

志当存高远

# 2024 Issue 5



Find a blank space in the cover page and fill in your message for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Cover Design led by Hana Nagatani, with photographs,  
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Myo Myat Hnin, Wakaba Saito, & Théo Weill.





# Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Hello! How has 2024 been for you so far?

I'm Chok from Malaysia and also a soon-to-be 4<sup>th</sup>-year student who constantly laments the complexity of our worlds yet find so much solace and thrill in them (credit to Anthropology and Sociology for always lulling me into liminal spaces that aren't quite black or white or grey). For most of my life, I found myself quite rigid. I took leaps only if I can see where it's heading; it was sure steps and either-ors – everything-everywhere-all-at-once type of chaos was never part of the manuscript.

But being here, in Okayama, GDP, Japan, (and virtually in Malaysia) all at once, at the turn of my twenties has cultivated in me, surprisingly, fun ways to engage with unexpected messiness, so much so I realized that it has become a way of life - it's sort of a freestyle now.

Polyphony Issue 5 was strung together with this spirit and in the backdrop of global humanitarian crises – with ongoing horrors and suffering in Palestine, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, Congo, and more. Let's not forget the rising sea levels and temperatures happening right under our noses. These crises do not obey geographical borders – they influence the broader global order, which we are deeply embedded in, and asks us to question where we stand in all the terror. Inspired by the role of student journalism during campus strikes against the genocide in Gaza, we had the ambition to make this issue a more “political” one, hoping to centralize our pieces on the themes of collective survival, solidarity, and passion.

Though the pieces we collected did not explicitly address the conflicts mentioned above, they nevertheless showcase the imagination that comes with reflecting on one's entanglement and identity-making in the faces of global changes. These changes ask for alternative ways of envisioning the future because there needs to be a rupture from the status quo to assemble a new norm. Introducing such imaginations can confound our sense of time because sometimes we must revisit the past to reinvent the present for the future, or something in between. Such entanglements should teach us a way of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a theme shaped by the dialogues our contributors brought to the table.

This issue would not have been possible without the simultaneous chaos and patience our team embodies: a special shoutout to Susan Li, Myo Myat Hnin (Snow), Puspawati Adiseputra, Hana Nagatani, Genki Hase, Kayla Guevara, Shan Min Kha, Wakaba Saito, Yui Nitta, Kha Nguyen, and Joan Silole for keeping Polyphony half-alive (if not dead!) yet breathtaking in its limbo state <3

I sincerely hope the chaos extends to you, because it is within chaos that you learn the gift of creativity and appreciation for even what seems least insignificant.

Cheers to peace, love, people, and planet.

Best,  
Jia Xuan Chok

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*and to all the food, greens, feelings, people, and  
kindness that has shaped us throughout this  
rough year.*



The **Polyphony Student Journal** is the first student-run literary platform at Okayama University's liberal arts program, the Discovery Program for Global Learners (GDP). This year is Polyphony's 5<sup>th</sup> year in running.

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If you are a student of GDP or Okayama University, feel free to submit your work to be considered for publication at ***polyphonygdp@gmail.com***.



# To Live and Breathe in a City

*Words & Visuals by  
Neo Sayavong*



One of the things I look forward to every weekend is a mundane and banal activity that most people do: walking. I do it weekly not just for physical exercise, but because the city's environment encourages me to go out and spontaneously explore the cityscape while I let my mind wander. It demonstrates how a well-designed urban area integrated with the local environment can inspire people to take time from work or study to explore their city and feel a sense of relief and calm surrounded by greenery.

Before coming to Okayama, I lived in cities that were either built in a highly car-centric manner or were infested with traffic jams. In those places, walking was not an option, and a journey always had an end in mind. It is not a critique, just a different way of viewing a city. Then, I started living in Okayama, where it was easy to commute by walking and cycling. It gave me a sense of freedom and enjoyment in going to places. Since most places are accessible by such means, it became easy as well to walk. It is not just the big sidewalks or other large-scale infrastructure such as endless parking lots and uninviting concrete sprawls, but also the small details of nature and city character- with trees and bodies of water squeezed between buildings alongside the occasional Showa-era posters punctuating wherever you are. The fondest routine I incorporated into my weekly ritual is just choosing an interesting big area and strolling there.

This weekly ritual, which I call my 'weekly constitutional,' has become a constant part of my college experience. It all started randomly, just one Friday afternoon under the fall wind at Okayama Station after hanging out with a friend before they went on a Shinkansen. Then, I saw the *romen densha* (路面電車) and realized I had never ridden it before. Being free with no assignments or other obligations that day, I went on the streetcar with no plans and decided to see where it would go. I exited at Shiroshita Station, but I didn't intend on going to the castle or Korakuen; I just wandered around underground bookshops and quaint old streets that I found interesting. And what I found interesting were the patches of trees, flowers, and greenery tucked between friendly streets and cozy buildings. It is the balance of nature and architecture that I find the most intriguing. While exploring and thinking back on the week, I had a realization: this was relaxing and fun, and I will do this every week.



In this weekly routine, I have two main purposes in mind: exploration and reflection. In the case of the former, I find it crucial to get to know the city where you live, feel the culture, and breathe in the unique air around every corner. Thus, I often choose a random train or streetcar station in Okayama City (or other surrounding areas) and just go there and figure out what to do next after stepping out of the station. It is the spontaneity and opportunity for discovery that greatly excite me: letting the surroundings dictate the next road I want to cross, the next street I want to walk down, and the next avenue I'd like to awe at. One such example was when I went to Seikibashi Station and just wandered wherever I found interesting. Then, I found an interesting park which I first thought was a small park, but then realized it was Nishigawa Park, a park that stretched across a large part of the city downtown, hidden beautifully between buildings with bliss. Just another example of how well-consciously designed urban spaces can bring a sense of fun.

In reflection, I love to take a walk as a time to unplug from this busy world and have time alone completely to myself. This way, I can take a step back and destress from the week, whether it was full of tests, or just an ordinary week. It allows me to let off the steam of whatever is building in my mind and focus on the bright sky with the birds chirping their songs. For me, this is essential, as I like to organize and categorize a majority of my personal and academic tasks which becomes dauntingly cumbersome if there were no ways of reflecting on the past week and counting my blessings.

As I have hinted many times in this writing, having a purposefully designed city that incorporates the needs of the natural environment, and its inhabitants- both humans and nonhumans, is crucial for the mental, emotional, and physical well-being. To give a personal example, I was having a hard time focusing during a final exam season so I decided to just go on the routine walk. I was glued to my screen for around 5 hours straight at that point, and when I started strolling, relief came to my side. This highlighted a need in our modern world to unplug from the screens, whether big or small and truly live in our cities rather than just merely residing in them. A problem nowadays is that we are too reliant on our technological bubbles instead of the physical areas that we inhabit. But it is not the fault of our own, for urban designs have pushed out third spaces and prioritized commercial needs over social ones. If we can design cities to be more human and nature friendly, then can bring great benefits to the average citizen of a city.

My advice to those who have read this far is to fully live in the environment that you are in. If you live somewhere near the ocean, take walks and see the beautiful coastlines. If you are near a park, take a walk there when you feel stressed or down. No matter where you are, try to explore different areas, which will not only help with your physical exercise but will help your mind slow down and absorb everything when living in a new place. When you are stuck on an assignment question, why not walk down the road but take a different turn; there's always something new to see.



# Stone and Sands

*Words & Visuals by Théo Weill*

Next one, again. Can't stop in the process. The day is not over yet. The night won't kick me out of my functions before a while.

First is always the same, you pour. Water, or sand. The stones need to be resurrected a bit before they can receive my intentions. I have a preference for sand, because like a million pebbles, it echoes in a lingering sound that slowly fades to the constant yet always evolving ambiance of the cemetery. Gloomy for some, it can be enjoyed when used to it. Sand is made of retired stones, kneaded, handled by the winds, the water. I wonder how many old stones would fit in this handful I pour now onto the grave. Maybe that by repeating this process on a regular basis, the effect will finally impose itself.

Then comes the second step. One knee, the other, I approach the ground. No order in particular, but I try to do it silently. I don't really know why, it feels right. Maybe sound was enough of a hassle when alive, who would want to elongate the practice after the years they spent here, I don't need to thump the ground.

The ritualistic part is done. Like a prayer, then starts the thinking. After doing it so many times, I don't need to watch the instruction sheet I carved in my brain anymore. I focus on what I want to transmit towards them.

It would be useless to give them news of the world, why would they care about something so trivial when they are not involved in it anymore. Seeing the way I have been dedicated to my activity, I don't know if such information would be that accurate either. I prefer to show sentiments, where maybe those former livings may find interest. Some remnants of a will might be glad to meet an ounce of nostalgia, or even fear, from time to time.

Coming here makes me whole, fills up my daily purpose gauge, and gives me this feeling of giving back to a world I take so much from. Coming everyday is not enough. I enjoy it so much... Could I just live here maybe? I could tidy up the place, and this way reach more graves everyday, appease the suffering souls so much quicker! This is my purpose, I found it, why should I go on the outside and search for something that would supposedly make me happier? After all, my survival must mean something. If some are dead, and some are not, an invisible line that made me question so many times the criteria of the selection is drawn.

Needing no more time than it took to get on my knees, I get up again and join the sepulchre that neighbors it by a few dozens of centimeters. The distance is close, but the eeriness never does remain similar.

