pahinungod” is through intellectual rigor and/or academic excellence (by doing well academically so as to give back to the Filipino people that funded their education and by sacrificing time on social media to share progressive opinions about current events or debatable issues in society). “Pahinungod” can also be done through altruistic acts of service for the “kapuwa” or others. It can be done through charitable acts by donating their allowance or their scholarship stipends to their families or to online donation drives for those students in need of gadgets and laptops. Lastly, “pahinungod” is also done through engaging in activism or joining organizations that serve a higher purpose, such as mobilizing students or promoting

critical discourses on education (not as a privilege but as a right). The ultimate goal, of course, is of a higher purpose and that is to serve the Filipino people and the nation/bayan.

After all the questions have been asked, some students pointed out further observations. Following the Black Lives Matter movement, the death of George Floyd in the hands of the police, and the iconoclasm of statues of slave masters in the United States and in Europe, a student wonders if the Oblation can also be read in the future as a totally negative image. Will groups be organized to destroy the image of the statue? One student realizes that university history taught students that meanings in the Oblation as an aesthetic object is not fixed. It is also fluid and unstable. It is a sign of change as shown in history, from the concept of the Oblation as a sacred and sacrificial aesthetic object to secular representations of the student body, academic freedom, student activism, and militancy.

### **A Cliffhanger, an Open-Ended Scene**

Each subheading of this paper is laid out with plot points. By way of weaving, I reveal how the subheadings tell a story:

In the beginning,  
there were authors and mythmakers,  
and storytellers who taught  
“all we read and unravel, is a word-weave, a text-tale.”<sup>3</sup>

I quoted the last line from poet and literary critic Gémino Abad to emphasize why this whole trajectory, a narrative arc, or perhaps, a fragmented frame story of the Oblation by way of history and the teaching of this icon, is an act of unraveling and weaving words, myths, and tales of the Oblation. It does not anymore become a simple springboard piece in an online and remote learning context. Like Penelope, who in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in order to prolong her waiting to her husband Odysseus, deceived and seduced her suitors by making them believe she will remarry once she is done weaving a funeral shroud. She unravels it at night in order to weave it again the next day. These student-teachers, like Penelope, also make stories about the Oblation in the act of weaving and unraveling with the teacher-students.

My students were supposed to study the fourth module on Art Circulation. However, because of the OVPAA memorandum on academic ease, I decided to devise a constructive and interactive activity using the discussion thread. Instead of working on a heavy formative assessment, I attempted to do a Round Robin. Here, I composed a five to seven-sentence story that students have to continue as a chain story. The prompt was about Oblation becoming alive and leaving its pedestal taking from an anecdote shared by Prof. Layeta Bucoy, a senior faculty in the Department. I titled the activity as “Oblation: A Chain Story” where students creatively thought of making up myths about the Oblation in relation to other icons in the university such as Mariang Banga, the Freedom Park, the Oblation Run, the Fertility Tree, and Pagaraw. They all came alive in the stories divided into three sections. Because the students are roughly around 39-41 in each section in an asynchronous set up, I had to double-check the list of storytellers and identify the last student who will end the story. Later on, they reflected on the chain stories their classmates wrote by talking about how the icon is circulated in a chain story or a myth. The information gathered can warrant for another study that shows the extent of storytelling as a mode of formative assessment on aesthetic concepts and artistic reproduction.

Following constructivist approaches, Freire’s problem posing method, Ick’s suggestion on storytelling, and Cañete’s study on the Oblation as applied to a remote learning set up in an online asynchronous environment, this study arrived not only at a demystification of notions but a deployment and re-plotting of narratives that surround the Oblation from 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. The methods I used here teaches us that storytelling can be a mode of bridging, reflecting, immersing, acting, and embodying critical concepts in the Arts and Humanities.

