

# THE ART OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

Is the Art of Building Community and Making Alternative History

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[aftadiarlibrary@gmail.com](mailto:aftadiarlibrary@gmail.com)

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# THE ART OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

IS THE ART OF BUILDING COMMUNITY  
AND MAKING ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

Edited by: Roma Estrada, Rae Rival and Neferti Tadiar







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# The Art of Women's Struggles Is the Art of Building Community and Making Alternative History

Roma Estrada, Rae Rival, and Neferu Tadiar



Peasant women from Lupang Ramos assemble for One Billion Rising.

Photo by: Geela Garcia

Women across the world have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Care responsibilities, which now include teaching children, top off the long-standing problem of unpaid labor such as housework. During the lockdown, women have also been more vulnerable to domestic abuse and online sexual abuse. Then there's also the back-to-back phenomena of the so-called *Baby Boom* and *Shedcession* (the phenomenon of largely female job losses). It is only apt to conclude that the longer the lockdown, the worse things get for women.

In the Philippines, where the longest and strictest lockdown in the world has been imposed, these existing problems are worsened by the president's intensified misogyny. Dubbed an "orphan maker," Rodrigo Duterte is accountable for thousands of cases of extra-judicial killings from the height of the war against drugs up until the present—this moment when the COVID-19 numbers have not significantly improved due to his flawed and militaristic pandemic response. He even weaponized the pandemic to come after dissenters and activists with the railroading-through of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020. According to the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, as of March 2021, the number of women political prisoners has climbed to eighty while that of peasant women killed by state forces has risen to forty two. Women who simply criticize the government and perform humanitarian acts are being red-tagged, which endangers their lives and possibly authorizes their grave punishment by imprisonment or execution. In the countryside, peasant women leaders who struggle to defend their land are harassed by state forces, threatened, and illegally arrested. Perhaps one of the most misogynistic treatments that the world has witnessed was that of Reina Mae Nasino, political prisoner, who didn't even get to hold her baby, let alone wipe her baby's tears, on the day of her internment. Locked up on trumped up charges, Nasino was separated from her baby after giving birth, which eventually led to the infant's death

*"History has shown us that while there is oppression, there is resistance. This is true among women's movements in many parts of the world. Despite the pandemic, hundreds of thousands and millions of women and men go to the streets to protest about issues that are specific to women,"* say the editors of Gantala Press (2021) in an essay where they enumerate different forms of women's resistance around the world. This essay collection attempts to contribute to efforts such as this one through documenting the creative resistance of Filipino women against the authoritarian conditions they struggle against today.

Parents and children protested with fabric scraps with the calls  
"Hands-Off Peasant Women" and "Free Our Nanays" painted on them.

*Photo by: Rae Rival*



“*Creative resistance*”  
*might thus be understood in this  
sense — as acts that make as well  
as testify to the life and struggle  
of survival of communities.*”

Members of Rural Women Advocates holding a handstitched banner.

*Photo by: Rae Rival*



In the gender as well as racial logic of capitalist modernity, women have largely been reduced to what Hannah Arendt called the degraded work of merely reproducing life, while men have been elevated to the higher work of culture and civilization, the arts of producing the enduring artifacts that are proof and example of the lasting achievements of humanity and that transcend the basic necessity of mere living. In this view, the arts have been the provenance of masculine creativity, imagination, design, and intelligence—the designated model of human culture that transcends nature, the body, and a brute life of subsistence. As feminists have long noted, the same gendered hierarchy marks the distinction between the “high” fine arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. and the “lower” practical or functional crafts of basket making, weaving, sewing, and embroidery. This distinction similarly marks the division between mental and material labor (between products of the mind and processes of the body), sexist and racist divisions between kinds of humans and between forms of activity. These distinctions have been intrinsic to the capitalist mode of accumulation of value and power and are based on the degradation and exploitation of the purportedly merely reproductive lives of subsistence of women, peasant farmers, Indigenous communities, and the urban poor.

Today, under the murderous, misogynist regime of Rodrigo Duterte (what Cabral refers to, in her essay for this collection, as its “macho-fascism”), the sexist logic of state power as permanent war against its own people has never been clearer. At the same time, the power and creativity of women’s struggles and feminist organizing have been formidable. It is this power and creativity of women’s forms of resistance, and in particular feminist and women’s activists’ use of women’s “arts and crafts” against the murderous, violent forms of power and governance asserted by the Duterte regime, the police, the military, etc. that we wanted to foreground in this collection.

To this end, the editors have gathered women activists’ reflections on arts and crafts (stitching, sewing, publishing, visual arts, teaching, community

writing, printmaking, and songwriting, as well as the subsistence practices—urban gardening, community pantries, etc.) that they and the communities they work with have been using in the political struggle against the deeply masculinist statecraft of the Duterte regime, with its sovereign “arts” and acts of violence evidenced in militarist repression and criminalization of dissent, relentless land dispossession of farmers and Indigenous communities, and attacks on people’s livelihood, targeting of people’s defenders, closure and outright bombing of Lumad (Indigenous communities of Mindanao) schools, and active indifference to the disproportionate toll that women in the informal economy have suffered under a militarist lockdown during the pandemic.

We wanted to explore how women and feminists in the Philippines understand the political importance of the creative practices and modes of expression used in struggle as a means and model of resistance against the systems of power (the “statecraft” and “corporate arts” of authoritarian repression, capitalist exploitation, patriarchal and masculinist structures, imperial dispossession, and other forms of social injustice and violence) that they are fighting against. Primarily feminist activists, the women who have contributed to this collection come from various arenas of cultural work—visual art, writing and publishing, music, journalism. They focus on the marginalized women they work with, such as peasants, workers, the urban poor, and Indigenous communities, who have been continuously resisting and working against these long-standing structures of violence that have only been exacerbated by the state’s actions during the pandemic.

For example, demolitions of houses in the urban poor areas have not ceased, even in the middle of the pandemic. While people are being told to stay at home and practice physical distancing, the homes of the poor—where people can barely move—are being crushed in the name of gentrification and Duterte’s Build Build Build project. In “Urban and rural women at the forefront of reclaiming their land,” Geela Garcia highlights urban poor women championing the art of growing their own food and reclaiming demolished spaces while they’re at it.

Like gardening, stitching and embroidery are also practical, creative ways of resistance with a long history. Through collective stitching, women do not just prepare an eco-friendly protest material but importantly sew a culture of solidarity, as Rae Rival writes in “Defend Peasant Women: Stitching to Resist.” Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, Rural Women Advocates, and artist Yllang Montenegro stitch to amplify the call to #DefendPeasantWomen, unfurling their hand stitched banners in protests. Faye Cura’s cloth books, which she describes in “Sewing Dissent: Making Cloth Books During Covid-19,” contain secret codes, escaping the cunning of the repressive 2020 Anti-Terror Law, which outlaws criticism against the government.

Then there are messages that aren’t supposed to be secret, such as calls for free mass testing, vaccination, and medical solutions. As she describes in “Music as Counterviolence in the Time of Duterte and COVID-19,” Alyana Cabral embeds such messages in songs sung at protests and educational fora. Meanwhile, always on the brink of displacement, Lumad Bakwit students have pen and paper to turn to, as narrated in “Writing to Resist, to Remember.” Roda Tajon writes that for Indigenous youth evacuated out of conditions of state war against their communities, *“writing as an art form is their way of remembering their communities, the families that they have to temporarily leave behind so they may seek justice...their written narratives offer hope that the wisdom and knowledge gained from the collective struggle to resist attacks will live on. It will be passed on to the future generation of brave and resolute Lumad youth.”*

But art isn’t easy for everyone, especially not for women who have lost their jobs. In Roma Estrada’s “Women and the (Non)Working Filipina,” women workers describe how even simple joys become difficult to access due to the lack of resources. And yet, through collective practices of cooperation, such as those enlivened through community pantries where they work together, women also get to create spaces for solidarity. As Rival notes, collective sewing keeps defenders of peasant women together.



Yllang Montenegro, "Hanay ng makapangyarihang Babaylan, Patuloy na lumalaban!"  
 ["Series of powerful Babaylan (Pre-Colonial Priestesses), Continuing to Resist!"].  
 Mixed media on 68 x 68 x 3 cm canvas cloth and chicken wire.

# AWIT NG MAKIBAKA

KABABAIHAN GUMISING KA MAGBANGON AT  
MAGKAISA / ANONG TAPANG AT GITING HUMARAP  
KA SA UNOS NG PAKIKIBAKA / ITAGUYOD ANG  
HIMAGSIKAN SA ILALIM NG BANDILANG PULA /  
IWASTO ANG MALING KAISIPAN WAKASAN ANG  
KAMIRAPAN // ANG TATAG SA PAKIKIPAGLABAN  
PANAHOON NA UPANG IYONG PATUNAYAN ANG  
BUHAY AY LAGING NAKALAAAN ANG KABABAIHAN  
AT HANDANG PAGLINGKURAN // KABABAIHAN  
TUMUNDIG KA SUMANIB AT MAKISAPAT / SA  
HANAY NG NAGKAKAISANG MANGGAGAWA AT  
MAGSASAKA / KILALANIN ANG TUNAY NA  
KALABAN MGA BUHONG AT TAKIL SA  
BAYAN / MAY ARAW DING MANANAIG ANG  
TAGUMPAY NG KASAYSAYAN



## POEM FROM SIERRA MADRE

The rains have come,  
Warriors beloved of the masses.  
It is time to avenge Cristin Tagamolila.  
The forest, swathed now by the dark of the sky,  
Has become more impervious  
To the frantic roar of helicopters;  
If they come we shall in any case  
Shoot panic into their dragonfly wings.  
Let the enemy commandos  
Trudge up the Sierra Madre  
With their six-pound packs.  
The mud that will gather on their boots  
Shall add to the weight on their backs.  
We for our part  
Shall slide nimbly down  
The mountain trails.  
Lightly up the giant boulders:  
We serve the masses,  
The masses are with us.  
Today, as our comrades below  
Help plant the season's new seedlings,  
We shall run the enemy down: for now  
The flashfloods take them.  
Will bloodily take them.

-Clarita Raja



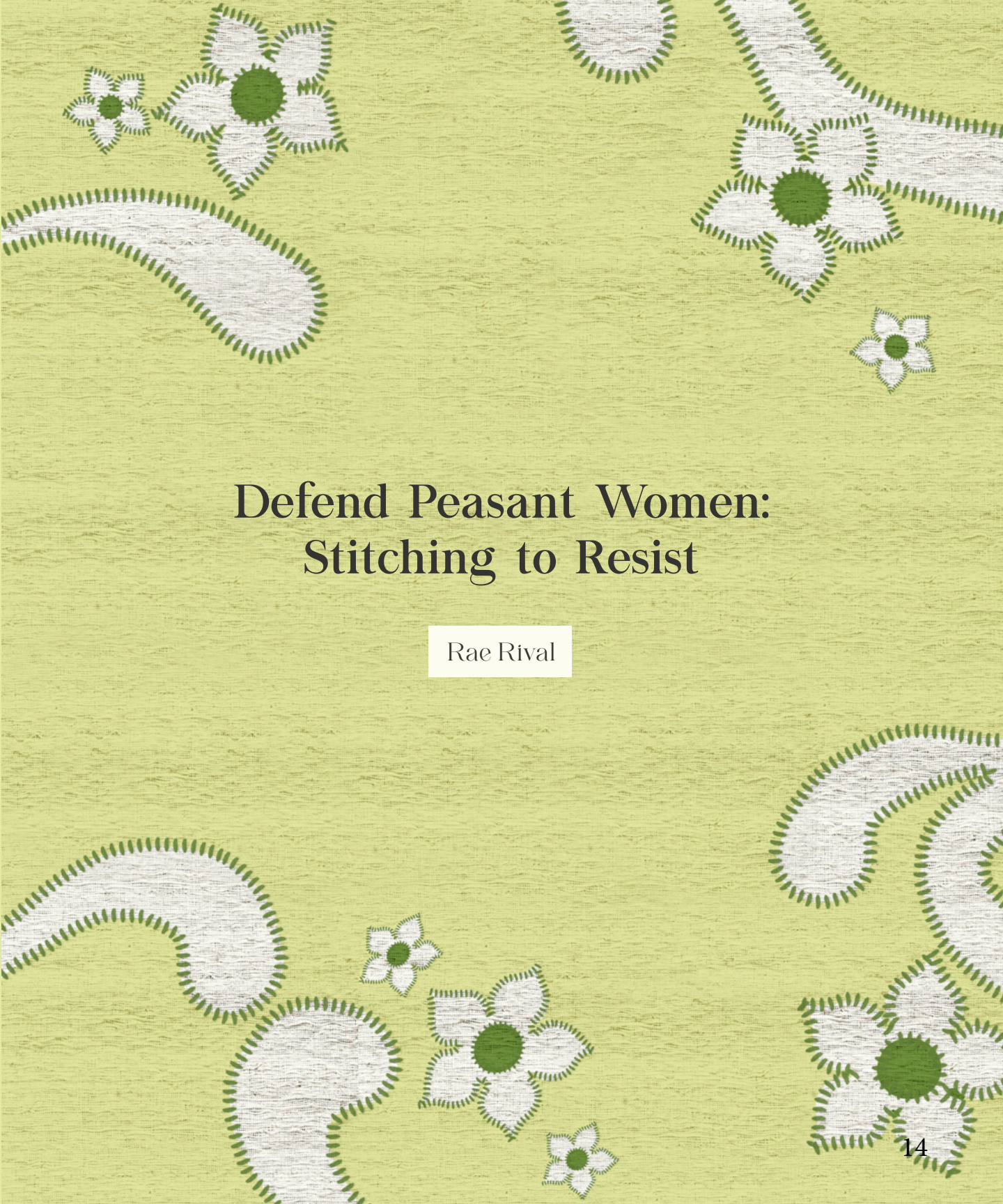
She writes that in the face of and protest against harassment and attack, “*we collectively mended our grief in front of the cameras, stitching and processing our anger through our solidarity statement.*” Stitching is speaking as well as mourning, healing, and reinvigorating the fight for radical transformation.