This round has been going on for sometime now, I should try to conclude it soon so I can quickly get on with the next one. Just a few more years, and then again. The loop of my infatigable recollection. How many graves in total I sometimes thought, and should I limit myself to the memory of a part? I wondered indefinitely.

But I should not be thinking about that, this is supposed to be a moment of focus and dedication. Memory is a sacred thing! I shall forget, and only think about the future when it reaches me through the next tomb, and when my round will be done, then only will I go on with the following. All over again... I will repeat, for this is a mission that I invested myself in. Giving up now would ruin this harshly developed determination that I constructed through the years of my pilgrimage through the dead.



Again this one is done, I clear my hands of the remaining sand, I get up, two knees simultaneously, I have no time to spare. I put a feet in front of the next grave in a single large leap. How long do I have left ? No need for useless steps anymore, I can win at least a few seconds per grave this way! Why do I sometimes feel burdened by this survival of mine? The other leg joins the first one in its' landing site. Can I keep going alone? But on the way, it meets a bucket of water waiting to be poured. It falls with me and my cranium unceremoniously leads my whole body to the ground.

I wake up... No I should not be waking up! Does it mean that I have slept? How could I even be out for a second...



I fall in tears.

But no tears. I feel them going down each of my cheeks, but dry as the sand. Only their individual paths are loosely yet visibly carved out in my skin. They mark me of the souls accompanying me since ages. Finally they manifest! I always felt related to them, but only by the impossibility to distinguish their form. Elusive presences haunting my eyes by their absence, I fought hard by confronting my spirit to their rotten graves, but even with my eyes closed, I could not make an image of them. It was in the past that they resided, in their closed ones' memories, but it would not be in mine.

How is it that all of the others forgot? How could they relentlessly abandon everyday the thoughts of their closed ones, trapped under the ground in their cages or wood and iron? Living in those chests topped with caps of marble. Should I follow their path, stop being the last one attached and drop the arms in the face of a fate that is held out only by my unremitting will?

But did they forget?

Should I go back, to the place where I had a place. Where I was one among many, and not the one caring for the many? This special will that I have inherited, did I forge it so my own eyes would not see the loss? If they all took the same path that turns away from this place, it must have been the easy one though right? But how could I accept to thwart the last thread holding back so many suffering ghosts to their unwillingly lost lives? Is it even my responsibility? Maybe I took it when I made the choice of being the last one to honor them? Was it even a choice?

When I first arrived, my first intention was to be done with it as quickly as possible, and go back to reality, where I could be left alone, running away from the overwhelming presences that the tormented souls emit. But soon, along the few times I came back to this cemetery, I started to get passionate about this place. As the soon to be last visitor, I would be the memory keeper, the one who makes the dead alive again. They would even thrive with me!

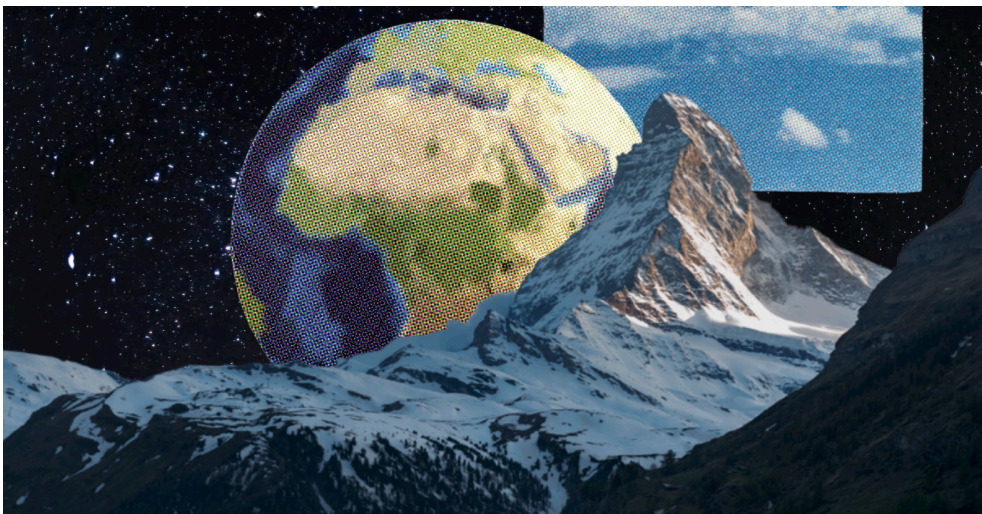
Quickly though, this dream was born into an obsession, then turned into pain. Pain for me, and pain for those who did not ask me to stay. As their memory died down in people's memories, they should have slowly faded into the pool of the existential remains. Ready to leave their seats for new ones. But I kept this iron thread around their throats well tied, fighting against their unconscious wills. I should have let them go.

Then I will let them go.

And hope for not too many to remember me when my time comes. At least not for too long. Please don't hold my thread.

# Transcending Boundaries of Subjectivity and Identity in Science Films

Words & Visuals by Susan Li



Beginning with Georges Méliès's *Le voyage dans la lune*, science fiction cinema has developed and demonstrated an abundance and richness of cinematic spectacle. The presentation of spectacle enriches the narrative and documentary nature of the movie (Yu, 1998), thus adding to the wealth of imagination.

While many science fiction films construct cinematic spectacle in the realm of space, technological exploration, and so on, the posthuman imagination also has multiple realms of exploration, including the creation of cyborg figures and monsters, and the creation of characters in non-human forms. In Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto of Cyborgs* published in 1985, she refers to an extension of the cyborg figure as a cybernetic organism, a mixture of machine and organism, a creature of social reality, and a character of science fiction (Haraway, 1991). This image of a fused entity of human and machine blurs and dismantles the boundaries of traditional conceptualizations of dichotomies, taking a

questioning stance in discussing the dominance of human beings in both the natural and technological worlds. Monsters and non-human figures appear as important characters in film and television, mostly out of a combination of humans, gods, animals, etc., such as the mermaid figure, in which the identities of the woman and the fish are merged. The monster becomes a kind of intermediate transition between the "human world" and the "non-human world" (Li, 2017). The large number of cyborgs and monsters in contemporary cinema has brought about new imaginings that break away from the traditional construction of body and identity, and gradually form the imaginings of the future form of human beings. Under the increasingly blurred construction of body and identity, the connection and relationship between human beings, machines, and monsters, as well as human/non-human and cyborg subjectivity and subjective consciousness have become new perspectives and meanings.

Subjectivity was proposed by Descartes in the 17th century, who separated the self from the outside through the proposition "I think, therefore I am," forming the dichotomy of subject and object, self and other, with the object becoming the "other" external to the self. Meanwhile, he argues that man is the possessor of nature and that animals are irrational machines. Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* that the gaze of the Other is important in the subject's construction of the self and that by forcing the self to question "who am I" through the gaze of the Other, the subject creates a sense of self (Sartre, 2003). Thereafter, Lacan argues that the Other refers primarily to the unconscious, the infant born without a separate self, in a state of wholeness with the outside world, with no distinction between the I and the other. He sees this state of wholeness, of endearing bliss, as an imaginative realm. By observing its own kind, the infant senses its own existence. Like looking in a mirror, the pressed formations reflect the ego, resulting in a certain sense of self-unity. This stage is considered the "mirror stage" (Lacan, 2006). The former study explores the subjectivity of "human beings" based on the concept of "human beings". The technological progress of the Anthropocene technology and technology as an extension of the human being accelerated the development of the Anthropocene and expanded new connections between humans and machines, and also between humans and non-human actors. Haraway in her cyborg manifesto says that the cyborg world's construction has caused the boundaries between human/animal, organism/mechanism, and the visible/invisible to collapse.

*"By the late twentieth century, machines had thoroughly blurred the distinction between the natural and the artificial, between mind and body, between self-development and external design, and many other distinctions that once applied to organisms and machines. Our machines are so vivid as to be disturbing, and we are so dead as to be frightening."* (Haraway, 1991)

She adds animal/mechanical subjects, placing humans outside of the center. Kohn (2007) states in his essay that the biological world is constituted by the myriad ways in which beings—human and non-human—perceive and represent their surroundings, and that subjectivity, which human and other creatures formed through contact with other living beings. Distinguished from the traditional

anthropocentrism of Descartes and others, biological/non-biological subjectivities and selves outside of humans are added to the discourse. Films such as *Titanium*, *Artificial Intelligence* and *Blade Runner 2049* transform fictionalized digital images into real-world reproductions, presenting the imagined relationship between machines, nonhumans, and humans through the display of spectacle from a posthuman perspective. The blurring of boundaries under this new trend of posthumanism awakens "human beings" to their subjectivity, forcing us to think about a new kind of subjectivity.

*Titanium*, directed by Julia DiCuno, won the Palme d'Or at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival. The film focuses on a protagonist who practices Haraway's cyborg manifesto, portraying a new, dismantled dichotomy of gender, species, and so on. The protagonist, Alexia, was originally a girl who had a titanium plate implanted in her brain during surgery following a childhood car accident. From this, she (and it is still her) begins to build her identity as a Cyborg. Because of the implant, she became a combination of machine and human, which affected her emotions and desires, or her "humanity", as well as her, or more neutrally, their gender, becoming a mix of male and female. Early on Alexia's female form presents her dancing with a car. This straightforward symbol of the gender gaze directly demonstrates a typical as well as traditional gender dichotomy in which the female serves as an object to be gazed at by the male, a traditional scenario in which the female is immobilized in her gender identity in being gazed at.