Digging deeper into the whole structure of this lesson, there are hints that the Oblation project of culling and connecting stories from the personal, the local, the common, and the collective memory of students can possibly be a prelude to a digital humanities archive, one where we build sites of remembering that interact with history, icon, and memory, and also archive texts, objects, and information process as perceived by the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner of UP. It shows possibilities of digitizing, archiving, and sharing oral histories and memories of students about the Oblation which can be utilized for future archival work. Although this study did not touch on the subject of pictorial representations of the Oblation on the internet, it is possible to explore for future research the digital objects and common sites that students go to in order to build a memory, representation or myth of Oblation.

The Oblation from the mind of a freshman student connotes memories of activism, pursuit for social justice, and commitment of the body to sacrificing for the nation. What makes it other or different from the Diliman concept of Oblation is that the UPLB Oblation is a fertile ground for mythmaking, deeply tied to agriculture (Fertility Tree, Sperm Bridge, Sperm Trees, Freedom Park, Carabao Park, Mariang Banga, Pegaraw, and Oblation Runs)<sup>4</sup> and the place in which it is located. There are deep ties rooted to Makiling and the stories that surround this mythical mountain. There are also historical ties to the stories of activism and political engagement that is very lively in the communities of UPLB. There is a strong tie too on “pahinungod” or selfless sacrifice as an act of volunteerism given that UPLB has a lively orientation to field work and immersion to communities. This study provides glimpses of possible engagement and authentic assessments for students who are asynchronous in an online and remote learning set up. Resisting the rubric by way of storytelling encourages students to discover accepted meanings of icons in society, deconstructing their notions of these icons, explore contradictions and tensions in its accepted meanings based on the historical archive and objects, and unearth new significations that may enable a critical understanding of how, why and for whom the icon continues to be engaged in art production, circulation, and reception in the Philippines’ art public. Students were introduced to critical concepts and definitions of art that engaged them in imagining rhizomic connections of meanings in the Oblation that have been passed for generations. Through captioning an artwork from a distance, discussing threads of memories or stories about the Oblation in a Google classroom, writing fictional stories about the Oblation, and holding a small discussion group on the icon’s nature and meanings, both sacred and secular/profane, students were able to weave stories about the Oblation that can be possible ideas for building a digital archive dedicated to UP Los Baños. The exploratory lessons on the Oblation did not only teach the art aspect but also extended itself to the possibility of a digital humanities archive where students are active builders of knowledge and not just passive recipients of meanings.

The Oblation, the mysterious and critical vessel on our minds, is a story that continues to be told among us folks all over the country even in times of crisis. It has become a beacon of hope or a gentle reminder to many scholars of this nation, to uphold dignity and excellence. All of us enter through its deep recesses, the wide expanse and depth of its “loob”, by way of what we know. For what is learning, but an entry to a story?

## NOTES

- 1 Summarized with consent from my ARTS 1 Students, First Semester 2020-2021.
- 2 Quoted with consent from the seven students who answered the prompt in ARTS 1, First Semester 2020-2021
- 3 The quote is from Gémino Abad in his essay “Language and Literature: Imagination’s Way” published in *Dagmay.online, Literary Journal of the Davao Writers Guild*, 5 March 2011, <https://dagmay.online/2011/03/05/language-and-literature/>
- 4 For some blogposts or digital media related to these icons, you may check these sites: “UPLB-a natural gallery of national artists.” *Campus News*. <https://uplb.edu.ph/all-news/uplb-a-natural-gallery-of-national-artists/>, “No person may use, manufacture, produce, offer to sell, and sell the icons, symbols, and trade and service marks of UP without the permission or license from UP...” *UPLB Research and Extension*. <https://www.facebook.com/UPLBRandE/posts/no-person-may-use-manufacture-produce-offer-to-sell-and-sell-the-icons-symbols-a/912992462090804/>, “UPLB Fertility Tree.” *Blogspot*. <http://losbanoslagunaphilippines.blogspot.com/2012/06/uplb-fertility-tree.html>, “photography: the UPLB fertility tree.” *A good apple turned bad*. <http://>

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