In an essay titled “Weaving: Women’s Art and Power,” Alice G. Guillermo argues that women’s traditional art of weaving in the Philippines has largely been taken for granted and overlooked in the context of a dominant patriarchal order, even as it is an integral and vital part of communities’ everyday life. Women weavers exercise important social power in traditional communities because of their role in preserving and disseminating the world view and values of their communities. Weaving is associated with the *babaylan*, or native priestesses, as mediators between the community and the spirits and forces of nature, because of the importance of this art and the women weavers themselves to social rituals of birth and death, spiritual and physical healing, and all aspects of community life and survival. As they inscribe the perspectives, imagination, and spiritual and practical aspirations and invocations of their communities through the mediation of the women weavers, Guillermo argues, the handwoven fabrics become women’s “*narratives of social and environmental exchange, protecting and unifying the body and spirit of a community*” (36). In contrast to the histories of patriarchal state power, these are everyday life narratives that “*reflect the female point of view of cosmological relationships and cultural interactions.*” In this way, “*textiles constitute an alternative history by and of women, as well as of the socially marginalized, economically deprived, and non-Christian groups, as against mainstream history constructed in the interest of powerful, economically dominant, male Christian elites*” (36)

The arts and crafts of women’s struggles today continue this tradition and the role of women weavers as makers and defenders of their communities’ survival and as writers of an alternative, communitarian history. “Creative resistance” might thus be understood in this sense—as acts that make as well as testify to the life and struggle of survival of communities.

Like traditional woven textiles, the cloth books of Cura, for example, serve at once as revolutionary organizing codes, as gifts, as a source of strength, but also as documents of the failure of the state in a time of people's crisis and the refusal of women to forget it. Similarly, in addition to amplifying the voices and demands of the people, as Cabral asserts, women's activist music is a form of healing, of processing the strong emotions of struggle. As a creative mode of expression, it is a social force of "counter attack," of narrating *"events and stories of the marginalized exactly as they are, in ways we should remember them."* As such, music becomes *"a way of documenting and mapping memory, playing a role in reconstructing and correcting history."*

It is in this same spirit of contributing to an alternative history that we have gathered together these essays. We hope that these essays are also seeds of further thought and action that can grow and sustain old and new communities of solidarity with those presented here. In this, we take inspiration from the work and words of Nanay Carmina, one of the women reclaiming land for the cultivation of urban poor gardens. As she reflects, *"If art involves imagination, our gardens are art because through them we imagine and contribute to building better communities."*

The background of the page is a textured, olive-green fabric. In the corners, there are decorative floral patterns. These patterns consist of white fabric with green stitching. The stitching forms the outlines of flowers and swirling, cloud-like shapes. Some flowers have a solid green center, while others are hollow. The patterns are scattered across the corners, with some larger, more complex shapes and some smaller, simpler flowers.

# Defend Peasant Women: Stitching to Resist

Rae Rival

In a sea of colorful placards, the blanket-stitched banners of Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women seem comforting. It personally reminds me of what Alexandra Kollontai calls “our grandmother’s time”—what family looked like before capitalism: *“The woman did everything that the modern working and peasant woman has to do, but besides this cooking, washing, cleaning and mending, she spun wool and linen, wove clothing and garments, knitted stockings, made lace ... and manufactured her own candles.”* These activities, according to Jodi Dean, were necessary not just for the family but the state as a whole. The national economy benefited from the products that the women made for the neighboring market.

As an act of resistance against the marking of the anniversary of Republic Act 11203 an act liberalizing the importation, exportation and trading of rice in the Philippines, we asked the chairperson of Amihan to facilitate a stitching workshop. We called it Letter-Patching Workshop versus Rice Liberalization. Participants gathered in a quaint zine library in Cubao—scissors, needles, and fabric in hand.

Zenaida Soriano, who we fondly call Ka Zen, began the workshop by sharing that sewing has become her outlet. When not delivering protest speeches or organizing peasant women, she hand-stitches banners to release her anger against the ineptitude of the government. Even during her time off, she transforms her anger into sustainable banners, into propaganda work.

First, the edges of the cheesecloth or the katsa must be sewn. This is the only time Ka Zen uses the sewing machine. Of course, the katsa must also be washed, as one usually buys them in the local bakeshop. Katsa is often used as a flour sack, usually sold for P5.00 with dried flour still sticking to the fabric.

Senator Cynthia Villar is one of the proponents of the Republic Act 11203, or the Rice Liberalization Law. Cynthia is the wife of Manny Villar, the richest Filipino according to Forbes’ World’s Billionaire 2021 List. The pair are landed elites who have converted vast agricultural lands into subdivisions, commercial spaces, and malls.

Filipino rice farmers are opposing the Republic Act 11203 and are calling for its repeal based on the following important points:

1. Prior to its enactment, the farmers were already enduring chronic crisis and poverty, thus, they were facing unrecoverable debts, leading to their displacement from lands and to termination of rice production for the Filipino population. Last October 2020, farm gate prices of palay plummeted and bankruptcy of rice farmers became imminent: P10 to P14 per kilo in Nueva Ecija, Isabela, Tarlac, Bulacan, Pangasinan, Mindoro, Ilocos Sur, and Bicol; the same in Negros Occidental, Capiz, and Antique; at P11 to P15 per kilo in Agusan del Sur, Davao del Oro, Davao del Norte, South Cotabato, North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte, and Caraga.
2. Filipino rice farmers lost at least P75 billion due to the implementation of the RA 11203. The value of palay in 2018 was at P20.19 per kilo, but this drastically fell to P16.22 per kilo in 2019. Thus, by applying the decline to the little more than 18.8 million metric tons volume of production of 2019, it amounted to P74.8 billion, which was the lost potential income of rice farmers that year.
3. The RA 11203 did not serve the welfare of both poor producers and consumers. It led to the bankruptcy and indebtedness of rice farmers, while retail prices remain unaffordable to poor consumer families who have low purchase power and household incomes.

## Harassment and Attacks

After measuring, cutting the cheese cloth, and sewing its edges, we began cutting the letters. We were to cut the letters: JUNK RICE LIBERALIZATION LAW from scraps of fabric. Around twenty participants gathered around tables and sat on the floor, cutting letters and sewing them onto the katsu. We sat next to each other, needle and thread in hand. The room fell quiet as Nanay Zen continued to tell us the conditions of the Filipino peasant women:

*When we think of the word farmer, for Filipinos at least, we immediately picture a man with his carabao (farming remains backward and small-scale because of the semi-feudal system). The majority of the women in the countryside, however, are farmers and agricultural workers. They are at the forefront of agricultural production—farming, fishing, and working in rubber, pineapple, banana, palm oil plantations. As farmers, they are involved in the preparation of land, removing weeds, planting, the long process of tilling that involves spraying pesticides and fertilizers, harvesting, drying, transporting the produce to the local market. Some of the women farmers even sell their crops themselves.*

According to Amihan, seven out of ten farmers remain landless and women suffer greatly because of this. The country remains agricultural and agrarian but the lands are monopolized by the rich and elite hacenderos and compradors (local partners of foreign investors).

In Hacienda Yulo, amid pandemic, attacks on land rights and livelihood continue. Last August 24, 2020, a contingent of armed goons brandished their Armalite rifles at a group of peasant women, including the elderly, who blocked them from entering their community. The goons were hired by Yulo-Ayalas to wipe out the farmer communities living in the area that was to be converted into a country club and golf course. “Our place used to be a paradise. Now, after they have burned down our house and demolished the houses in our community, it’s nothing but hell,” says Nanay Idang. She is one of the farmers whose parents and ancestors have been tilling the land. She has proof that her parents have been paying taxes. Her normal voice has not returned after enduring multiple instances of harassment from armed goons. As she narrates her experience, her voice trembles, as if she’s always about to cry.

Haciendas and agricultural lands controlled by local landlords and foreign investors are converted into commercial spaces under President Duterte’s Build-Build-Build program. The farmers cannot seek help from the local police and their mayor because they, too, protect the Yulo-Ayalas, landlords who own hundreds and thousands of farms in the country.

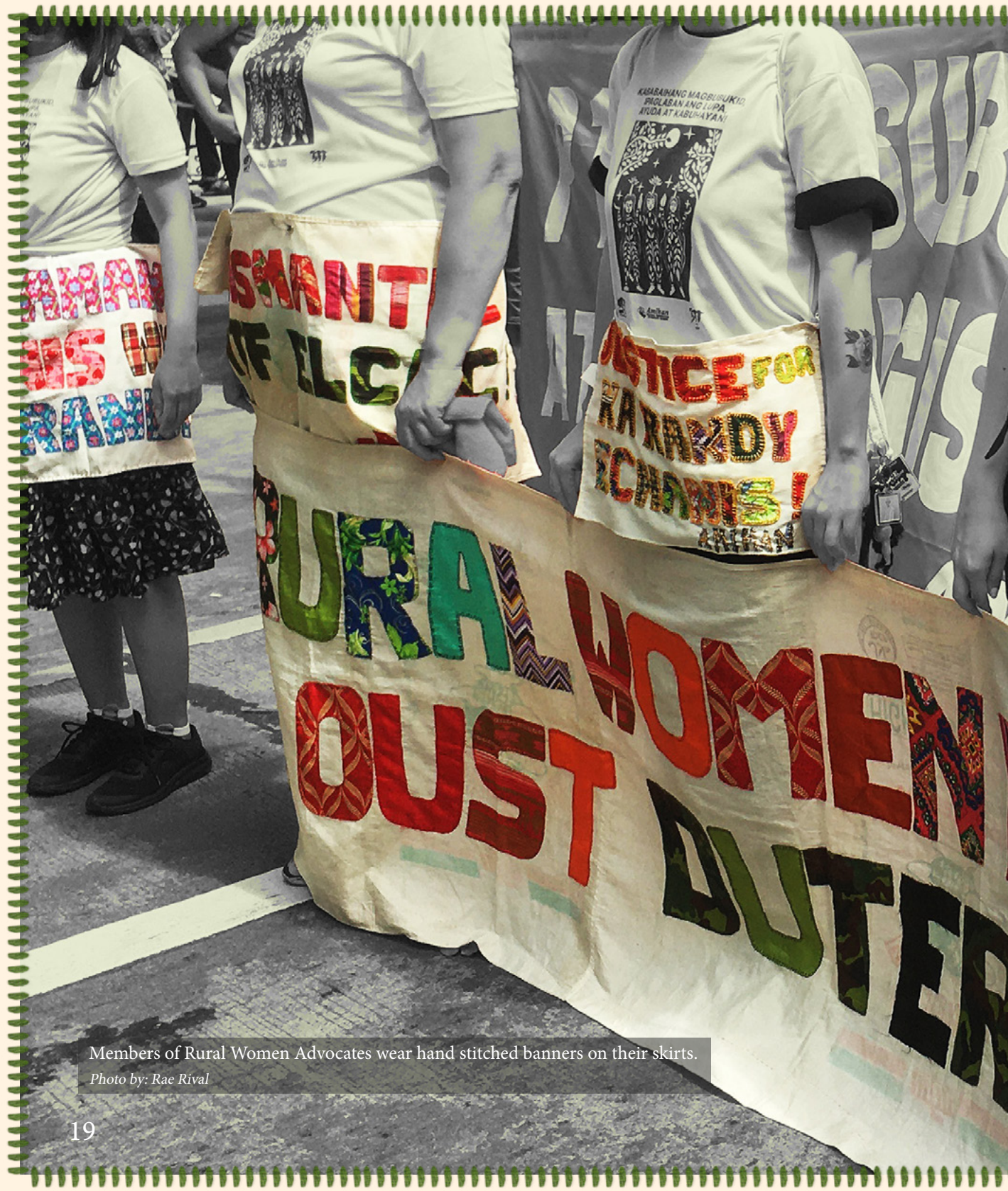
Despite the series of threats, peasant women and mothers in Sitio Bangyas tell us, *“Buo ang loob namin. Magkakapit-bisig kami para hindi sila makapasok”* (“We are firm in our stand. We will create a human barricade so the armed goons cannot enter”). Peasant organizations led by women have always protected their communities. *“It has to be the women, the elderly women. Because if our husbands face these armed goons, their rage will lead to physical fight. Magkakasakitan,”* one of the younger mothers shared. In a video recording of this encounter, you will see the mothers of Sitio Bangyas talking to a masked man. He holds his rifle at gun point as the women walk up to him, using their bare hands to push the long gun away.