Alexia then transforms from her daughter's identity to that of her son Adrian and becomes a firefighter, stepping into the traditionally male arena. Here the boundaries of gender become blurred, and Adrian/Alexia complete the fusion of their biological identities. In the end, Adrian/Alexia return to their "father's" home and seek refuge by embedding themselves in Adrian's identity.

Adrian/Alexia's cyborg imagery is not attributed to any paradigm but remains ambiguous and fluid. His identity changes as it flows, loving women as women, men as men, being attracted to cars, or giving birth in the male form. In the midst of Cyborg's metaphor, they transcend the contradictions of binary identity oppositions in modern society and construct subjects with multiple selves.



The characters in the movie *Blade Runner 2049* contain three types of subjects: humans/replicants/virtual. Replicants and avatars realize their self-identity by recognizing the external other, and K, as the main character of the movie, constructs his self-identity by observing humans and identifying with them. Since the replicant does not go through the stage of infancy, in Lacan's discourse, human beings become the replicant's only external mirrors to produce the subject and the self. In defining his identity as a replicant with "human" as the core, the replicant's self-consciousness relies mostly on the established discourse system of "human", and after K mistakenly believes that he is a real human being, the way to get rid of his replicant identity is to rely on the social discourse system of human nature, such as taking names and so on. K's escape from the identity of the replicant after mistaking himself for a real human is based on the social discourse of human nature, such as names.

In order for humans to protect themselves from the threat of replicants, replicants were made to have a lifespan of only four years, and law enforcement agencies search for replicants who defect. This innate skill deficit and the acquired norm of roundups limit the identity of the replicants in a social system that strictly separates humans from machines. The replicants are placed in the position of "things" in a social structure in which humans are at the center, reducing the replicants to alienated subjects. K undergoes a constant change in self-perception in his quest for the truth, searching for his subjectivity in the replicant-human alternation, and ultimately believing himself to be a "human being". Finally, K's perception of himself as a "human being" collapses, and he realizes that the replicant is only an illusion in the mirror image of the human being. At this point, K understands that he is the Other who has been alienated by humans and turned into an "object", but in the process of mistaking himself for a human being, he develops a sense of human subjectivity and is not satisfied with his Othered status.

In the movie *Artificial Intelligence*, produced by Kubrick and directed by Spielberg, David is a simulated robot child created by the company Mimicronics to serve his family with his innate ability to love people. His new "parents", whose original human child was frozen for treatment after an accident, purchased

David because of the pain of losing their child, and he was abandoned several times in the process of getting along with his "parents" because he was a robot child and not a human child. However, to get his mother's love, he thought that if he could become a real human child, she would love him. He spends the rest of his life searching for a way to become a real human child. He heard that if he found the Blue Fairy, he could become a real human being, and he suffered so much in order to find the Blue Fairy, and waited for her for thousands of years, but even after the Blue Fairy collapsed into a puddle of debris in the water, he was still a robotic child after all.



Several of the films present Haraway's breakthrough dichotomies of mingling and collapsing between various realms: Titanium, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Artificial Intelligence* for the mingling and fluidity between humans, machines, and simulacra. Braidotti argues that today's rapid technological development has blurred the boundaries between natural and cultural objects, and that, unlike social constructivism's binary distinction between the given (natural) and the constructed (cultural), living matter is dynamic and self-organized/autopoietic, which implies that the relationship between materiality and cultural, technological mediation is not a dialectical opposition, but rather a companionable continuum (Braidotti, 2013).

In *Artificial Intelligence* and *Blade Runner 2049*, we can see that under the construction of modern anthropocentrism and during social and technological development, human beings still have an antagonistic relationship with non-human beings and that human subjectivity is beginning to feel anxious and threatened by the establishment and formation of self-consciousness and subjectivity in the non-human beings who have been othered. Posthumanism criticizes the social structures constructed by human beings by placing their own lives above other forms of life, ignoring non-human forms of life, not only the cyborg forms and monsters that appear in the film, but also the many other non-human beings, and the process of constructing the status of human subjectivity is accompanied by the establishment of the boundary between the human and the non-human (Gao, 2019). The new configuration of posthuman subjectivity would complete the shift from the traditional humanist unitary subjectivity to nomadic subjectivity, "by

removing the self-centeredness of the individualistic barriers and proposing a larger sense of intersectionality between self and other, including the nonhuman or 'earthly' other." (Braidotti, 2013).

The interaction between the human and the nonhuman does not only occur in the imaginative and spectacle presentations of sci-fi films; the centrism that humans constitute for themselves under the development of modern technology and the consumption of nature is gradually relegated to a secondary position in the prominence of the posthuman, whereas the subjectivity of humans is formed in the gaze of the Other, and the subjectivity of the Other gazes at humans, forcing them to examine their centrality. Cyborg's metaphors, the connections between humans, animals, and machines are not intended to allow us to reconfigure our paradigms of subjectivity while exploring newer, more diverse perceptions of the subject.



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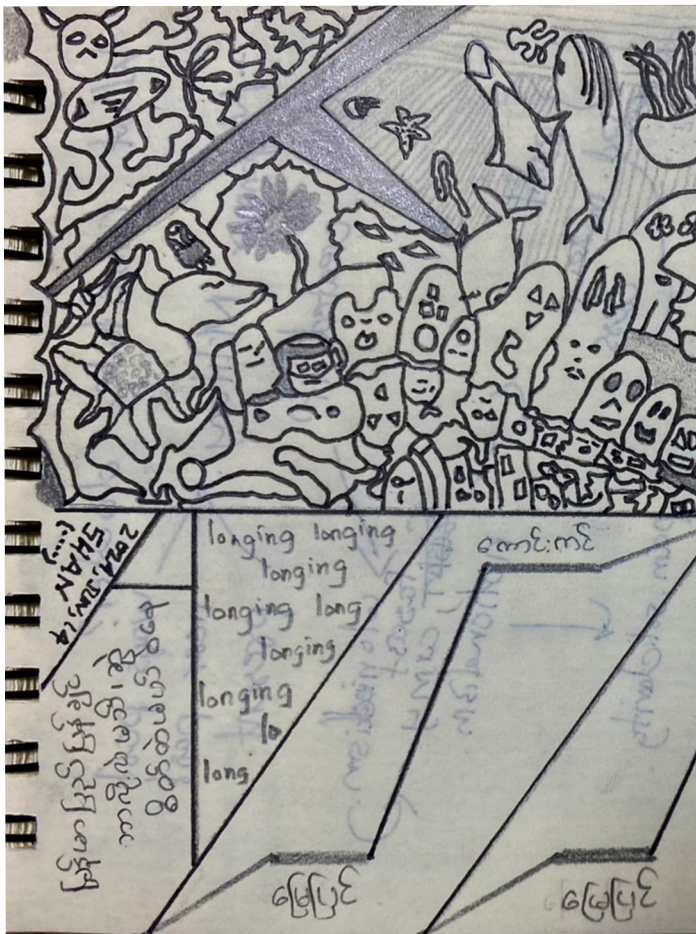


Do you ever sit and ponder love,  
Not the grand gestures or perfect scenes,  
But the fleeting touches in quiet spaces,  
Moments felt more deeply than seen?

Longing is different, isn't it?  
It's not just wishing for what's out of reach,  
But the soft ache of time stretching backward,  
A tender tug from the edges of memory.

What makes a poem without a tune to hum?  
Is it the pauses where meaning breathes,  
Or the ink stains on paper, forming shapes of thought  
That flutter like silent notes in a solitary dance?

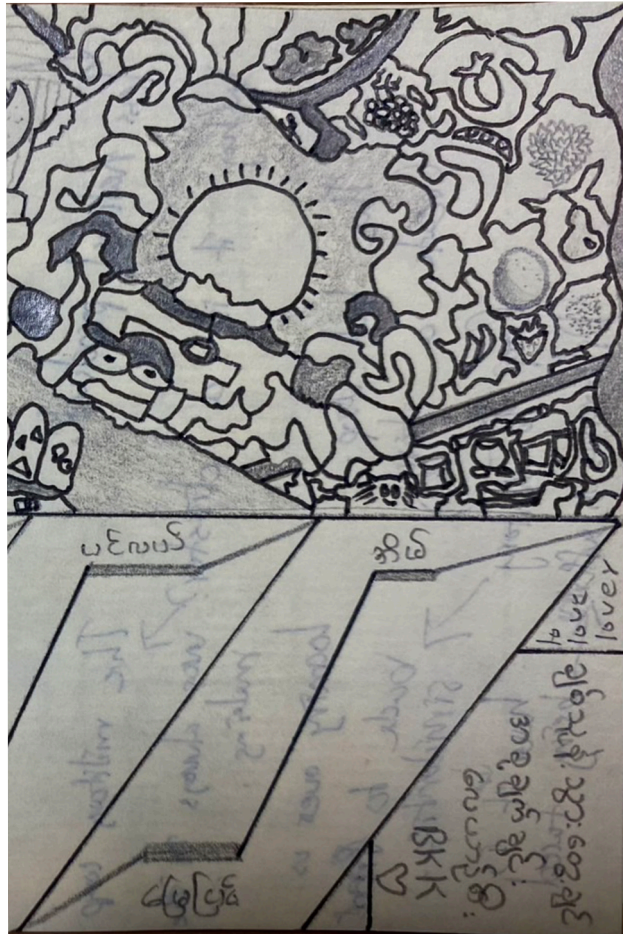
Poetry becomes a quiet conversation with ourselves,  
A canvas where unspoken feelings find their voice.  
Not in grand declarations but in subtle truths,  
As if each line whispers from the depth of our soul.



# In Quiet Conversations

*Words & Drawing by  
Shan Min Kha*





Romantics often speaks of the extraordinary in the mundane,  
Finding beauty in the everyday simplicity.  
So here we explore the contours of our hearts,  
Navigating love and longing without the need for saying.

Love might be in the soft brush of a hand,  
Or the silent promise held in a gaze.  
Longing could be that space left by a friend's departure,  
The echo of their laughter hanging in the room.

A poem without melody is like a conversation in stillness,  
Where every pause holds weight, each word finds its place.  
It's not about filling silence with noise,  
But discovering what silence can reveal.

We remember the fleeting moments and the phantoms of our past,  
The way time weaves through our lives, leaving threads of connection.  
So let's sit here and share,  
The quiet ways we love and long,  
And how poetry becomes a mirror,  
Reflecting the depth of what's often left unsaid.



## *Words & Visuals by Kayla Guevara*

A 1:1 picture, a 16:9 interactive story, a 30-second video, a thought expressed in 280 characters—these are my windows to other worlds.

I swipe to read the words composed by fellow students, published authors, and queer activists—individuals advocating for and championing a safer, more inclusive future. Words that instantly transport me elsewhere, tickle my emotions, and even spark confusion are words that allow me to form, reform, and entertain my imaginaries about nature, culture, and the future.

I pause at the images that allow me to view the world through another lens. I am perplexed by how artists use the mundane as their canvas to create something extraordinary. My eyes merely gaze at a two-dimensional piece of work, yet I am transported to their world—a world that helps me live within my own.





I am brought to the dense forests of Latin America. I swim within the waters of the Pacific. I can hear the unfamiliar yet polyphonic melodies of creatures, both enormous and minuscule in size. I see the multicolored lights painting the sky as if it were a memory. I walk beside those underrepresented while we take a stroll through their villages. They show me their ways of life and I listen to their stories full of unexpected protagonists and frameworks. I stand firm alongside protesters worldwide holding cardboard signs with demands for accountability and calls for action.

I close the window - a 1:1 picture, a 16:9 interactive story, a 30-second video, and a thought expressed in 280 characters. I exit their worlds and reenter my own—yet my world was never isolated from the other. I realize that I am entangled within. I am transformed. I am contaminated.

I dance with other lives as I make sense of mine.

# Two Names, সেইনুপা ওমল

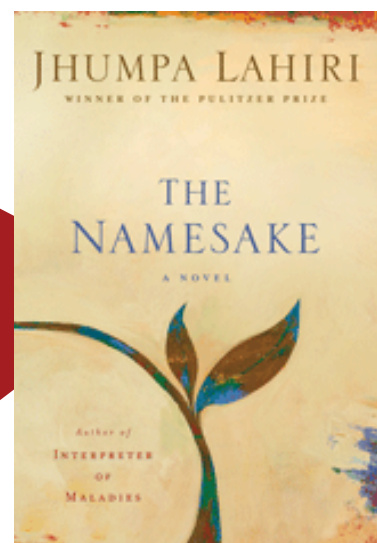
## Cultural Influence and Identity Formation: An Analysis of Gogol Ganguli in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Words by Pham Phuong Anh

It is said that the adventure of growing up abroad is always filled with thrilling opportunities, novelties, and valuable experiences. However, few delve into the opposite side – issues such as identity crisis, discrimination, and so forth. **The Namesake**, written by Jhumpa Lahiri and published in 2003, is a work of art which portrayed the exploration of identity and cultural influence. The Namesake explores the lives of an Indian couple leaving their hometown, heading to America for a new life. This essay will focus on the protagonist of the novel, Gogol Ganguli, the son of this Indian couple and the development of his dual identities.

Born to Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Gogol Ganguli is named after his father's favourite author, Nikolai Gogol. Despite being born to Indian parents, Gogol grew up in America, deeply influenced by American culture, leading to a sense of disconnection with his Indian roots, as shown by his habit of addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. (p.66) In several trips back home, Gogol feels like a stranger in Calcutta (known today as Kolkata); the city where his parents grew up and where many of his extended family still resides. Gogol's lack of familiarity with Calcutta contrasts significantly with his parents' deep connection to their homeland and their close ties to family members. To them, Calcutta is home, but to Gogol, it is nothing but a foreign country. However, it is not true to say that Gogol feels completely comfortable with his American identity, given that his name has set him apart from others. Initially, Gogol did not question the name, it is simply what he had always been

called. In kindergarten, he even persisted in going by "Gogol", despite his parents' wishes to use his "good name" - the name with specific cultural significance, in contrast to the name "Gogol" which carries no such meaning. However, as Gogol grew older, he started to realize the peculiarity of his name and struggled with it, yearning to fit in with the American community. The character is always uncomfortable with the fact that his name is both absurd and obscure, as it is neither Indian nor American but Russian. (p.67) Gogol's struggle is an example of how societal attitudes and reactions can impact or even change one's interpretation of one's self and identity. Berger (1963) mentioned that in the Durkheimian perspective, living in society means being subject to its prevailing logic, which individuals often follow unconsciously. The mentioned concept aligns





with Gogol's experience, where societal expectations shape his understanding of himself. It is the unconscious adoption of social constructs in which many individuals often conform their thoughts and perceptions to obey the society. The American community, specifically Gogol's peers, acts as the reference group which influenced Gogol's perception of his name's uniqueness, leading to the decision to change his name to Nikhil. However, the change does not bring true comfort, rather, it represents a mask he wears to gain acceptance from the American community. In the novel, the author continues to refer to him as "Gogol" in several scenes even after he legally adopted the name "Nikhil." Through Erving Goffman's concept of dramaturgy, these two names symbolize Gogol alternating between his "front stage" and "back stage" personas. On the front stage, he assumes the identity of Nikhil to fit in with American societal norms, while at the back stage, he remains as Gogol, preserving his Indian background. Gogol's two names hold a deep significance as they reflect his cultural identities and personal growth.

Gogol's in-depth and complex character is hardly revealed to any other figure throughout the novel. The romantic relationship he had with Maxine seems to be superficial, as Maxine only focused on their romantic connection, rather than comprehending his Indian roots or the depth of his inner complexities and cultural identities. His marriage with Moushumi later in the book might achieve a deeper level of understanding since both of them share the same background, yet Gogol's inner struggles are not fully understood by Moushumi. It seems that the feeling of being a stranger in both cultures has made Gogol isolate himself, facing difficulties in forming deep connections with others, thus it explains the author's choice to refrain from bringing any close friendship for Gogol in the novel. I believe the presence of a friend who could accompany Gogol and listen without judgment would reveal other aspects of him. Unlike other peers who may only see Gogol's "front stage" persona, this friend could be able to see beyond the surface, recognizing the richness and complexity of his inner world. Beginning with an encounter in class to simply enjoying each other's company over a cup of coffee, the friendship will bring meaningful conversations, providing a safe space where

both of them can express their innermost insecurities, fears, and hopes. Their bond would be purely platonic yet profound. The friend's role is not to fulfill Gogol's romantic or emotional needs but rather to be a steady presence – the one who accepts Gogol unconditionally and encourages him to express himself fully. By giving emotional support and simply being there for him, this friend would be an indispensable part in Gogol's journey of self-acceptance, offering reassurance and companionship for his struggle.

This essay primarily focuses on Gogol Ganguli's struggle with his dual identities and the impact of his name. However, it does not fully explore his relationship with his parents and lovers, whose influences are crucial to his character development. Further understanding of these aspects would provide a more comprehensive analysis of Gogol's self-journey.

Overall, Gogol's character is a symbol of second-generation children– illustrating the broader challenges of balancing their parents' cultural heritage with the desire to assimilate into the dominant culture. This problem is common among children of immigrants who frequently find themselves caught between two worlds, struggling to determine where they truly belong.

The Namesake brings valuable insights into the immigrant experience, emphasizing the importance of finding peace and strength within one's identity despite external pressures and the impact of culture on one's sense of self. Gogol's story shed light on the value of accepting one's multifaceted identity as a source of strength and self-acceptance.

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# *The Bear*

*The Bear*, a dark comedy-drama series, plunges us into the pressure cooker of the Beef — a messy, chaotic Italian beef sandwich shop. We follow Carmen "Carry" Berzatto, a talented young chef with Michelin-starred background, as he returns home to Chicago to take over the family business after his brother's tragic suicide. However, Carry's culinary experience did not prepare him for this takeover. He's used to the controlled, precise world of fine dining, but the Beef is anything but. It's a disorganized, debt-ridden operation with a dysfunctional staff: the volatile "cousin" Richie, the sardonic sous chef Sydney, and the timid line cook Ebraheim.

Heather Paxson, in her book *The Life of Cheese*, explores the intimate link between cheesemaking and the identity of the maker. Cheese, shaped by choices, practices, and dedication, embodies the values, skills, and connection to land and community of the artisan. This theme resonates within the culinary drama *The Bear*, where chef Carry grapples with reconciling his artistic vision with the financial realities of the struggling sandwich shop, The Beef.