## Discrimination Against Peasant Women

Ka Zen taught us how to do the blanket stitch. This stitch secures the letters and protects it from ripping and tearing. First, one has to do a running stitch so the letters will not move. The participants were surprised that we needed to do a running stitch of all twenty-five letters first. We wanted to try the blanket stitch right away! After a few hours of collective stitching, we were unable to complete the banner. We decided to pass the banner from one volunteer to the next until the day of the protest. We unfurled the statement on February 14, 2020 during a protest marking the first anniversary of RA 11203.

Aside from calling for the junking of the Rice Liberalization Law, peasant organizations and members of Rural Women Advocates resist the high cost of production. In some provinces, farmers have to come up with P50,000 to P70,000 for land rent, seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, rental of farm equipment, transportation, etc. Because of RA 11203, the price of palay, or rice crop, plummeted to P10 per kilo! Farmers have to enter onerous contracts and be buried in debt in order to till the land, but their crops are bought at very low prices. Hence, peasant women are victims of exploitation, slave-like wages, and abuse.

On top of the multiple burdens that they carry doing farm work and housework, wives often look for odd jobs in order to pay for their debts. They work as labandera (laundry workers), housekeepers, and vendors.



Members of Rural Women Advocates wear hand stitched banners on their skirts.

Photo by: Rae Rival



*“The majority of the women in the countryside...are farmers and agricultural workers. They are at the forefront of agricultural production—farming, fishing, and working in rubber, pineapple, banana, palm oil plantations.”*

On top of the multiple burden, women also suffer from discrimination. A survey from the Philippine Statistics Authority revealed that in 2019, the average daily nominal wage rate of male and female agricultural workers was P335 and P305.60 per day, respectively. The wage differential is around P30.00 per day. Hence, farmer organizations play an important role in pushing for just working conditions, equal pay, and minimum wages.

Women farmers rise above the dire situation when they are organized. Amihan has chapters in Isabela, Bicol, Cavite, Cagayan, and different provinces. Aside from this, women farmers also hold leadership positions in their organization. They act as chairs, lead the legal battles to defend their land, educate their fellow farmers, and mobilize their members to hold peaceful protests. However, according to the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, the state silences peasant women leaders. *“Adelaida Macusang, jailed in Tagum City, died due to cardiac arrest and kidney failure; Nona Espinosa, jailed in Guihulngan City, was separated from her newborn baby Carlen who died due to infection of lungs; Ma. Lindy Perocho, jailed in Escalante City, 57, a member of the National Federation of Sugar Workers accused of illegal possession of firearms and explosives.”*

## Defend Peasant Women Campaign

On March 21, 2021, a series of crackdowns killed farmers, advocates, and activists. We called it the Bloody Sunday Massacre because nine activists were killed.

One was Dandy Miguel, president of Pamantik-Kilusang Mayo Uno, a trade union in Southern Tagalog. That same day, five activists and organizers in Laguna were arrested based on trumped up charges. Two fisherfolk were murdered in front of their nine-year-old child in Batangas. They were Chai and Ariel Evangelista of Ugnayan ng Mamamayan Laban sa Pagwawasak ng Kalikasan at Kalupaan (UMALPAS KA). Their son hid under the bed. Emmanuel “Manny” Asuncion of Bayan-Cavite was also gunned down. Randy and Puroy Dela Cruz, both of the Dumagat Indigenous people, were also killed. Also slain in Rizal province were Melvin Dasigao, Mark Lee Bacasno, Abner Esto, and Edward Esto.

Two days before the raid, President Rodrigo Duterte announced, “I’ve told the military and the police, if they find themselves in an encounter with the communist rebels and you see them armed, kill them, don’t mind human rights.” Of course, the activists were not armed, nor were they communist rebels. They were part of legal organizations.

Defend Southern Tagalog was launched. This was the time I began deconstructing thrifted clothes and turning them into “protest wear.” I simply stitched scraps of fabric on to jumpers and skirts and painted our calls. We needed to gather donations for the burial of Puroy and Randy Dela Cruz, which cost around P230,000. We also accepted donations for legal assistance and bail funds for the Laguna5.

Along with Defend Southern Tagalog, Defend Peasant Women was also launched. Peasant women have increasingly become targets of human rights abuses through the Anti-Terror Law and President Rodrigo Duterte’s counter-insurgency policies, like Memorandum Order 32 and Executive Order 70, or the whole-of-national approach which created the infamous National Task Force to End Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Amid surging COVID-19 cases, the Duterte regime allocated billions of the nation’s budget to the armed forces and police over the health and socio-economic sector. The militaristic response included strict lockdowns and arrests. It became an excuse to attack progressive organizations, commit human rights abuses, and red-tag land rights advocates.

A member of Rural Women Advocates wears a skirt with the call  
“Land to the Tillers” and holds an arpillera-inspired banner with  
farmers and peasant women figures stitched below the call “Defend Our Rice.”

*Photo by: Rae Rival*



We painted the calls Duterte the Orphan Maker and Mothers Not Terrorists because the counter-insurgency policies have systematically used military, police, and paramilitary forced to victimize peasant women asserting their rights to land and livelihood. Elderly and sick peasant women political prisoners were denied proper medical attention, worsening prisoners' health conditions and leading to the death of Adelaida Macusang. Alongside our handstitched banners, Zenaida Soriano proclaimed, *"We call an end to the series of harassment, vilification and red-tagging of peasant women leaders, organizers and members under Amihan including Leonisa Taray of Bohol, Julie Marcos, Emelia Ventula, Jacqueline Ratin of Cagayan, Cita Managuelod, Rowena Hidalgo, Nenita Apricio and Gladys Ganado of Isabela and Jewelyn Fernandez and Jeralyn Cerezo of PAMALAKAYA-Aklan."*

Our needles and fabric scraps kept us together—the thrifted clothes became our canvas and banners. When the COVID-19 cases surged to a million, we were subjected to another series of strict lockdowns and curfews. We can turn only to stitching and painting to document the calls of peasant women. We could not travel and conduct fact-finding missions because we were prevented from even going outside our homes.

Along with our solidarity statements, social media rallies, webinars, and online fora, our crafts condemned the mass killings, illegal arrests, and detention. We punctured fabrics and crafted against the aerial bombings in farmer communities, against forcible mass evacuation, against the food blockade, and against the trump-up charges filed against peasant women who organized farmers. We brought our protest clothing to rallies and gathered donations by selling them online. We collectively mended our grief in front of our cameras, stitching and processing our anger through our solidarity statement. Our bandanas, crocheted bags, embroidery, and arpilleras demanded accountability, called for justice, and archived the crimes of our fascist government. Still today, we continue to use our crafts to connect to those who are afraid to join the struggle. By conducting basic crochet workshops and comic-making workshops we find openings and lead discussions on the conditions of the peasant women. We tame our collective anxieties and traumas through our needles, hooks, and yarns so that we may continue the fight against exploitation and abuse and push for genuine agrarian reform.

*“Women farmers rise above the dire situation when they are organized... They act as chairs, lead the legal battles to defend their land, educate their fellow farmers, and mobilize their members to hold peaceful protests.”*

Handmade poster made of fabric scraps and illustrations of slain peace consultant Randall Echanis.  
*Photo by: Rae Rival*



# JUSTICE for ECHANIS JUSTICE for ALL

#StopTheKillings



The background is a light green textured surface. It is decorated with several white floral and leaf-like patterns. Some of these patterns have a solid green center, while others are hollow. The patterns are scattered across the page, with some appearing in the top left, top right, and bottom right corners, and others along the bottom edge.

# Music as Counterviolence in the Time of Duterte and COVID-19

Alyana Cabral

## LUNAS

by Barangay Pesante Combo

Magtatapos na naman ang anihan  
Magtatanim kasabay ng tag-ulan  
Hangarin ay maibsan  
Sikmurang tumakalan

Si ama't ina ay nababalisa  
Sa unas ng parang walang kortapuan  
Biro ng tadhana  
Wala pa ring lunas

Bati nang lugmok sa karimlan  
Ngayo'y may bagong lagok na naman  
Wala pa ring lunas  
Ano nga ba ang lunas?

Isulat na lang ba sa kawalan  
Ang aking mga pinapangarap  
Wala pa ring lunas  
Walang masahan

Sino pa ba ang bahagad ng paglaya  
Kundi ang may mga kinukuyon sa kamay  
Tayo ang makapag-aangat sa isa't isa  
Patungo sa bukas na may liwanag

Halika, at bawiin ang sa atin ay sa atin  
Halina, at usigin, singilin ang napang-alipin

Hawak nating ang bukas  
Tayo ang maglilitar  
Nasa atin ang lakas  
Tungan natin ang lunas

## CURE (English translation)

Harvest season is ending again  
~~that~~ About to plant for the wet season  
The goal is to relieve  
The hungry stomach

Father and mother are anxious  
Of the storm that seems to be without end  
Trick of fate  
Still there is no cure

Before, already lying in the dark  
Now faced with another blow  
There is still no cure  
What is the cure?

Shall I just write in the void  
All of my dreams?  
There is still no cure  
Nothing to rely on

Who else will reach for freedom  
Than those whose fists are clenched  
We are the ones who will lift each other up  
To a bright tomorrow

Come, take back what is ours is ours  
Come, prosecute, charge the oppressors

We hold tomorrow in our hands  
We will be warriors  
We hold the strength  
We hold the cure

With the violence of the patriarchy becoming more prominent and exacerbating worsening socioeconomic conditions around COVID-19, circumventions and confrontations have been necessary as strategies for survival. Art, with its tradition of disestablishing flawed systems and infrastructure as well as exposing truths and reflecting societal realities in different perspectives, plays a significant role within these circumventions. As state violence and machismo increase, people's resistance naturally becomes more radical and feminized, and so do the creative forms of expression that come along with it.

The macho-fascism of Duterte's regime in the Philippines is evident in all aspects of his leadership—in militarist repression in the form of both lockdowns and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which criminalizes dissent; in enabling demolitions, large-scale mining operations, and land grabbing in urban and rural communities; in neoliberal policies that hurt the people's economy and serve macho-imperialist states; in negligent and anti-scientific solutions to the coronavirus; in the appointment of misogynist leaders and the creation of a diabolical task force against communists; in mass murders and illegal arrests of the poor, activists, farmers, Indigenous people, women, and children. The list goes on.

It is these acts of violence that keep the majority of Filipinos hungry and in poverty. Lack of sufficient relief and financial aid during the pandemic is violence. Keeping farmers landless and food insecure is violence. And for each one of these brutish acts, there exist reforms on one hand and counterviolence on the other. In between lie negotiations between ruling and oppressed classes, and wherever circumventions lie on the spectrum, there arise creative modes of expression—art, music, literature, etc.—as necessary tools in furthering the goals of causes, advocacies, campaigns, and offensives.



Barangay Pesante Combo at “Babae, Babawi” concert at Comission of Human Rights.

*Photo by: Nick Gomez Poblacion*

*Barangay Pesante Combo* is a folk group composed of peasant advocates from different organizations in the Philippines. Their original song “Lunas” was prompted by farmers’ calls for relief aid and health solutions for the pandemic.

More specifically, a mode of expression that easily crosses the realms of both popular and underground culture is music. Along with other art forms, music is a “tool on the cultural front,” and a “social force for propaganda,” according to the Composers Collective of New York. These definitions resonate louder if the music amplifies marginalized voices and serves the interests of the oppressed classes of workers and peasants, countering mainstream bourgeois agendas that enable systemic violence.

## INA / ANAK

by Alyana Cabral

May isang ina  
Buo ang kanyang diwa  
Kinuha ng mundo ang anak

Sa gitna ng dilim  
Umusbong ang takot  
At mula sa takot  
Ay naliwanagan

Ina, ina ang mapagpasya  
Walang ibang magluluwal  
Ng pag-ibig na tumiti'bak sa puso  
Ng buhay na umaagos sa ilog  
Ng pag-asang dumadaloy sa dugo  
Kundi ang ina

Ina ang mapagpasya  
Walang nawawala sa kanya  
Mga anak ng bayan ang magluluksa  
Kahit pawitin ang buhay sa lupa  
Walang wagas ang kanyang tapang at diwa

May isang anak  
Naligaw, nawala  
Tinatak ang landas ng 'di pang-  
karaniwan

Sa gitna ng dilim  
Umusbong ang takot  
At mula sa takot  
Namungay ang katapangan

## MOTHER / OFFSPRING (English translation)

There is a mother  
Her soul is steadfast  
The world took her son

In the middle of the dark  
Fear has sprung  
And from fear  
Came enlightenment

The mother is the determiner  
No other gives birth  
To the love that beats in the heart  
To the life that flows in the river  
To the hope that runs in the blood  
Than the mother

The mother is the determiner  
She has nothing to lose  
Children of the motherland will grieve  
Even if her life ends on earth  
Her love and spirit is eternal

There is a ~~big~~ daughter  
Lost, orphaned  
Walked the path of the ordinary

In the middle of the dark  
Fear has sprung  
And from fear  
Came courage

*“In addition to spreading awareness and amplifying people’s demands, music is also a way of documenting and mapping memory, playing a role in reconstructing and correcting history.”*

The movement for national democracy in the Philippines is imbued with such a rich tradition of music and revolutionary songs—I think that for every bad decision the government has made, there is always a song that critiques it. For every state-perpetrated attack, there is always a creative counter-attack, which is also true for other progressive forms of art and media.

If Sartre agrees that *“counterviolence against the oppressors is morally justified as well as liberating and humanizing,”* then music with militant aspirations can serve as an underscore to this counterviolence, by virtue of its capacity to humanize.

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“Mga Dukhang Anghel ng Ginhawa at Liwanag” (Destitute Angels of Comfort and Light) by Teenage Granny: a musical interpretation of an excerpt from a “pasyon,” a Filipino religious text, written by Lino Gopez Dizon, titled “Pasyon ng mga Manggagawa” (Passion of the Workers). From chapter XXVI: “Karamihan sa mga Dukha Hindi Namamatay sa Sakit—Namamatay sa Kahirapan (Most of the Poor Die Not of Illness—But of Poverty).”

In addition to spreading awareness and amplifying people’s demands, music is also a way of documenting and mapping memory, playing a role in reconstructing and correcting history. Ideally, it should narrate events and stories of the marginalized exactly as they are, in ways we should remember them. In this way, music can be an “organizer of social experience.”

In mobilizations where different sectors are united by basic demands for rights, justice, land, and wages, people are brought closer together through chant and song. It's a way of processing all of our emotions in struggle, helping us deal with anger, grief, fear, and death. At the same time, strong melodies charged with powerful and precise messages serve to arouse hope and foster empathy, strengthening our connections with each other against a common enemy.

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“Hindi Namin Kayo Titigilan” is a poem written by peasant leader and peace consultant Randall Echanis, who was slain by state forces in his home on August 10, 2020. Here it is, made into song by Barangay Pesante Combo.

\*\*\*

“Ina / Anak” was written by Cabral for Amanda Echanis and Baby Randall Emmanuel, Reina Nasino and Baby River, and Sonya and Frank Gregorio—mothers and their children who are victims of state violence and harassment.

\*\*\*

However, it must always be noted that the very thing that gives songs their power is the vitality of the struggles they strive to shed light on. Alice Guillermo’s “Art and Society” stresses that art is never neutral and that it *“derives its energies from the dynamism and conflicts of society....As it tackles social and political themes, it shows its affinities and sympathies with one or the other pole of the productive relations.”*

In the same essay, Guillermo also highlights gender and racial prejudices in the production and reception of art since the advent of patriarchal society and colonialism. While Spanish colonizers were exacerbating feudal relations in Philippine society, the image of the meek Maria Clara stood out, waiting for a lover to serenade her by her window. The tones and rhythms of such a musical gesture (the kundiman or harana, as we call it) still resonate today.

I believe that as another case of counterviolence, many contemporary revolutionary songs adopt and appropriate this form of folk guitar playing and then charge it with critiques and exposés as a way of turning it against its initial function during the colonial period, which was to perpetuate gender roles and the subordination of women and colonialism.

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“Awit ng Mendiola” (Song of Mendiola) as interpreted by Mara Marasigan and Alyana Cabral at the forty-eighth anniversary of martial law. This song is a tribute to the student martyrs who demonstrated against the dictatorship of former president Ferdinand Marcos at the January 30, 1970 Battle of Mendiola. Words originally by Bienvenido Lumbera and music by Inang Laya and Lester Demetillo.

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Just as old Spanish-inspired harana melodies still ring in our ears, feudal violence and land-related oppression is still rampant under Duterte. Within grassroots movements addressing the problem that seven out of ten farmers remain landless in the country, women agricultural workers, who earn nine percent less than their male counterparts, are struggling to close the gender wage gap.

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“Babae sa Nasyon” (Woman in the Countryside) by Mara Marasigan

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If violence is gendered, so must be the counterattacks. Voices by women for women must continue to be made and heard. The universality of music as a channel for awareness and empowerment must correspond to the universality of feminism and the aspirations of women’s struggles.

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“I Ain’t No Domestic Slave” by Alyana Cabral





Barangay Pesante Combo's performance at Katutubong Dangal, Katutubong Tapang:  
Installation of Cordillera Heroes Monument Replica at Bantayog ng mga Bayani, Manila.

*Photo By: Alyana Cabral*



Barangay Pesante Combo - “Lunas”



Teenage Granny - “Mga Dukhang Anghel  
ng Ginhawa at Liwanag” (*Destitute Angels  
of Comfort and Light*)



Barangay Pesante Combo - “Hindi Namin  
Kayo Titigilan”



Mara Marasigan - “Babae sa Nayon”  
(*Woman in the Countryside*)



Alyana Cabral - “I Ain’t No Domestic Slave”



Mara Marasigan and Alyana Cabral -  
“Awit ng Mendiola” (*Song of Mendiola*)

The background is a solid green color with a fine, woven texture. Scattered across the page are several stylized floral motifs. These motifs are composed of white shapes with green outlines and centers. Some flowers have five petals, while others are more abstract, resembling sunbursts or stylized leaves. The patterns are arranged in a way that suggests a traditional textile design, possibly a type of embroidery or woven fabric.

# The Pandemic and the (Non)Working Filipina

Roma Estrada

Women account for 39 percent of employment worldwide but constitute 54 percent of job losses during the pandemic (as McKinsey and Company reports). In the US, this phenomenon has been termed *she-cession*.

The same thing is arguably happening in the Philippines. As of October 2020, The Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for women was 27 percent lower than it was for men. What these figures do not get at, however, is how difficult it might be for most working Filipinas to identify which of the two—being laid off or keeping the exploitative job—is worse these days.

On International Labor Day, in the sweltering heat of Manila, I sat down with four Filipina workers to talk about their previous working conditions, struggles at finding new jobs amid the pandemic, and their respective ways of coping. They are members of Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (Women Workers' Movement), a labor organization pushing for women workers' rights in the Philippines. All of them work in the city of Valenzuela, the country's top manufacturing hub and, in 2015, the site of the worst factory fire in Philippine history. Had cops from the Manila Police District not blocked Liwasang Bonifacio, the original location of demonstrations, there would have been plenty of shade for us to sit under and talk. But because of the cops, the five of us had to make do with the gutter.

## Emily, 20

Emily used to work in a plastic factory. From 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., she would sit with her co-workers and separate rubber from plastic. She usually took home around \$3.50. Emily describes the working area as extremely hot and dusty, with plastic particles clinging to the workers' clothes and even to their faces. Despite this direct exposure to harmful amounts of plastic, they were not provided any sort of protective gear.

A second-year college student, Emily works to support her studies, especially now that classes have migrated online. She mostly spends her wages on paying for load (prepaid phone credit) in order to join virtual classes and download PDF readings, which eat up a lot of data.

Before she knows it, Emily has to load her phone again, except on occasions when she goes to her cousin's just to connect to the internet.

Emily was laid off recently and the small amount she has left is running out.

### **Eloisa, 25**

A mother to an eight-year-old, Eloisa also used to work in the plastic factory. She usually took home \$4.40 per day for having “a faster set of hands,” which in turn got covered with blisters. Her husband is still working, but since his wage is at the provincial rate, even when it was combined with Eloisa's it could barely keep them afloat.

Unlike last year, Eloisa and her husband didn't receive any monetary support from the government when it re-imposed Enhanced Community Quarantine, the strictest form of quarantine in the country, on Metro Manila and its neighboring provinces in late March.

### **Pia, 33**

Pia worked in the same factory and usually took home \$4.00 per day. She also used to work in a detergent factory owned by Pepmaco Manufacturing Corporation which, along with other corporations, has been known to be abusive to its workers. Pia recalls her direct exposure to harmful surfactant chemicals and, even in those circumstances, not being provided with protective gear. If they ask for gear, workers are given just one face mask per day, so they have to make do with handkerchiefs wrapped around their noses and mouths. Pia's primary job was to keep the machines from overflowing with detergent. With her bare hands, she had to take away excess detergent, which she described as being as “hot as newly cooked rice.” She said that Pepmaco doesn't provide the workers gloves as these would contaminate the detergent. This job also left Pia's hands blistered and scalded.

Unlike other people she knows, Pia received only \$40 from the government this year. When she inquired why, the agent explained that she and her mother could receive only \$20 each as per Special Amelioration Program (SAP) guidelines.

As a labor leader, Pia currently helps organize the organization's community pantry in Valenzuela.

## **Daliza, 51**

A single mother of three, Nanay Daliza used to work as a household helper earning \$4.00 per day. She was laid off in August 2020 but recently found work as a charcoal chopper earning about \$5.00 per day. Nanay Daliza says she always worries about what to put on the table. Meat and vegetables are getting expensive, so her family mostly settles on dried fish. Nanay Daliza's eldest is already working, but her wages are just enough to pay their credit at the nearby sari-sari store.

\*

Other than Nanay Daliza, the rest of the women are still looking for new jobs. They would have found jobs much sooner if not for the high cost of completing requirements, including a swab test amounting to at least \$60, way more than their wages could afford.

They were quite timid when asked about how they exercise creativity despite the current crisis. Emily said she reads and writes stories. Pia and Nanay Daliza both reported growing vegetables. For Pia, gardening eases the budget whenever a plant gets sold online. Eloisa likes to sing on videoke, but since they she and her husband currently don't have electricity at home, she still has to go to her mother's for this simple joy.