Both narratives explore the challenges and dedication involved in creating food. Paxson delves into the ethical and environmental aspects of cheesemaking, emphasizing care for animals, the land, and upholding tradition. She highlights the challenges artisanal cheese makers face due to production costs and a shrinking market. On the other hand, *The Bear* delves into the pressure cooker of the

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*Words by Jessica Kaguah*

restaurant industry, showcasing the brutal financial obstacles and compromises chefs like Carry must make. The show mirrors the economic strain artisanal cheese makers encounter, often portrayed by Carry's deceased brother, Mike's poor management of The Beef.

*The Bear* challenges the purely commercial value of food while depicting the immense emotional connection characters have with food, raising questions about the compromises made for financial success and the impact on personal ideals. On the other hand, *The Life of Cheese* celebrates the cultural and symbolic value of cheese through the exploration of how cheesemakers express themselves through their creations, shaping not only the product but also their own identities. Despite their contrasting worlds, both narratives offer valuable insights into the passion, struggle, and identity formation inherent to the food industry. While *The Life of Cheese* celebrates the artisanal craft and its ethical considerations, *The Bear* serves a raw look at the tenuous environment and its compromise on artistic integrity. By comparing these seemingly disparate stories, we gain a richer understanding of the complex factors that shape the creation and meaning of food in our lives. Chef Carry's lament—"You ever miss the days when a sandwich was just a sandwich?"—succinctly captures the core tension explored in *The Bear*: the struggle between artistic vision and the brutal realities of the modern food industry. This resonates with anthropologist Sidney Mintz's critique of

our food systems, often prioritizing speed and efficiency over traditional methods and their cultural significance. While not dealing directly with cheese, *The Bear* subtly references concepts explored by Heather Paxson in *The Life of Cheese*. Carmy's insistence on using local beef and fresh, home-made ingredients can be linked to Paxson's notion of "terroir." Both cases highlight the importance of understanding and valuing the unique characteristics imparted by local ingredients and ethical production practices. This commitment to quality contrasts with the show's portrayal of fast-food mentality, embodied by Carmy's deceased brother's chaotic management of The Beef. This mirrors the contrast Paxson draws between artisanal, terroir-driven cheeses and standardized, industrial products. In both contexts, techniques and specific ingredients aim to differentiate the product through supplementing them with added-values that go beyond monetary gains, appealing to consumers who value craftsmanship and ethical considerations.

The show dives deeper into just finances, exploring the emotional attachment humans have toward food. Characters like Carmy and Richie exhibit the dedication and talent required in high-pressure kitchens, echoing the artistry and knowledge of cheesemakers in *The Life of Cheese*. Carmy's decision to send his team for specialized training – Richie to a high-end restaurant, Marcus to Denmark, and Tina and Ebrahim to culinary school – further aligns with Paxson's discussion of "quality-enhanced" cheeses and the value placed on expertise and particularities. *The Bear* doesn't just offer a glimpse into the demanding world of restaurants; it invites viewers to engage in broader discussions about the food system itself. By juxtaposing Carmy's ideals with the harsh realities of The Beef, the show encourages reflection on the value we place on speed, efficiency, and ethics in our everyday food choices. Ultimately, it challenges us to reconsider the true cost of a sandwich, both economically and in terms of cultural significance and personal connection.

Anthropologist Carole Counihan examines how Mexican immigrant women in the US use food to maintain cultural identity and navigate assimilation pressures through her ethnography *Mexicanas' Food Voice and Differential Consciousness in the San Luis Valley of Colorado*. Both *The Bear* and *Mexicanas* explore the connection between food and identity. In *The Bear*, characters like Carmen wrestle with their cultural heritage and family expectations through their relationship with Italian-American beef sandwiches. Analyzing Sidney's attempts to modernize the menu while respecting tradition, or scenes showing characters' emotional connections to specific dishes, could be used as a comparison to passages in *Mexicanas* where women discuss the cultural significance of traditional recipes and foodways. Both works explore gender roles and power dynamics within

food cultures. Counihan analyzes how Mexican women navigate patriarchal norms and challenge gender expectations through their involvement in food production and business, while *The Bear* showcases the challenges characters like Sidney and Tina – a black and Latino woman – confront with as female, colored-chefs in a male dominated environment. Scenes depicting power struggles among kitchen staff and the difficulties of having their voices heard could be compared to accounts in *Mexicanas* where women discuss their experiences with discrimination and their strategies for gaining agency within the food sphere. Moreover, *The Bear* emphasizes the intense sensory experience of the kitchen, showcasing the physical and emotional demands it has on the characters. This connects to Mintz's discussion of how sensory experiences, including taste, are shaped by social and cultural contexts and power dynamics.

While *The Life of Cheese* explores the cultural and symbolic meaning of cheese, *The Bear* could be seen as questioning the value of food beyond its cost or commercial success, considering the personal connections and emotional attachments characters form with food. Both works highlight the crucial role of people and the environment in creating food experiences. *The Life of Cheese* focuses on cheesemakers and their craft, while *The Bear* portrays the diverse staff and their struggles, showcasing the human element within the fast-paced restaurant world. Despite the dark subject matter, *The Bear* is known for its dark humor, rapid-fire dialogue, and handheld camerawork that creates a sense of immediacy and claustrophobia. The show is also praised for its realistic portrayal of the restaurant industry and its unflinching look at the challenges faced by its workers. Overall, *The Bear* captures viewers with raw and authentic imagery and its storyline that showcases the unique world of the food industry. Its blend of intensity and humor offers a gripping exploration of life behind the kitchen doors.

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# Illogical

*Words by Yooninzali Min Min*

Once scholars be rare  
Those framed melons started to compare  
The amount of dye is matter  
"The more you have, the sweeter you got"  
Oh..My Lord

Those nature lovers  
Mumbling some philosophies  
Mourning for nature  
While squared melons vie  
On that stage, they lie

My dearest nature.....  
How do you define "The Success"?  
How do you define "The Gift"?  
They don't even think about it  
For them, being a square will be" Gift"

Aww... Days definitely evolve,  
Still comfort myself resolve,  
Living in the wrong world I absolve,  
How can you comfort?

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時代が進むにつれて、人々の関係が希薄になりつつあるように感じる人も多いかもしれない。一昔前は、地域の催し物があればその地域の住人ほぼ全員が一同に集い交流し、町内会などがあればより積極的に参加する傾向があったように思える。しかし、現代社会において、そのようなつながりはどんどん薄くなっているように感じる。

自分の経験則であるが、人は共通項があれば、それがポジティブな感情を伴うものであれ、ネガティブな感情を伴うものであれ、団結しコミュニティを形成すると考える。例えば、好きな歌手が一緒であったり、嫌いな政党が一緒であったりすることである。同じ地域に住んでいるというのも1つの共通項である。しかし今は、同じ地域に住んでいるという共通項は力を失いつつあるのかもしれない。その一因として技術の発達、特にパソコンやスマホなどのインターネットにアクセスできる機器の普及が原因としてあげられる。テクノロジーが普及する以前は、直接地元の食料品店に出向き、買い物をして店主さんと雑談をして帰るなんていう機会も非常にありふれたものではなかったのだろうか。そのような日常の中では近所さんと良好な関係を築く機会も豊富にあったとも考えられる。いわゆる近所づきあいである。しかし近所づきあいをする機会自体がテクノロジーの普及により少なくなっている。例えば、直接買い物に出向くことでしか、買うことのできなかったものは何でもオンラインで購入できるようになった。そして、地域に根差したお店の需要は下がり、近所づきあいが行われていた場所も減っていく。そのような負のサイクルが、同じ地域に住んでいるという共通項の力を弱体化させている。また、この共通項の弱体化には、もう一つテクノロジーの普及に関連した原因があると私は考える。それは、孤立することに対する恐怖の薄れである。現在も、過去も自分の属する社会から孤立するということは、程度に差はあれど、ほとんどの人が恐れることなのではないだろうか。かつては孤立しないためには自分の属しているコミュニティの中の人間とある程度良好な関係を築き、その中での自分の役割を果たすことが重要であった。多少居心地が悪くても、一度自分の住まいを建ててしまった以上は孤立しないために良い関係を保つ必要があったのではないだろうか。しかし今は、居心地が悪かったり、自分に合っていないと感じたりすれば、昔よりそのコミュニティに積極的に参加、貢献しないという選択をすることは容易になっているのではないか。自分の住む地域にフィットできなくても、インターネット上に存在する自分に合った新しいコミュニティは探せばいくらかでも見つかる。そのような環境下では、人は地域の人とつながる必要性を見出すことができないのかもしれない。人の繋がりは薄れているのではなく、場所が変わって続いていくと思われる。しかしその繋がりは過去のものよりもろく簡単に切れてしまうものなのではないだろうか。個人的なことを言うと、地域の人での繋がりが薄れていくのはさみしく感じる。

P.S 今まで、書いたことはすべて私一個人の意見です。これ読んで思ったことがあればぜひ私にお伝えいただけると幸いです。

Words  
& Visuals  
by Shusei  
Fujikawa

# Tracing a Solarpunk Future through Cyberpunk-Steampunk Dystopias, Fiction, and Posthumanism

Words by Jia Xuan Chok

"We're solarpunks because the only other options are denial or despair."

- Adam Flynn, "Solarpunk: Notes toward a manifesto"

When the Beluga Skysail was set for its first voyage in March 2008, spanning across two months from Germany to Venezuela, the United States, and Norway, a new term to describe and imagine an alternative future took the virtual space by storm – **solarpunk**. The vehicle is the world's first hybrid cargo ship partially powered by a computer-controlled kite rig whose size is similar to a huge paraglider (Maligeay, 2023). If normalized, the technology can reduce up to 150 million tons of carbon dioxide emission per year (Ship Technology, 2008) – a durable element to expand the possibilities of imagining a fossil-fuel free future. Following the success, the author of the blog *Republic of the Bees* published a post named "From Steampunk to Solarpunk" the same month, where the word *solarpunk* was known to be "first" coined on the Internet (Maligeay, 2023; Gillam, 2023; Reina-Rozo, 2021). However, other accounts exist – the web writer for Tv Tropes said solarpunk as a literary genre was first crafted 6 years later on Tumblr in 2014 by user *missolivialouise*, and an independent blogger even claimed that their fictional world Ecoria, where humans and machines formed alliances to build the world with particular visions in mind, predated the 2008 ostensible beginning, or what Walter Benjamin would call the "ur-form", of the Solarpunk movement with its conceptualization done in 2004. This unruly history not only indicates the unstable conception of a budding idea but also urges us to look wider and more carefully at the latent traces, which made it possible for us to envision alternative worlds because these traces are already around us (Tsing, Bubandt, Gan, & Swanson, 2017).

Though the creator of the Beluga Skysail never conceptualized their design as inspired by solarpunk, what really aligned with the solarpunk ideal was the return to using sailing ships as working cargo ships while not shying away from wedding technology as part of bringing back "obsolete" power generation

methods, all for achieving ecological balance as well. A solarpunk society (Fig. 1) will be one that emphasizes less on corporate capitalism and more small, local businesses. It will be built on renewable energy as well as interconnected with nature and art, further pushing the agenda of including practical skills to build such a future in children's education. The elaboration gained more popularity to the imaginary and was followed by a rush of solarpunk discourses in literature, movies, art, design, and even politics, leading to the publication of a solarpunk manifesto written by *The Solarpunk Community* in 2021 (Gillam, 2023). The manifesto soaks its utopian ambition with the determination to "thrive without fossil fuels, to equitably manage real scarcity and share in abundance instead of supporting false scarcity and false abundance, to be kinder to each other and to the planet we share".

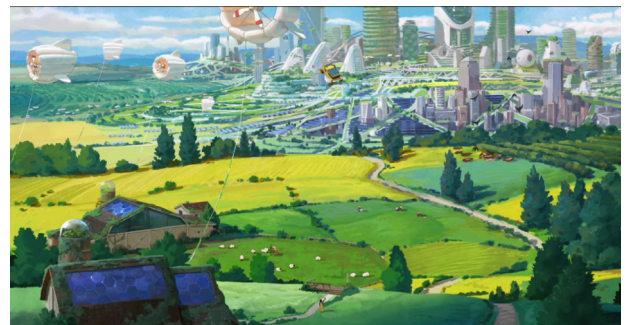


Fig. 1 Screenshot from "Dear Alice" (2021) published by The Line on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-Ng5ZvrDm4>)

To look at the genealogy of solarpunk, a dive into 'punk' is first and foremost essential. The word "punk" sprung into being around the late 1800s and was commonly associated with negative connotations like "inferior", "bad", or "something worthless" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The debut of punk culture started with music, where punk bands painted themselves as the rebels of society by calling out social injustices and inequalities (Moore,



2004). It was a bleak and doomist mindset that appeared against the backdrop of nuclear warfare in the 1940s. The loss of faith in states birthed anarchist visions and enforced a desire to develop individuality as a rally against the status quo that prevents one from having a future that is free from the system (Gillam, 2023; Lewin & Williams, 2009). Punk identity quickly influenced science fiction writing through promoting new social imaginaries. Absorbing the rebellious character of punk, author Bruce Bethke coined the term *Cyberpunk* in 1982 as the title of his short sci-fi story illustrating a gang of teen hackers with 'punk' badass attitudes jumping on the web to cause trouble. However, Bethke called William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer* as the true defining work of cyberpunk as it builds a dystopian world dealing with the troubles of a society deeply penetrated by technology controlled by megacorporations. The cyberpunk subgenre is a pessimistic, dystopian critique on the dangers of technological dependence and hypercapitalism (Fig. 2), though myriad ways of being blossomed in a cybernetic world. In *Ready Player One* (2018), people in Oklahoma City in the 2040s – a bit all too familiar and close to us – escape the declining state of the world plagued by various socioeconomic issues coming from the energy crisis by turning to the OASIS, a virtual reality simulator with an entirely different world, where a stable currency is in place and people live as freely customizable avatars, opening up a plethora of possibilities to imagine and craft one's identity thanks to the normalization of biotechnology.



Fig. 2 Free AI-generated image of “cyberpunk dystopia” from Canva

Slowly after cyberpunk was coined, *steampunk* was conceptualized, under its influence as it imagined a retro-futuristic society inspired by the Victorian steam-based technology. Ruth La Ferla (2008) defined steampunk as “a subculture that is the aesthetic expression of a time-travelling fantasy world, [...] all inspired by the extravagantly inventive age of dirigibles

and steam locomotives, brass diving bells and jar-shaped protosubmarines.” Punk is also known to have delineated DIY culture since the 1970s that takes the form of a particular aesthetic infused with protest-oriented interests touching upon feminism, anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, to name a few, as a way of celebrating subcultures and stimulating new politics (Kohtala, Boeva, & Troxler, 2021).

Similar to how steampunk is derived from cyberpunk, solarpunk also takes inspiration from both but with its creative twists. Though the ‘punk’ in solarpunk painted a rather gloomy, rebellious and surely revolutionary portrait of pursuing a counterculture by taking technological development to the extreme, the ‘solar’ denoted the positivity of literally the sun and advocated for a renewable-energy-powered future that’s rooted in environmentalism, post-anthropocentrism, power horizontalism, and justice (Gillam, 2023). Hence, solarpunk positions itself as antithetical to cyberpunk’s highly capitalist and technological dystopian imagination of the future while proposing alternative hybrids that combines steampunk’s nostalgia for old-school technology with new technology where an ethos of posthumanist and climate-consciousness is actively being sought after. All these punk types take advantage from drawing shock images that contain fragments of existing reality with fantastical elements made possible by imagination and technology – the cyborg in the movie comes to life through extending ourselves with machines, leaving us in fear and hope to configure other actionables. Like the other punks, solarpunk’s identity has no “nature” but is constructed out of “*interessement*” (Callon, 1989), or how the problematization of an issue came to create new interests for other actors by removing existing interests - much like the current global energy transition. Solarpunk is defined in relation to other definitions of punk-related imaginaries insofar that an interest to define against them emerged.

While solarpunk hinges profusely on the word ‘imagination’ for now, it aspires to be materialized like how Tokyo followed the cyberpunk aesthetics. In fact, people and activists have been imagining this future beyond speculative fiction, depositing these dreams in architectural designs that seek to incorporate greens, though green building projects and certification systems as a greenwashing strategy have increasingly been criticized in the materialization of these imaginations (Kurnaz, 2021). I remember, almost nine years ago, sitting by the stone steps in Merlion Park gazing at Singapore’s skyline, meaning that I was also gazing at Marina Bay Sands, a state-of-the-art architecture that has come to uplift Singapore’s identity as a “modern nation” in the developing world. If you look closer in

between, you can find the purple branches of the Supertrees from Gardens by the Bay sticking out like the tentacles of an anemone. Born out of Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong's plan to transform Singapore from a Garden City into a City in the Garden, the vision aligns with the eco-futuristic image of a solarpunk colored loudly by the omnipresence of vegetation in synergy with technology (Maligeay, 2023). Supertrees are vertical gardens housing over 162,900 plants of over 200 species, and the tallest Supertree stands at about the height of a 16-storey building. Imagine that. This piqued my interest because those were artificial structures that mimic the ecological function of a tree, except it's a cybernetic tree now. An expansive array of plants hangs on the "trunks" of the Supertrees, which are fitted with solar energy panels to facilitate "photosynthesis." The trunk was metal – steel to be exact, covered in paint – but it fosters and sustains plants and pollinators in a Garden. I was marveling at a solarpunk imagination-turned-reality. Together with other repositories in the garden, Gardens by the Bay is a bank of nonhuman lives cultured with humans that welcomed nearly a hundred million visitors in total to the megastructure in 2023 to live out the reality of a solarpunk dream. While the artfully controlled environment of the garden sustained by various robotics and technology might come off as overly artificial to some, the constitutive element of human-nonhuman relationship in imagining and materializing alternative gardens in the city stands incontestable.



Fig. 3 Gardens by The Bay from Unsplash photographed by Sergio Sala

To imagine a solarpunk world, we need to shed off our pessimistic spectacle of a doomed future bound to end in flames and relent wholly to a multispecies utopian vision-scape. But to imagine these worlds, images have to come from somewhere. These worlds themselves have to be drawn, described, and demonstrated for its own conception. Walter Benjamin (1936) argued that mechanical reproducibility of art has led to the loss of "aura" in the artwork itself, leading to a change in how we value and define art. However, while the loss of aura might have diminished the sacredness of the artwork, its increased exhibition value allows for the democratization of art. This can be linked to

the proliferation of solarpunk as a political ideology and aesthetic in what Benjamin calls the 'politicization of art': using art to liberate, mobilize, or subjugate the masses through bringing to consciousness what have been otherwise. Solarpunk, at its nascence, was seen as a movement that seeks to transform the future through speculative fiction, art, fashion and activism (Springett, 2017). The solarpunk movement in fictional literature and media has since then inspired people to gather images online and seek ways to translate them into material realities. Gardens by the Bay can be seen as one.