Filipinos are known for exhibiting great creativity in the face of adversity, but it can be difficult to do on an empty stomach. Globally, 70 percent of women's employment is in informal work, and this sort of work is the first to disappear during phenomena like the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Pandemic and the (Non)Working Filipina  
Photo by: Loi Manalansan



**₱100 WAGE  
SUBSIDY,  
₱10K Ayuda,  
IBIGAY NA!  
Kilusan ng Manggagawang  
Kababaihan (KMK)**

**Ayudang Sana  
Para sa LAHAT  
IBIGAY NA!  
Kilusan ng Manggagawang  
Kababaihan (KMK)**

*“Community pantries like that of Women Workers give them some reprieve. Importantly, the pantries become spaces for solidarity.”*

*“Filipinos are known for exhibiting great creativity in the face of adversity, but it can be difficult to do on an empty stomach.”*

The Philippines’ lockdowns have been one of the world’s longest and the number of unemployed Filipinos climbed to 4.5 million in January 2021. Considering that women make up 46% of the Philippine workforce, it is only fitting to call the Duterte government’s pandemic response gender-blind.

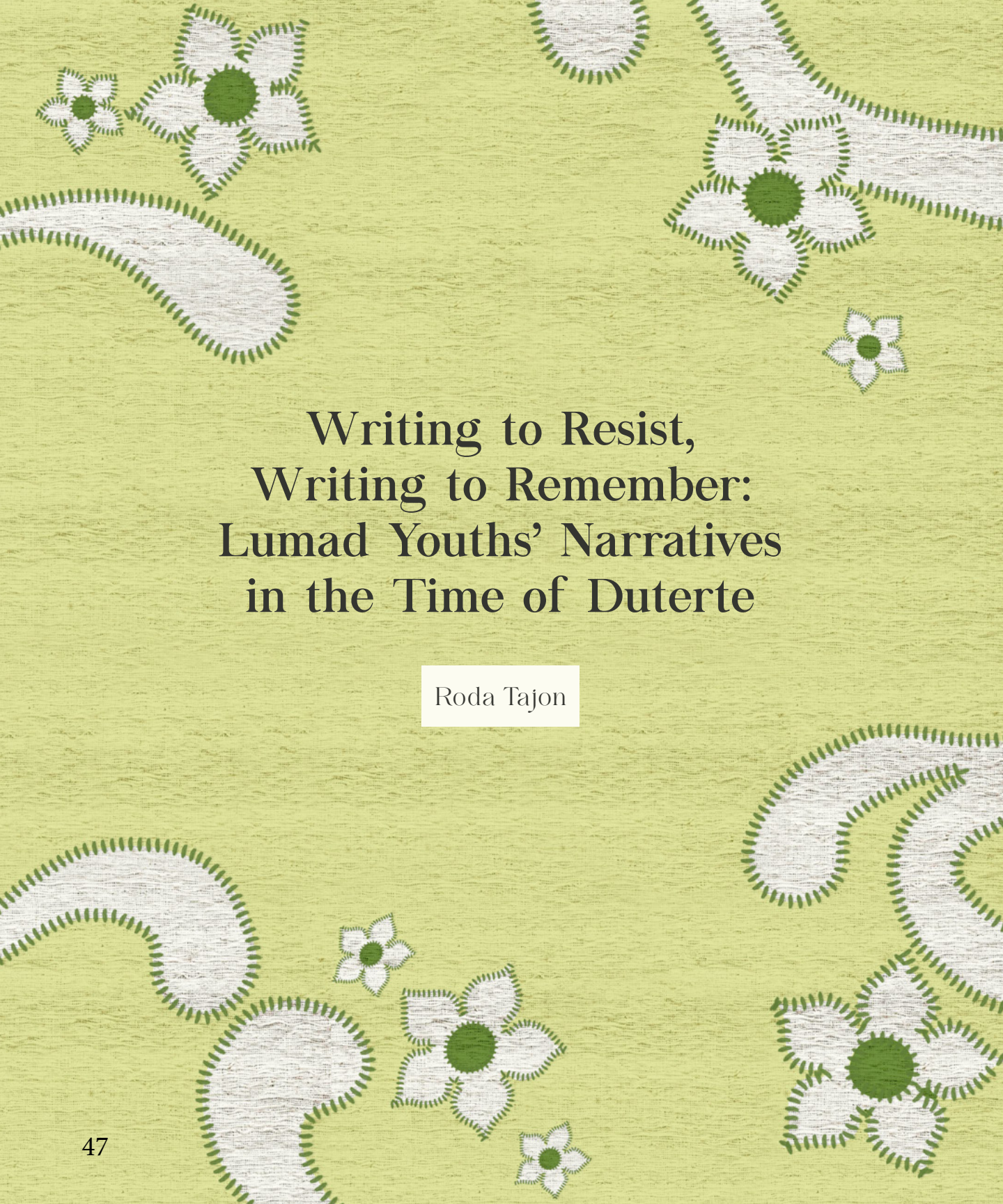
On our way back to the International Labor Day demonstration, Pia briefly talked about the pantry that she helps run for the Women Workers’ Movement. Held in different locations, the pantry usually operates on Sundays through the efforts of volunteer workers.

Community pantries sprouted across the Philippines (and even reached East Timor) as a response to the widespread hunger that the extended lockdowns caused among millions of Filipinos. The first pantry appeared at Maginhawa, Quezon City in April and was started by activist Ana Patricia Non.

In setting up a simple bamboo cart filled with goods, which operates on the philosophy, “*Give what you can, take what you need*,” Non renewed the Filipino Bayanihan spirit and inspired people to organize their own pantries as well. There have reportedly been 400 pantries, and the pantries have helped farmers distribute their produce at a reasonable price. This took the government by surprise; cops were quick to profile the organizers out of fear of a communist insurgency.

But why wouldn’t people organize themselves when there is nothing left to eat? In 2020, a government subsidy of \$112 per family for 17.6 million households only arrived in May, more than a hundred days after the lockdown began. Only 251,776 out of 568,026 individuals received a social amelioration of \$135 from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Of 3.4 million formal and informal workers, only 1.97 million received aid of \$104 from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Workers who lost their jobs are reportedly being served electricity and water disconnection notices and getting evicted from their rented houses while those who have gotten to keep their jobs are losing almost a third of their wages just to get to and from work. Community pantries like that of Women Workers give them some reprieve. Importantly, the pantries become spaces for solidarity.

Noon was approaching and the heat was becoming unbearable, but this did not deter Emily, Eloisa, Pia, and Nanay Daliza from joining the call to lower prices and raise wages, end contractualization, and raise the national minimum wage to \$15 across the board. A few more steps and we were right on time for the singing of the Internationale.

The background is a solid green color with a fine, woven texture. Scattered across the page are several stylized floral motifs. These motifs are primarily white with green outlines and centers. Some flowers have five petals, while others are more abstract, resembling sunbursts or stylized leaves. The patterns are arranged in a way that they appear to be part of a larger, repeating design, though only fragments are visible.

# Writing to Resist, Writing to Remember: Lumad Youths' Narratives in the Time of Duterte

Roda Tajon



Writing is also a collaborative process for Lumad students. Writing—through poetry, essays, and stories—has become a medium for Lumad students to remember their communities: the mountains and rivers, their farms, the vast lands of their ancestral domains that they could have inherited and enriched had militarization stopped. As integral as sciences, mathematics, and agriculture in Lumad schools, creative writing has provided a space not only to explore their creativity and intuitiveness, but a fertile ground to harness their Indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP) on the verge of deletion and revision by none other than the government.

Since the onset of Duterte's term, the Duterte regime has launched brazen attacks on the Lumad. (*Lumad* is the collective term for Indigenous peoples of Mindanao.) From the pronouncement of massive selling of ancestral lands to foreign investors to Duterte's order of bombing the Lumad schools that were alleged by the military to be training grounds for rebels, Lumad children and youth have had to weather the raging storm of the Duterte regime to continue their education.

More than 250 Lumad schools have been forcibly closed as of 2019. The Department of Education (DepEd) became instrumental in the closures by cancelling permits to operate even though schools such as the Salugpongan schools were recognized by the same department for their invaluable contribution to Indigenous peoples' education. Military and paramilitary forces also used sheer force to close the Lumad schools through encampment, arresting and detaining teachers and administration and padlocking and destroying facilities collectively built by the community. As if that were not enough, police raids have been carried out in Bakwit (evacuee) sanctuaries, for instance the recent police raid at the Talamban campus of the University of San Carlos, resulting in the arrest and detention of students and volunteer teachers and meddling from social workers.

Another sanctuary, the University of the Philippines (UP) faces yet another threat after the Department of National Defense (DND) unilaterally cancelled the DND-UP Accord, a safeguarding mechanism that prevented the military and police from conducting non-coordinated operations inside the university.

Despite all of these looming threats, the Lumad children and youth remain optimistic and steadfast in their education. In the midst of the pandemic, Lumad students from the Lumad Bakwit School based in Manila and the students of the Community Technical College in Southeastern Mindanao (CTCSM) have been able to produce works that tackle their personal issues and their communities' issues in relations to the wider struggle of Indigenous peoples in defending their ancestral lands and their rights to self-determination.

Written before and during the pandemic, the works were published in an anthology of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP) by the Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights (TFIP). The works spoke a lot about the continuation of Lumad education amidst the worsening attacks from state forces and Lumad narratives of resistance.

In the photo essay entitled, “Tuloy po kayo: kung may Lumad Bakwit School,” Lumad students and their teachers were able to explain why the Lumad Bakwit School existed in the first place.

*“All we wanted was to drown the sound of planes and bombs and gunfire so we could concentrate on our Science and Math. But the sounds kept getting in the way. We wanted so much to learn and be in school, but we were afraid, afraid of getting shot, afraid of not finding the future that our communities had envisioned when they set up the school, afraid of growing up without having had the means to fight and defend our people, our lands and our rights.*

*Thus, it was decided that we had to move to a great city to bring our case to the people.*

*We wanted to tell all who would care to listen: Please help us. Our schools have been padlocked. We are being shot at, vilified, and threatened. Our teachers and students are being killed—all in the name of Martial Law. Martial Law is a monster eating Lumad children alive! Martial Law must end if the Lumad communities must continue to exist!”*

The essay narrated the experiences of Lumad students in navigating to the city and the changes that occurred as they continued their education—the multiple volunteer teachers (whom they described as more “numerous than all the trees and plants in the mountains”), the poverty, the traffic, and their musings on how institutions break down and how corruption and injustice in the government affect people.

The essay also explained the Lumad Bakwit School pedagogy: subjects taught were framed to be nationalist, pro-people, and scientific. The goal is to liberate and not to remain in the shadows of colonial and neocolonial education. Philippine society is a classroom where people learn the realities of life, and people’s education is their key to change the oppressive and violent system that drove them away from their communities.

Similarly, in her essay “Hindi Totoong Paaralan ng Rebelde ang CTCSM (CTCSM is not a school for the rebels)”, Jie An describes how such liberating pedagogy is practiced in the Lumad schools.

*Ang paaralan ay para sa lahat ng kabataang gustong makapag-aral nang walang binabayaran. Hindi ito nakabatay sa salitang “academic” lamang para makakuha ng outstanding award, kundi, mayroon itong “three legs” na kailangang gampanan. Ang tatlo ay Agriculture, Academics, at Health.*

*(The school was established for students who would like to access free education. Students are not limited to the academic strand to gain an outstanding award. Instead, they have to pursue the “three legs” which are composed of agriculture, academics, and health to excel.)*

Unlike the mobile Lumad Bakwit School, the CTCSM is a boarding school based in Southeastern Mindanao, with physical facilities. Jie An writes in her essay that equal opportunities for girls and boys are given, and each have roles to play in the three areas. Students are also taught to respect one another's cultures and cultural practices, since they belong to different Indigenous People's groups in Mindanao. Most importantly, they are taught to respect one another's rights and to treat each other equally to challenge existing feudal and patriarchal relations.

Writing also allows the Lumad students to navigate their personal experiences and relate them to the larger oppressive system.

Welgen's personal essay is deeply about how poverty hinders him from attending school. He speaks of his father, working very hard on the farm to earn only a meager amount of money to support their family's daily subsistence needs. Because their family didn't have enough money to send them to school, he, as a young boy, also had to work to be able to go to school. Even in school, he had a hard time understanding the lessons because of hunger.

*Inakala kong makakapokus ako sa pag-aaral, ngunit hindi, dahil ang gutom ay umaatake. Hindi mo alam kung ano ang talakayan sa klase.*  
(*I cannot focus on my studies because I am hungry. I cannot understand the discussions in the class.*)

Welgen's essay also notes how important education is to Lumad children and youth, that it is a right that the state should have been providing. He writes that his pangarap (or aspiration), should he complete his college education in CTCSM, is to become a teacher—to go back to his community and contribute to liberation through education; however, this dream was shattered when the Department of Education cancelled the permit of the school. The school was also subjected to further attacks because the government issued trumped-up charges against its administrators.

**MAGKAIS  
UPA AT KARAPA**





Lumad children deliver a speech during International Working Women's Day.  
*Photo by: Kel Malazarte*

During the height of the lockdown, police and the local government units (LGUs) also attacked the school, forcibly taking the students from the premises of the school in the guise of rescue operations.

The lucidly written essays and poems not only aim to raise awareness but also speak about shared action—collective action through movement-building. Most of the works emphasize the students’ need to defend their tribes — their need to assert their right to determination and to defend their ancestral lands. Dwayne’s poem, “ang tribo kong Mansaka” (My tribe, the Mansaka) captures the resounding cry of his tribe affected by the threat of foreign capitalists.

*Ang tribo ko’y nalalanta  
unti-unting kinain ng gunting  
at nalalaos na rin sa paghinga.  
(my tribe is withering / Slowly sheared by scissors / And barely  
breathing)*

—

*Ang pangalan niya ay  
gaspang sa balat ng barya  
tatak negosyo ang kulay  
Na pinagsaluhan  
nilang mukhang pera.  
(His name / Is a rough edge of the coin / Business is its color /  
Shared by the greedy)*

Dwayne’s other poems, “Volunteer” and “Letter” (tackled his reflections as a student in the Lumad school.

Here, he contemplates life inside the school as a volunteer, having to think of his family left in the community but seeing the bigger picture and participating in actions to change the system. In “Letter,” his lines constantly question whom his writing is for.

*Daghan pang letrang isuwat  
Para sa bulahanong panawagan  
Karun, Pangutan-on tika:  
Para asa ang imong pag suwat  
(So many letters to write/ For our calls / Now I ask you: /  
For whom is your writing?)*

Movement-building is also an integral theme in the written works of the Lumad Bakwit School students. In their suite of poems, they narrate their ordeals and how they harness their sense of empowerment from the collective actions that they do as Bakwits, with the help of advocates. Duterte’s counterinsurgency program and its premise of rescuing the Lumad children from “NPA recruiters” are debunked.

Lala’s poem, “A step forward” narrates her experience of being forcibly evacuated and finding refuge in the city:

*From our young age I have known / that I must leave / to  
make you hear / my small voice. Forced to evacuate and part from  
our parents / we pack up our experiences. / As I walked away I  
chose not to look back / because I cannot bear to see my parents  
cry. Finding refuge in Manila, / we spend time for our calls / to  
seize back / the future stolen from us.*





**SCHOOLS!**  
**R SCHOOLS!**  
SCHOOLS NETWORK MINDANAO



*“Philippine society is a classroom where people learn the realities of life, and people’s education is their key to change the oppressive and violent system that drove them away from their communities.”*

Collective work. Writing is also a collaborative process for Lumad students.  
Photo by: China De Vera

*“As for the future of the Indigenous communities, their written narratives offer hope that the wisdom and knowledge gained from the collective struggle to resist attacks will live on.”*

Aragene’s poem, “Movement” explains the importance of collective action in seeking justice:

*We advance/ marching hand-in-hand / fighting wherever / to seek justice.*

Reading such poignant pieces from the Lumad youth proves that writing as an art form is their way of remembering their communities, the families that they have to temporarily leave behind so they may seek justice. As for the future of the Indigenous communities, their written narratives offer hope that the wisdom and knowledge gained from the collective struggle to resist attacks will live on. It will be passed on to the future generation of brave and resolute Lumad youth. As one of the Lumad youth writes,

*Hope is clear: / In the waters of this creek are the waves of war against our oppression.*

These works help hold on to Indigenous wisdom amid all the desperate attempts to revise the history and identities of the Lumad.

*[Note: Works by the Lumad students can be read in the PAGSALIN Anthology of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices published by the Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights, 2020.]*



# On Stitching Land and Peasant Women: An Interview with Yllang Montenegro

Camille Aguilar Rosas



Yllang Montenegro, "Elemento ng Kapangyarihan ni Adora, ang magiting na tagapag-tanggol ng kaburikan"  
 ["Element of Adora's Power, brave defender of the fields"]. Woodblock print, rubber stamp,  
 appliqué and embroidery on 30.55 x 22.4 cm canvas cloth.

The day before Mother's Day, the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women launched the #DefendPeasantWomen campaign, responding to intensifying state-inflicted violence against peasant women in the Philippines. The campaign highlights rampant human rights violations suffered by peasant women community organizers as a result of the Duterte regime's fascist crackdown on its critics. The campaign, which included social media rallies, the filing of a petition at the Commission on Human Rights, and an online forum, sought to hold the state accountable.

Among the artist advocates forwarding the campaign is Yllang Montenegro, a migrant worker, feminist, and artist from the Philippines. She is the founder of Empowerment Through Art, a collective that raises funds for grassroots organizations and aspiring artists while promoting awareness of national issues. She is also a volunteer artist for Rural Women Advocates of the Philippines and depicts the struggles and calls of Filipino women farmers, fisherfolk, and agricultural workers across various mediums.

Artists like Yllang have played a crucial role in pushing forward the campaigns of progressive Filipino organizations within virtual visual culture. Horrifying stories of violence against peasant women are widely left unheard, neglected by mainstream media outlets. By crafting images of peasant resistance and sharing them on social media platforms, these artists help bring issues such as landlessness, lack of crisis aid, agronomic underdevelopment, and the slaughter of activists from the rural periphery to the digital public's field of vision.

This interview features Yllang's works on cloth, one of the prominent mediums in which her work reflects consciousness for the rural feminine. Letter-patched cloth banners calling for land justice and an end to fascist violence are also among the trademarks of the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women and its volunteer arm, Rural Women Advocates, at protests. As Yllang notes early into the interview, needlework remains largely gender charged in Philippine culture.

In these works that defiantly embrace their gendered association, the multilayered struggles of peasant women are untangled and cohered into images of resistance through cloth, needle, and thread.

**Camille Rosas:** Why do you sew and make art during this pandemic?

**Yllang Montenegro:** Ever since before, I've had a feeling of wanting to make things or images that can be thought about and felt. I was interested in things that I haven't yet done or experienced, such as sewing.

I remember that in high school, we had a subject called T.H.E or Technology and Home Economics. We were made to sew but I wasn't really interested in it, as I was more interested in playing the guitar and drawing. It was because back then I felt as though sewing were too much of a thing meant for girls. Back then, I was also being forced to learn how to play the piano because my aunt, who was taking care of me, was good at it.

Since the only stitch I knew how to do was the running stitch, I only started sewing last year. I was inspired by the workshops of the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, Rural Women Advocates, and Gantala Press. I was in Japan back then and always used to see their posts on their social media. I was amazed at their work.

I often read about and studied a number of sewing techniques. I also always asked my friends how they were able to form their works with cloth, thread, and needles. I greatly admired the beauty of my comrades' output, which is why I tried sewing last year. The interpretation of sewing is truly different when it comes with stories of experiences.

I have sewn and made art during the pandemic because firstly, I was interested to learn. I feel as though I'm always hungry for knowledge, and want to learn many different things, especially with regards to creating. Second, I constantly feel inspired by my comrades.



Yllang Montenegro, "Dyosa ng Karagatan, iadya nyo kami sa lahat ng masama" [ "Goddess of the Ocean, protect us from all evil"]. Wood block, rubber stamp, embroidery, and applique collage on 29.5×23 cm canvas cloth.

It's true that you can move alone but it will be more powerful if you move with a collective. This is really where I end up, even if sometimes my themes in making art change because of the plates I have to submit for school, I still end up making art that comes from stories. Third, this is my way of carrying on with my everyday life. I guess I could say it is my process of healing, to relieve myself from the worries and disarrayed thoughts especially during a time of turmoil; to relieve negative thoughts about what I'm facing in life. The fourth reason is so that I can express my own views, which is very important especially for me who can't speak that much. I express my thoughts and feelings better through making images.

**CR: How do you relate the campaigns/issues of peasant women in your works?**

**YM:** I personally relate to the issues of peasant women because first of all, I am a human and a woman. The issues of peasant women are my issues as well. As an individual, I feel as though the making of art is a responsibility. For me, the making of art that expresses the issues of peasants is the only thing I can do for myself and for my comrades. This is why for as long as I can, I will create every day. I feel as if my day is wasted when I've done nothing.

Perhaps I can compare this to being a mother, or myself as a mother, where my responsibility to my family is similar to the issue of peasant women.

**CR: How do you see the creation of art as a form of resistance?**

**YM:** Making art corresponds to an emotion, whether this comes from anger, frustration, or joy and love.

In my opinion, even if a concept is still being formed in the mind of an artist, it already has a feeling of resisting oppression. This goes for any image, because as long as the artist has a strong foundation of resisting oppressors, this will emerge in the images that they make. This cannot be denied, as this has happened to me personally.

Sometimes it is hard to explain an image, as it is something more felt [than articulated].

**CR: Can you tell us your process in making Defend Peasant Women artworks?**

**YM:** This is not only for the process of making Defend Peasant Women artwork, but when I make art about peasant women— this may sound weird—I feel as though there’s a spirit merging with me. I lose myself when I am in the process of creation. Often my compositions are messy and lose the essence of design. I also have a hard time balancing my compositions because there are so many images that emerge from my mind. It may be that these come with the chaos happening now in our country and all over the world.

The Defend Peasant Women artwork that I made is not the only one; there are many of these and each uses a different art-making technique. After this work I also made another from a print that I made last year, from another old painting of mine called *Adora*.

I feel as though creating an image is similar to the unending calls of my comrades in the streets or on social media. The art-making process goes together with [the work of] my comrades who are writers reporting and integrating with the community, listening to the troubles of everyday citizens. These works may be simple when you look at them, because there are only two or three stitches involved; the running stitch, back stitch, and machine stitch are all that made up this printed image but I feel as though the needle and thread give life to an image to strengthen the call of “defend peasant women.”

**CR: Can you share the different artworks that you’ve done since ECQ was declared?**

**YM:** Since 2020, I think I’ve done a lot of artworks, from sketches to prints, wood and rubber carvings, figurines, and sewn works.



*“I constantly feel inspired by my comrades. It’s true that you can move alone but it will be more powerful if you move with a collective. This is really where I end up... I still end up making art that comes from stories.”*

Yllang Montenegro, “Sanggalan ng anak at espiritu ng kabundukan”  
[“In the name of the child and spirit of the mountains”].  
Relief print on 14.8 x 10 cm paper.



Yllang Montenegro, "Defend Peasant Women." Free hand sketch, embroidery and appliqué on 49 x 29.5 canvas cloth.

The background of the cover is a textured, olive-green fabric. In the corners, there are decorative floral patterns. These patterns consist of white, five-petaled flowers with green centers, arranged in clusters. The flowers are surrounded by green, serrated, scalloped borders that form a frame around the central text area.

# Urban and Rural Women at the Forefront of Reclaiming Their Land

Geela García



A peasant woman from Lupang Ramos separates mongo seeds from their pods. The call “Prices of goods down, wages up,” is painted on her woven basket.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*

The urban poor women's gardens at Pandi and San Roque and the three-decade land struggle of the farmers at Lupang Ramos transcend "arts and crafts." Their organized resistance, in the form of gardening, belongs to a long-running struggle that defies imperialist plunder, subverts capitalist-centered agriculture, and reclaims what has always been under the women's control: their land and their fundamental roles in the food system.

### The Philippines as a Neocolony

The colonial past of the Philippines has shaped the current agrarian situation in the country. Lupang Ramos, a 372-hectare land located in Dasmarinas Cavite, traces its history of land dispute from American colonial rule.

Today, because of bogus agrarian reforms, farmers of Lupang Ramos continue to face threats of displacement from the lands they till, particularly from the notorious joint ventures of landgrabber Ayala Land. Their struggle is one of the countless similar stories that landless peasants experience because the country remains a neocolony.

When the Green Revolution was introduced to the global South, it forced Filipino farmers to submit to neoliberal policies forged by Western countries. With farmers exploited by these policies, the state of Philippine agriculture became dependent on imperialist nations and Filipino farmers lost their autonomy and economic independence.