In *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1985) famously argued that we are all cyborgs and chimeras – hybrids of machines and organisms, combinations of matters of fiction and lived social realities. There is ostensibly no distinction between "fiction" and "lived social reality" because both are actively defining each other. Looking into these material fusions of multiple entities, rigid boundaries are dissolved, and a cybernetic imagination being played out in fictional worlds interacts with reality as political agendas. *Wakanda* from the movie *Black Panther* portrays a hidden utopian society where tradition and technology coexist – the two 'T's that seem to always be in dichotomy. The film conveyed scenes of futuristic technological wonders where the built environment and the natural environment are intricately interwoven, with traditional African architectural style as the leading aesthetic inspiration. Ritual itself and as integral to the political system of succession in *Wakanda* plays a major role in sustaining the 'traditional' side of the nation. The exclusive mineral *Vibranium* used in both ritualistic procedures and technological productions undermines the dichotomous discourse of traditional vs. modern and prompts for the reimagination of what it means to progress. Though *Wakanda* is a technologically sophisticated country, they opted to hide the truth by projecting themselves as an agricultural third-world nation to the outside world, rendering their entire city invisible with technology for fear of Western colonization. The outline of this figurative city shares a similarity with the *Senákw* development (Crosby, 2023) located in Vancouver's False Creek waterfront, once a 34-hectare parcel of reserve lands known as *Senákw* ("the place inside the head of False Creek") (Revery Architecture, 2023). This development project is the largest economic project in Canadian history involving direct participation of the Squamish Nation in partnership with *Revery Architecture* and private developer *Westbank*. The blackwater-powered heating and cooling system, public spaces imagined for communal living, integration of indigenous connection with natural elements of land and sea, and most importantly the restoration of indigenous land



rights all point toward signs of a developing solarpunk culture. Both *Wakanda* and the *Senákw* development are solarpunk in a sense that both looks away from alienation and seeks to find ways to sustain a human- and planet-centered way of life.

Though the ‘solar’ in solarpunk denotes a common goal to transition away from carbon-intensive energy sources, it also urges for a change in social relations and value systems that places significance on kinder entanglements between human, nature, nonhumans, and technology. From literary representations to durable architectures, pockets of solarpunk worlds are already available for us to experience, though the issue of power horizontalism might be difficult to implement in our bordered world. Imagining a solarpunk future is to dream of enmeshment within a network – there is no space for alienation! Looking into alternative histories can help us rediscover technocultural phenomena tucked in the past (Kohtala, Boeva, & Troxler, 2021), allowing us to imagine the previously unimaginable, or latent possibilities, recreate utopias and remake narratives on how to act and be embedded in webs of life, especially during times of increasing interdependence, complexity and precarity tackling head-on with environmental, sociopolitical, and economic crises. Solarpunk imaginaries ask us to look at what’s beyond the horizon and think of how our lives have never been our lives. So, what do you see?

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In curating these pictures, I began to delve deeper into my portfolio, striving to assemble the perfect assortment of pictures to represent my current “identity” as a photographer.

I saw myself change and grow over the years as I experimented with different subjects, styles, and techniques. Each period reflected a distinct phase in my photography journey, from the day I picked up the camera, taking shots of everything and anything I found amusing to more recently when I picked up the camera professionally in the studio.

I was scrolling for hours at home, in class, on break, anywhere I could find a spare moment. To me these pictures meant more than just developments in my technical abilities; they shifted between who I was as a person and how I saw the world around me. I guess that’s what I found so beautiful about photography, as you begin to invest yourself in the art, you begin to see the world differently - through a lens that captures moments and memories in a way that reflects your selfhood. You start to find beauty in the most minute details of everyday life - the way light bounces off certain materials, the way someone walks, the way we organize our table, the motion of the sidewalk, the water droplets on our water bottles, the overlooked pieces that make an *aesthetic*, aesthetic.



Starting off, street & human-interest photography was where I found the most joy, as I was able to capture the energy and diversity of everyday life around me. Living in the depths of a bustling city, where everything was constantly in motion, I braced myself for the wild chase of capturing the fleeting moments that made up the rhythm of this urban landscape. This was the life of a photographer I had envisioned myself to be. However, more recently, I felt as though I've deviated from what I set myself up to be. Picking up photography professionally, I found myself slowly getting dragged into the realm of studio work, portraiture, and overall synthetic work. With the exception of the few instances where I was recruited as an event photographer or given creative lead on a conceptual shoot, much of my portfolio had

become curated towards aesthetic perfection rather than the raw, unfiltered nature that had initially drawn me to the art form. Constantly being directed, and with predetermined expectations, everything felt artificial. I found myself slowly detaching from the camera in my personal life. Something I was once passionate about, pouring hundreds of hours honing and exploring, had now become a task, a chore rather than a creative outlet.

These pictures I've selected are from the first steps of my journey, days where I felt free from any expectations. Although it may not be representative of my current work, it represents the work I expected myself to engage in. Sitting down and looking at these changes had allowed these emotions to set in.



Perhaps I should take this opportunity of being in a new space and environment to return to my roots, potentially reigniting my passion for the art, and be the photographer I envisioned myself to be. Maybe we should all take some time to revisit our pasts from time to time, remind ourselves of who we were and what we dreamt of.

Who knows, maybe the *you* in the past could re-position the *you* now for the *you* in the future.

# To be Titled

Words & Photos by Ken Kitamura



*Dear You,*

It's strange, isn't it, how stories from distant lands long ago can stir something deep within us—echoes of lives we've never lived yet somehow understand? I've been spending my evenings with one such story, *Things Fall Apart*, and it's left me with a need to reach out to share what it has awakened in me. Perhaps it's a way of reconnecting, not just with you, but with something larger that I can't quite name.

Okonkwo, the central figure of the story, stands as a monument to strength and tradition—a man so deeply rooted in his culture that he believes it can never be uprooted. Yet, as the novel unfolds, we witness the slow, inevitable unraveling of his world. What strikes me most isn't just the tragedy of his personal downfall but the broader loss—the erosion of a way of life, of a culture that had existed in harmony with itself for centuries, suddenly brought to its knees by forces from outside. It's impossible to read Okonkwo's story without thinking of the countless others like him, across time and geography, who have faced the arrival of an alien power that claims to bring progress while sowing seeds of discord and destruction. There's a certain violence in the way colonialism works, but it's not always the violence of guns and swords. More often, it's the quiet,

insidious  
violence of  
erasure—the erasure of language, of stories,  
of the very things that give a  
people their identity.

I've been reflecting on how this resonates with us, in our own lives, in ways both large and small. We, too, have our traditions, our stories, our ways of being that we cling to, even as the world around us changes at a pace that can be dizzying. I used to think that strength meant holding on, refusing to bend to the winds of change. But Okonkwo's tale teaches a different lesson: that sometimes, in holding on too tightly, we break. There's a kind of tragedy in his resistance, in the way his pride and stubbornness prevent him from seeing that the world he knew is gone, replaced by something new—something that doesn't fit within the boundaries of his understanding. And yet, there's also something admirable in his defiance, in his refusal to simply accept what is being forced upon him. It's a defiance that speaks to a deeper struggle, one that goes beyond the individual and touches on the collective trauma of colonization. I see in Okonkwo a reflection of all those who have fought to preserve their way of life in the face of overwhelming odds, and who have, in one way or another, paid the price for their resistance.



You and I, we've had our own struggles, our own moments of holding on when perhaps we should have let go. I think back to the masks we wore, the roles we played, each of us trying to be something we thought we needed to be. In a way, we were like Okonkwo, caught between the desire to preserve what was and the inevitability of change. But unlike Okonkwo, we've had the chance to step back, to reflect, to choose a different path. There's a line in the book where Okonkwo reflects on the fate of his people, realizing that the bonds that once held them together have been severed, not by force, but by the slow, creeping influence of the colonizers. It's a moment that resonates deeply, not just because of its sadness but because of its truth. Colonialism doesn't just conquer lands; it conquers minds, reshaping the very way people see themselves and their place in the world.

I can't help but think about the stories we tell ourselves, the ones we inherit, and how they shape our lives. The power of those stories can be both a blessing and a curse, a source of strength and a source of division. Okonkwo's story is a reminder of the importance of those stories but also of the danger of clinging too tightly to them, of refusing to see the world as it is rather than as we wish it to be.

As I sit with these thoughts, I find myself thinking of you, of us, and of the journey we've been on. Our paths have diverged, yes, but they've also brought us to a place where we can look back and see the choices we made with a clearer understanding. There's a certain grace in that, I think, in the ability to acknowledge the past without being bound by it, to honor what was while embracing what is. So here I am, sharing these reflections with you, not out of nostalgia, but out of a desire to connect in a different way, to explore these ideas together, even if only through words on a page. *Things Fall Apart* has reminded me of the importance of stories, of the need to remember, but also of the need to let go, to allow new stories to emerge.

I hope this letter finds you well and perhaps sparks something in you, as this story has sparked something in me. Take care, my friend, and know that you're often in my thoughts.