Most agricultural lands also belong to the hands of landlords and state bureaucrats who exercise corporate control of the land. Large corporations that own giant plantations are focused on maximizing profits—dictating that farmers plant cash crops such as bananas, pineapples, and sugarcane while depriving them of proper wages and land rights.

On top of farmers losing land autonomy, plantations use “miracle seeds” that are patented by multinational corporations and that heavily depend on chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which poison not only agricultural workers who work in inhumane conditions but also the land they till and the people who consume their produce.

Based on data from Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura’s *“Imperialist plunder of Philippine agriculture: A research on the expansion of plantations through agribusiness venture arrangements in Mindanao,”* the country ranked as the sixth banana exporter in 2017, while it ranked third for pineapples, even placing as the top exporter of the fruit in the US. However, the regional minimum wage for agricultural workers in Mindanao, where most of these plantations are located, is below \$8 per day, while the average Filipino needs \$20 daily to survive.

With land under corporate control and the state serving its foreign masters instead of the people, seven out of ten farmers remain landless, while one out of five Filipinos suffers food insecurity. This dispossession then forces impoverished peasants to take their chances in the country’s capital. Displaced from their provinces, they come to the Metro to look for low-paying jobs, but because of systemic problems rooted in imperialist policies, only suffer the fate of becoming the urban poor.

In Cavite, rural women experience threats of land-grabbing from the Ayala Corporation, one of the country’s oldest and largest family conglomerates. In Quezon City, urban poor women face demolitions from the business ventures of the same landed family. With structural problems erasing spaces for marginalized rural and urban women, these women are left without a choice but to organize and fight back.

## The Women Reclaiming Land

Carmina, Wena, and Inday are *nanay*, or mothers who came from Samar, Cavite, and Cotabato. They all came from peasant and fisherfolk families who moved to Manila to work as market vendors, caregivers, and maids, composing the country's informal economy.

After a long day of work, they take shelter in urban poor communities located in Pandi, Bulacan, and San Roque Quezon City. They cannot afford to rent homes located in gated subdivisions or invest in real estate because their measly incomes are only enough to support their daily expenses.

When Rodrigo Duterte placed the country under his militaristic lockdown in 2020, this meant another layer of instability to add to the precarity the poor encounter as informal workers who are considered fortunate to earn \$10 per day. Nanay Carmina's small paper bag business stopped for months; Nanay Wena was laid off from her job; Nanay Inday still sold *suman* (rice cakes) but reported that her community was going hungry.

The government's inutile "stay at home" protocol is impossible for daily wage earners to follow. The poor, whose bodies crowd in cramped spaces in the city, go out and work as service crew personnel, construction workers, and sidewalk vendors. Oppressive societal structures do not permit them to work from home nor allow them to practice physical distancing.

Establishments where these laborers work were tremendously affected by the ongoing lockdown and the government's criminal negligence in not responding to the pandemic with public health solutions, exacerbated the food insecurity in the country. With their husbands and themselves deprived of livelihood to support their basic needs, women went back to the work they left in the provinces: farming to put food on the table.



Nanay Wena and Nanay Inday cultivate their garden at San Roque.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*

By cultivating small plots of food security gardens in their immediate communities, urban poor women are empowered to choose the seeds they sow on their land. Instead of planting cash crops dictated by plantation owners, marginalized women grow plants like cabbage, mustard, and pepper, which they can use as ingredients in their everyday meals.

Aside from exercising land control, urban poor gardens share the principles of permaculture. In monoculture systems practiced in large plantations, corporations enslave agricultural workers to cultivate large plots of land. In their gardens, urban poor women practice permaculture, involving the whole community in gardening and promoting a communal culture. Women take the lead in organizing systems to maintain the gardens, ensuring that the soil is cultivated daily and the crops are well-watered.

However, just like with any other form of resistance, the women are met with intimidation from private guards and state forces. Before finding spaces for a vegetable farms in San Roque, Nanay Inday reported intimidation from security guards. She had to seek approval from the National Housing Authority (NHA), the same entity that deprives the women of their right to homes. Private guards also questioned the women for bringing in soil.

In Pandi, militant women led the historic occupation of the houses back in 2017. Four years later, the local government has continued to deprive them of social services. Their houses still do not have access to running water and electricity. During the summer of 2021, some of the plots in Pandi dried out; Nanay Carmina has said that it is because the women experience difficulties in accessing water for their crops.



Women of Kamote Chapter, a chapter in San Roque, receive a workshop for organic fertilizers from Nanay Wena.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*



Urban poor women of Pandi harvest sweet potato leaves for lunch.  
Photo by: Geela Garcia



*“Don’t you need imagination for art to improve? It’s the same way for our gardening—we think of ways on how to involve the community for it to grow,”*

Still, because of collective action and strong community organizing, the women of San Roque were able to turn demolished houses into vegetable gardens in a month, and the gardens at Pandi remain intact, turning a year this August 2021. San Roque’s initial harvest yielded large Chinese cabbages that even caught the attention of market vendors because of their larger sizes compared to cabbages found in commercial markets.

On harvest days in Pandi, vegetables are served from the women’s backyards to their tables, and the women cook their meal together sharing the condiments, pots, and ladles they have at home. They eat their sumptuous lunch together while sharing stories about their days.

Both gardens subscribe to the principles of agroecology, an organic method of farming which *“centers on food production that makes the best use of nature’s goods and services while not damaging these resource”* (Agroecologyfund).

In Pandi, women attended a bokashi composting workshop organized by Green Space, while in San Roque, women were taught by anti-feudal artists alliance SAKA to concoct fermented fruit juice, fermented plant juice, and oriental herb nutrient.

Nanay Wena now teaches women from other chapters to make fertilizers for their garden. Since ingredients for organic fertilizers are accessible at home, women from different chapters can easily make their own and then contribute them to the centralized garden.

Aside from gardens, residents of San Roque also re-established their community kitchens which they first organized last year. They look forward to using the vegetables from their garden as ingredients in their community kitchen.

### Political Movement beyond “Arts and Crafts”

*“Isn’t art drawing and illustrating? How do I relate it to gardening?”* were the questions Nanay Carmina asked when I asked how she sees art in their gardening.

Compared to dominant forms of art, such as paintings locked in galleries owned by the same land-grabbing elite and consumed by the few with purchasing power, Nanay Carmina sees their practice as largely communal, since successful gardening involves the whole community in the process.

*“Art for me is anything that comforts me and makes me happy, and in our gardening, it occurs when more people are engaged. Because the more people committed to our gardens, the better they will grow, making more people happy,”* Nanay Carmina explained.

Initially, Nanay Carmina was hesitant to link the gardens to art, especially since they were primarily borne out of hunger, rather than as artistic expression. In fact, for Nanay Wena, the gardens signify the government’s lack of pandemic response, which worsened the situation.

Nanay Wena, however, likens the time and preparation that gardening requires to the preparation time that is needed for dominant forms of art, such as illustration and songwriting. Nanay Carmina, on the other hand, eventually realized that their practice can also be considered as art since, like any other art form, it involves imagination.

*“Don’t you need imagination for art to improve? It’s the same way for our gardening—we think of ways on how to involve the community for it to grow,”* asked Nanay Carmina.



Nanay Carmina and other women of Pandi share a nutritious lunch cooked by members of the community. That day their viand was sauteed vegetables in fish sauce.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*

*“Everyone can make art because everyone can think. However, I think imaginations also differ per class. The rich perhaps imagine how they could go abroad, become richer. But the poor’s imaginations are simple, as for me, I only want a house and to survive daily. If art involves imagination, our gardens are art because through them we imagine and contribute to building better communities,”* added Nanay Carmina.

The theme of this collection is “Arts and Crafts in Women’s and Feminist Struggles under Duterte and COVID-19,” and while art comes in multiple forms and gardens can be considered art, the women gardeners of Pandi and San Roque envision their gardens as operating beyond “artistic” resistance.

Perhaps it makes sense to describe the gardens as creative forms of resistance, especially when the common demonstrations we see in the cities come through protests and effigies with the masses using chants and placards to communicate their calls.

And while there is nothing wrong with thinking of gardening as a form of arts and crafts, this view should also be coupled with the recognition that gardening is an everyday mundane activity for landless peasants and urban gardeners, and that this form of resistance, beyond the label of art, belong to larger political movements borne out of necessity for genuine liberation.

While women noticeably subvert patriarchal structures by taking the lead in these movements, it’s also crucial to recognize that the everyday unpaid care work of urban and rural women inside their homes when they nurture their families and in their gardens when they tend their crops is oftentimes under-recognized essential work that allows systems to function. Prior to capitalist brainwashing and privatization, women were already the foundation of society.

## Bungkalan and the Longtime Struggle of Peasant Women

More than arts and crafts, the gardens at Pandi and San Roque can be considered as the urban counterpart of the bungkalan found in haciendas and at Lupang Ramos. Bungkalan is a movement of landless peasants and hacienda workers asserting their land ownership by establishing alternative farming systems that negate exploitative, semi-feudal conditions.

Rural women at Lupang Ramos took the lead at establishing bungkalan in their community in 2017. They cultivated 51-hectares of land where they harvested sweet potato, corn, and cabbage for their own consumption. Food security gardens were primarily created in the Metro to address food insecurity, but for peasants in the countryside, this political movement is also part of their struggle for free land distribution and genuine agrarian reform.

In Lupang Ramos, Nanay Miriam recalls the many women leaders before her who stood their ground against violence instigated by state forces. She looks up to Nanay Masang, a peasant leader before her who fought a tractor by tying a good morning towel to its driver, threatening the man with death if he runs over their crops—because she will tighten her grip. Nanay Miriam remembers Nanay Masang as one of the most daring and fearless women leaders she encountered and holds onto her memories of her even today.

With their three-decade strong resistance, Nanay Miriam says they are on the path of winning the national democratic struggle towards genuine liberation and emancipation. And through gardens and political movements motivated to feed the community, urban poor and rural women join together in creating an alternative economy that rejects the system that imperialism, monopoly capitalism, and feudalism thrives in, and struggles for land and food sovereignty as they reestablish food systems under the hands of food producers.



Women of Pandi are exposed to literature from female writers and attend writing workshops with Filipina feminist publisher Gantala Press; they then articulate their thoughts about gardening.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*

{Further reading Bungkalan: Ang karanasan ng mga manggagawang bukid ng Hacienda Luisita sa organikong pagsasaka at pakikibaka para sa tunay na reporma sa lupa: Manwal sa organikong pagsasaka. Diliman, Lungsod Quezon: Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, Unibersidad ng Pilipinas, 2017.

Imperialist Plunder of Philippine Agriculture: A Research on the Expansion of Plantations through Agribusiness Venture Arrangements in Mindanao. Quezon City, Philippines: Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (UMA), 2019.

Lupang Ramos: Isang kasaysayan. Makati, Philippines: Gantala Press, at Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, 2019.}



*“If art involves imagination, our gardens are art because through them we imagine and contribute to building better communities.”*

One of the vegetable gardens at Pandi.

*Photo by: Geela Garcia*

The background is a light green textured fabric. It features several embroidered floral motifs in white thread with green centers and green outlines. The motifs are scattered across the page, including a large one in the top left, a smaller one in the top right, and several others in the bottom left and bottom right.

# Sewing Dissent: Making Cloth Books During COVID-19

Faye Cura



Before community lockdowns were enforced in the Philippines in March 2020, Gantala Press, a feminist small press and literary collective, had plans to participate in an exhibition at the Cultural Center of the Philippines Library that was to publicly launch the Valerio Nofuente Collection. Valerio Nofuente was a professor of Filipino and Philippine Literature at the University of the Philippines who “*met with a violent death under mysterious circumstances in 1981 ... [and] has been honoured by the Concerned Artists of the Philippines as a martyr for the cause of the nationalist struggle.*” The exhibition was to celebrate the removal of the collection from the archive of books banned by the Marcos dictatorship.

In response to the collection, Gantala Press decided to make a cloth book about the Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan or MAKIBAKA, a National Democratic women’s organization formed in the 1970s. The book was to be based on materials in the collection that the press found to be of interest, such as MAKIBAKA’s newsletter, *Malayang Pilipina*, as well as a chapbook by Clarita Roja. Of course, “*Makibaka*” (“*Join the Struggle!*”) has also been a battle cry of Filipino activists since the 1970s.

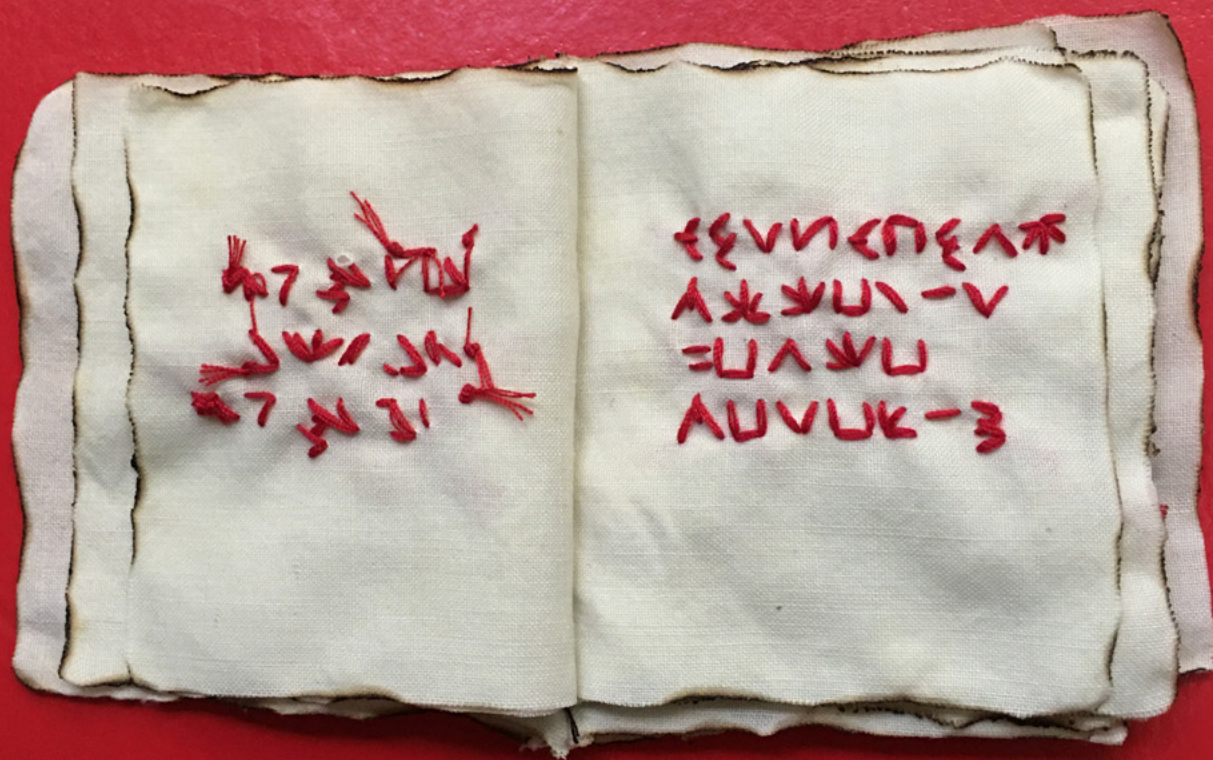
The plan was for the members of the collective to individually embroider texts or images from these documents onto cloth pages, which we would then bind into a book. We thought that the book could be passed down to other/younger women, who could then mend and/or add new pages or new elements. The research aspect of the project—finding texts and images to render in embroidery—would reflect the often difficult task of sifting through archives, through history, in search of women’s stories. Meanwhile, the stitchwork would imitate the multiple layers of work that women have to do: keeping things in order, mending broken things, committing things to memory, all often unpaid labor.

The cancellation of the exhibition due to the pandemic temporarily shelved *Makibaka*, which was to have been the collective’s first cloth book.

Eventually, I took it on as a personal project, especially after the curator of the Nofuente exhibition, Alice Sarmiento, proposed that the cloth book be included in an online exhibition. The exhibition was to become *Where We Are: When the Storm Comes?*, a collaboration with the Saigon-based indie press, Bar de Force. “*Where We Are is an attempt at documenting everyday life and feminist responses to being locked down or surveilled, as part of our respective country’s solutions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. ... Gathered here are projects that question and critique the rhetoric of resiliency and the strategies of discipline, silencing, and censorship that pervade the so-called New Normal for both the Philippines and Vietnam.*”

By that time in June 2020, in the middle of the longest lockdown in the world, I was deep in thought about bookmaking—its continued relevance, its being “non-essential” in a world that urgently needed food and a vaccine, as well as its materiality. At a time when people, including me, were starting to explore new ways of coping with collective distress and anxiety, on top of my personal obligation to persist in my work as an activist, I thought: why not merge two activities I love and enjoy and sew books?

So I began treating cloth like paper and thread like ink. In June, the Congress and Senate railroaded the *Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020* as part of the government’s crackdown against so-called communists. The bill had a loose definition of “terrorism” and imposed impossibly heavy penalties on basically anyone who expressed dissent against the government. This was the context of my cloth zine “*Red Bandanna*,” in which I embroidered the names of the people’s organizations that were “red-tagged”—identified as dangerous communists, i.e., terrorists—by the *National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC)* onto a red bandanna that I had worn (it was given away by one of the organizations) in a pandemic protest rally I had managed to join as a volunteer of *Rural Women Advocates (RUWA)*. I used an invented code to spell out the organizations’ names and based the code on simple embroidery forms.



Faye Cura, Spread from “#” cloth zine.

*“The idea was that the invented code could be used to set “secret” meetings, send “secret” messages, like the revolutionary organization Katipunan did in the late 1800s in the struggle against Spanish colonialism. The code was based on common embroidery strokes, a slight nod to Nushu, a syllabic script derived from Chinese characters that was used exclusively by women.”*

I again used the invented code to embroider onto a cloth booklet hashtags that “trended” during the pandemic: *Free Mass Testing Now*; *Ayuda, Ibigay Na* (*Subsidy, Now!*); *Aktibista, Hindi Terrorista* (*Activists Not Terrorists*); *Solusyong Medikal, Hindi Militar* (*Medical, Not Military, Solutions*); *Junk Terror Law*; and the word *Free* attached to several groups of wrongfully arrested activists: *Leyte 5, Calaca 6, Marikina 10* (*the numbers indicate how many activists were arrested while the names refer to where they were arrested*); *Piston 6*, the jeepney drivers who were jailed after picketing for food and the permission to drive their jeepneys and earn their livelihood; and *Pride 20*, the members of the militant LGBT organization Bahaghari who organized a Pride March in protest of the Anti-Terror Bill. My square cloth booklet was “published” on July 7, also the 128th anniversary of the founding of the *Kataas-taasang, Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan*, or *Katipunan*, the Philippine anti-colonial, revolutionary organization. The booklet poses the question: *“How would art collectives like Gantala Press, which heavily use social media in their activism, subvert this kind of surveillance and repression [imposed by the Anti-Terror Bill]?”*

The idea was that the invented code could be used to set “secret” meetings, send “secret” messages, like the revolutionary organization Katipunan did in the late 1800s in the struggle against Spanish colonialism. The code was based on common embroidery strokes, a slight nod to Nushu, a syllabic script derived from Chinese characters that was used exclusively by women.

The latest cloth book I made, *Du30 Dancing*, is a collection of protest calls embroidered in *Slaney* (the cipher in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventures of the Dancing Men”). The calls include “Stop the Attacks,” “Defund NTF-ELCAC,” and “Oust Duterte.” I have also been making needle books and rag dolls. We have featured the rag dolls in some of Gantala Press’s social media posts, such as those calling for the junking of the Terror Law and those in support of Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women’s #DefendPeasantWomen campaign.

*Makibaka* and “Hashtag” were exhibited along with other zines in *Proto/Para: Rethinking Curatorial Work* at the Vargas Museum in April 2021, but for the most part my sewing projects are only shared on Instagram. That is the downside of cloth books as publication projects: they are not reproducible and accessible to many, unless they are scanned and printed on paper. Cloth books and sewn projects are best shared as gifts: I made a needle book for a comrade, donated another to RUWA’s fundraising drive for peasant communities, and exchanged one of my dolls for a bottle of homemade wine.

But what cannot be questioned is the strength that sewing has given me and the way that it has motivated me to continue both making art and staying politically engaged in these difficult times. This strength is perhaps what sustains me in doing my work at Gantala Press—coordinating with writers, editors, artists, printers, buyers; editing manuscripts; managing our social media, among other things.

I would like to think that those single copies of cloth books multiplied into thousands of copies of books like *Kumusta Kayo*, a collection of writings by peasant women in the pandemic; *My Mother is More Than a Comfort Woman*, a storybook in three languages that we released during Women's Month 2021; and *SaLoobin*, an anthology of writings by and about women political prisoners. There is also always the hope that the cloth books shall be displayed in a physical exhibition when everything has settled—as documents, if anything, of how the Duterte government failed the Filipino people during this crisis, and of how we refused, refuse, to forget this.

*“What cannot be questioned is the strength that sewing has given me and the way that it has motivated me to continue both making art and staying politically engaged in these difficult times.”*

Spread from “Makibaka” cloth book.  
Photo by: Alice Sarmiento

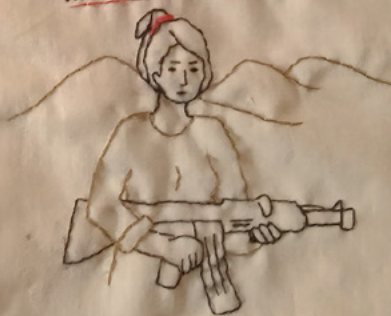
The programme of the Malayang Kilusang Bagong Kababaihan (MAKIBAKA) states: To liberate the creative potential of women, it is first of all necessary to liberate the Filipino masses of which they are a part. No sector of the population can be free from exploitation of any sort unless the primary exploitative relation, that between U.S. imperialism and domestic feudalism on the one hand and the broad masses of the Filipino people on the other, is totally destroyed. Moreover, it is in their participation in the national struggle for liberation from feudal and foreign oppression that women can achieve their own

# LIBERATION

## POEM FROM SIERRA MADRE

The rains have come,  
Warriors beloved of the mosses,  
It is time to avenge Cristin Tagamula.  
The forest, swathed now by the dark of the sky,  
Has become more impenetrable.  
To the frantic roar of helicopters:  
If they come we shall in any case  
Shoot panic into their dragonfly wings.  
Let the enemy commandos  
Trudge up the Sierra Madre  
With their six-pound packs.  
The mud that will gather on their boots  
Shall add to the weight on their backs.  
We for our part  
Shall slide nimbly down  
The mountain trails.  
Lightly up the mosses,  
We serve the masses,  
The masses are with us.  
Today, as our comrades below  
Help plant the seasons' new seedlings,  
We shall run the enemy down: for now  
The flashfloods of our anger  
Will bloodily take them.

-Clarita Rejo



## Contributors



### Alyana Cabral

Alyana Cabral is a musician, writer, and activist from Manila. She performs as a singer and multi-instrumentalist for several musical projects, such as the anti-feudal folk band Barangay Pesante Combo and experimental pop alias Teenage Granny.



### Camille Rosas

Camille Aguilar Rosas is an emerging writer from the Philippines. She finished her undergraduate degree in English Literature at the University of the Philippines Diliman.



### Faye Cura

Faye Cura is a writer, editor, and convener of Gantala Press, a feminist small press/literary collective based in Metro Manila, the Philippines. She is the author of four books of poetry.



### Geela Garcia

Geela Garcia (b. 1998) is a freelance visual journalist, writer, and peasant advocate based in Manila, Philippines. Her photography, which focuses on women, food security, the environment, and culture, aims to document and write history from the experience of its makers.



## Neferti Tadiar

Neferti Tadiar is a feminist scholar of cultural practice, social imagination, and global political economy. She teaches at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her most recent book is *Remaindered Life* (Duke, 2022). She is founding Director of the Alfredo F. Tadiar Library.



## Rae Rival

Rae Rival is a writer and a college instructor. Her works have appeared in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, books published by Gantala Press, Adarna Publishing House, and different anthologies from the Philippines.



## Roda Tajon

Roda Tajon teaches at the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, UP Open University.



## Roma Estrada

Roma Estrada teaches languages, civic consciousness, and the humanities in the Philippines. Outside the school gates, she curates, delivers, and / or facilitates discussions and workshops on critical and creative writing, independent publishing, citizen journalism, human rights, and collective memory.

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