Your friend,  
Shan

# Letter to a Lost Friend

*Words by Shan Min Kha*

# Some Bygones are Never Bygone

**–Senior Student Reflections on 4 Years at GDP**  
*Words & Photos by GDP's Graduating Class of 2024*

This year, GDP is proud to be witnessing the graduation of the 2025 cohort (students enrolled in October 2020)! Upon this celebratory occasion, Polyphony asked a few seniors to share with us their reflections over the years spent in this microcosm of Discovery wonderness.

Here's what they have to say:

My first two years of university were fully online, so arriving in Japan in the middle of my second year (if I remember this correctly) was such an experience. I felt as if I was stripped of my time here, but at the same time, I feel as if it was the perfect timing. Throughout my college life, I've discovered so many things about myself - things that I didn't know I liked, disliked, was capable of, etc. I've learned to be more patient - not only with others, but most especially with myself. I have made so many good friends here and I truly don't think I would have survived without their help.

University has truly shaped my growth both as a student and an individual. My ideas about the future have shifted in many ways and it honestly is a wonderful experience; it makes me reflect and think deeply. I lost past hobbies, but gained new passions. I learned new skills and garnered more interests in various fields - fields that I didn't think I'd want to ever get into or assume that I'd be capable of taking up.

*An advice I would give:* Substantial friendships are literally the key to everything.

## Kayla Guevara



*Born and raised in the Philippines - specializes in Environmental Anthropology*

## My Linh Tran



*Born and raised in Vietnam, lived in Tokyo for 4 years before university - specializes in Human Resource Management*

Coming to Japan in the midst of COVID-19 was a huge challenge. It was hard to socialize with friends or with people in general, and school was all online. I had to stay in my home country and deal with everything alone. But I learned to take care of myself and adapt to the environment - I grew a lot from it!

University really shaped me, from helping me understand what I'm really interested in by taking courses across majors in GDP and doing internships, to socializing with people from different backgrounds in a new country.

*An advice I would give:* If you are unsure of your future, reach out to seniors, ask for their study plan and job hunting plan to see how it is usually like and what you should prepare/schedule etc. Don't be afraid to consult your AA or visit the career center! Take Japanese courses offered by Okadai, you will learn a lot from them.

**Jnifar Gillur Yumi**

For most of my GDP years, I can't help but reminisce about the 18 months of online lessons I took from back home in Bangladesh. That has all become a vague memory now that I am here, but I will never forget the feeling of being disconnected from my university life even though I was lucky to receive the constant support to attend online classes. After being able to come to Japan, I got to immerse myself in diverse cultures, balancing academics with part-time jobs, and participating in meaningful internships and volunteer activities, and I realised what I have been missing out on. Like every other student studying abroad, I've overcome challenges such as adapting to a new country and managing time effectively. I have met some wonderful people along the way that I will keep in touch with in this lifetime. These experiences have taught me resilience and cultural sensitivity - some soft skills I wouldn't have achieved if I hadn't chosen to study abroad (and study abroad from home). So if I have to describe the last 4 years in GDP in one phrase, it would be a 'rollercoaster ride'.

*An advice I would give:* Embrace every opportunity and don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. Try, and keep on trying - you'll never know how broad your limits are if you never try testing them. Build connections, and seek help when needed - remember, that doesn't make you any weaker. Most importantly, don't forget to enjoy the journey! This time of your life will never come back so make the most out of it!

I deeply appreciate the dedication and effort the Polyphony team has consistently shown over the years. While the faces in the team may frequently change, the commitment to quality remains steadfast, just as I witnessed when I first joined the GDP. I am grateful to have contributed my writings here, and I hope they provide knowledge and inspiration for future students.

I entered the program with a blank to-do list in my head, and now, four years later, I can proudly say that I've achieved a deeply fulfilling university life that I wouldn't trade for anything. My academic interests have transitioned from Economics to HR management, Sociology to Cultural Anthropology, and I would say it still hasn't quite reached its destination. However, I've learned that inconsistency isn't necessarily a bad thing as it opens doors to new experiences, and life is a continuous journey of learning after all. I've also taken part in two long-term internships that have enabled me to unleash my fullest potential and to reveal and refine skills that I never knew I possessed. Beyond academics, as a core member of GDPSA, I've helped organize countless events and formed invaluable connections with the vibrant student community—relationships that will undoubtedly be the hardest to part with upon graduation.

I used to navigate life with great caution and would often second-guess every decision, which has held me back from seizing opportunities that could have resulted in significant achievements. However, my four-year-long quest for self-discovery has given me a much-needed push on the back and empowered me with the courage to confront challenges head-on. Through my experiences, I've cultivated resilience, leadership skills, and a strong sense of community responsibility—all of which are indispensable qualities in the professional landscape.

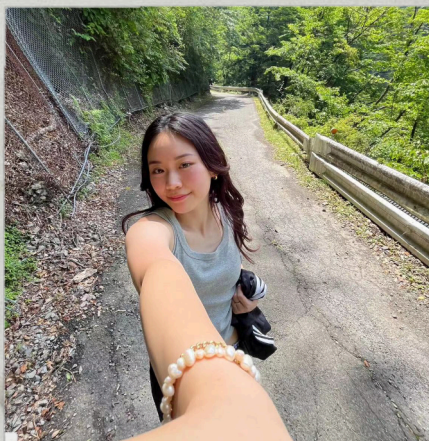
As I step into adulthood with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, I am eager to apply my acquired skills to make meaningful impacts and to continue my ongoing process of self-refinement.

*An advice I would give:* Don't easily say "no" to the subtle taps of opportunities that come your way. While venturing into unfamiliar territory can be daunting, taking the leap of faith is much more rewarding than dwelling on the regrettable "what ifs" of the action not taken.

**Karin Inoue**



## Aiko Sugano



*Born and raised in Malaysia - specializes in Human Resource Management*

My university journey began with significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which heavily impacted my first two years at school. Meeting classmates was difficult, and we relied on online classes and hangouts on Zoom to connect. At the beginning, I struggled to find my academic interests and major, but, fortunately, being in GDP allowed me to explore various courses, eventually helping me discover my passion. While assignment deadlines were a constant challenge, I found the university environment welcoming and conducive to open discussions and communication. Through class discussions and group projects, I found meaningful connections with many people around me, enriching my overall university experience!

## Otomi Tochika

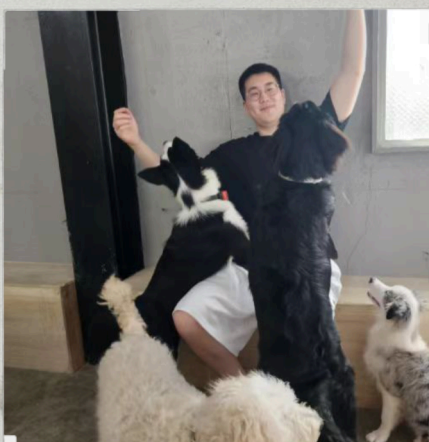


*Born and raised in Hawaii, specializes in Anthropology*

During my time in university, I've had a lot of time to confront myself and my identity. I realized how privileged I was to not have had that struggle previously. Since coming to Japan, I have had to question what it means to be Japanese (ethnically and as a nationality), American (as my nationality), and Hawaiian (as my birthplace). I think my four years here has allowed me to struggle and come to terms with my multidimensional identity, as I now can say I am not just one or the other but am all of them at once.

*An advice I would give:* Live life to the fullest! I always think that it's better to regret the things you've done, than the things you haven't. University is about testing out new experiences so keep an open mind and you may gain unexpected learnings.

## Hunjong Ha



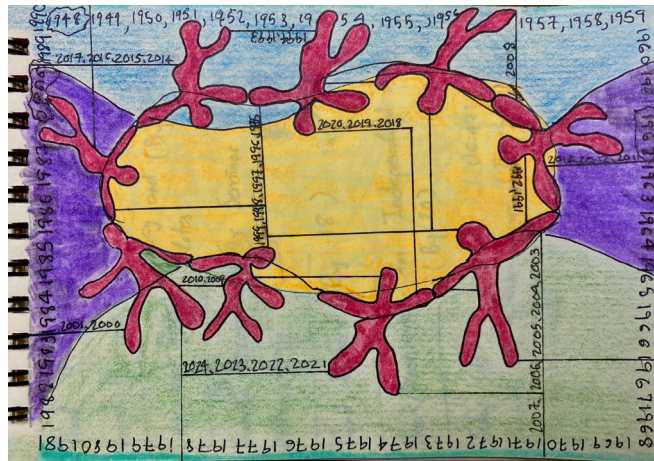
*Born in Korea, raised in Japan, specializes in Management*

I think my university life has not been so exciting, but the most significant experience was doing an exchange program at Boston University. I had a hard time choosing what university to attend for my study abroad. I did not like any of the universities offered by EPOK, so I had to find a university on my own that offers short term academic lessons. From this experience, I learned that you do not need to always follow or utilize what the university has for you. You can create your own academic path and make it happen.

I feel like a lot of my university life was spent at the gym. Surprisingly, it did lead me to get multiple job offers from famous sports companies and choose what I want to do in the future. I never was a big fan of the gym, but I feel like doing something that you are not used to is really important.

*An advice you would give:* This might be a bit cliché, but don't wait for the chance to come to you - seek for the chances. University is a place where if you want to make it happen, you can make it happen.

Thank you for reading!



*Drawing by Shan Min Kha*

