

THE
ANGRY
CHRIST
(PLOT
AND
PLANTATION)

A central illustration of a globe, possibly representing Earth, with a crown of flames or spikes rising from the top. The globe is rendered in a detailed, almost woodcut style, with various patterns and textures. The flames or spikes are depicted as sharp, pointed shapes radiating upwards. The entire image is set against a black background with white text and splatters.



WARNING: This zine contains graphic descriptions of violence.

"THE PEOPLE ARE THE MESSIAH" (Graphic courtesy of SAKA)

THE ANGRY CHRIST (PLOT AND PLANTATION)

The Angry Christ (1950) is an unusual church mural located on the agricultural island of Negros in the Philippines. Situated within the compound of an industrial sugar mill, the mural's flamboyant avant-garde sensibility cuts like a knife through the rural environment. For several years now, we have been unpacking the visceral sense of fissure, of puncturing, that this artwork produces, because it seems to us to embody a kind of queer logic that is not only disruptive but also generative, laced with a certain potential. This initial seed of recognition has since sprouted multiple interwoven tendrils of inquiry, which have together guided our ongoing study of *The Angry Christ*.

The mural's creator, Alfonso Ossorio, was a Filipino-American painter who, despite being a visionary artist who was intimately connected to canonical figures like Jackson Pollock and Jean Dubuffet, remains relatively obscure today. We can speculate that certain particularities of Ossorio's person and practice prevented him from being written into the dominant narratives of Western avant-garde art of the time: his commitment to religiosity, his hybrid ethnicity, the fact that he was indeed queer ("h.s. or b.s.," as he wrote in one of his notebooks). But it would be wrong to entirely ascribe his lack of recognition to a lack of social privilege, because Ossorio also belonged to the ruling class. It was his family's money that enabled him to leave the Philippines as a young child, acquire US citizenship and a Harvard degree, and gain a solid footing in the cosmopolitan art scenes of New York and Paris (as both an artist and a collector).

The source of all of this wealth was sugar: Ossorio's family owned and operated one of the largest sugar milling companies in the Philippines, and it was for the worker's chapel of this company that he was commissioned to paint his *Angry Christ* mural. Sugar—grown and processed in a country that had only just been granted nominal "independence" from US colonial rule after the end of the Second World War—could therefore be thought of as a kind of substratum to Ossorio's life and work, the material base of his artistic practice. With this in mind, we knew that we wanted to look at Ossorio's mural in relation to the sugar ecology in which it was embedded and to think of it as an active agent within this ecology. We wanted to ground our study of the mural in the sugarcane plantation.

To delve into the plantation society of Negros—an island known as the "sugar bowl of the Philippines," producing over half of the country's sugar output—is to confront a reality defined by naked violence. This is not particular to the plantations of Negros: rooted in colonization and slavery, the plantation as an institution has always and everywhere depended on various forms of coercion and terror, inflicted on all manner of biological life, as well as on the land itself. Some have further argued that the colonial plantation laid the foundations for the whole world order we have inherited, which means that we can trace its legacy not only in the plantations that still exist today in the Philippines and elsewhere, but also in our urban slums and our gated communities, in our war zones and our stock markets, in our prisons and our art museums. This is to say that, in many ways, we have never left the plantation.

With regards to Negros, the violence of the plantation is impossible to avoid. This became glaringly clear to us a year into our research, on October 20, 2018, when nine farmer-activists were brutally massacred by a team of gunmen on a plantation in Sagay, a city that we had visited. The farmers had been setting up a protest occupation site on the plantation property, and they were eating dinner and resting inside their makeshift tent when the ambush occurred. Sadly, these nine victims are only a few out of the many hundreds of Filipinos who have died in the struggle against the plantation and its legacy.

We recount this tragic incident in order to sketch a rough picture of the urgent situation in Negros and other plantation zones of the Philippines, a situation that has only worsened under the current Duterte regime and its bloody policies. We join many others in the call to **STOP KILLING FARMERS**. At the same time, we do not want to propagate an abject image of Negros as an "inhuman or uninhabitable [geography]," a land of "the already dead and dying," in the words of Katherine McKittrick. In retelling the story of the killings in Sagay, we want to draw attention not only to the hard reality of a violent system, but also to identify a *logic of survival* that has somehow managed to take root in these dead soils.

At the time of their deaths, the victims of the Sagay Massacre were engaged in a protest practice known in the Philippines as *bungkalan*. This is when groups of landless farmers occupy parcels of disputed agricultural land in order to collectively grow their own food crops,

which generally occurs on large-scale properties that were supposed to have been broken up and redistributed under the country's land reform program. In stark contrast to the false promises of this government program, bungkalan offers a glimpse of how *genuine* land reform and food sovereignty could be practiced in reality, simultaneously throwing into relief the perversity of the existing system, in which the majority of those who physically till the soil remain in a state of landlessness and hunger. Being both protest and cultivation, bungkalan is a gesture that harbors both outrage and care.

This militant activity in fact has very humble origins. For as long as plantations have existed in the Philippines, Filipino peasants and agrarian workers have been cultivating small pockets of idle land within plantation properties out of bare necessity to grow food to eat. Bungkalan has its roots in this long-standing practice. What began as a means of surviving the plantation system ripened, through the guidance and support of various leftist political groups, into an organized effort to directly confront this system. In this way, we understand bungkalan as part of an alternative history of the plantation, one that suggests links to other stories, other contexts, and one that punctures through the overwhelming sense of extinction that pervades the plantation to gesture towards an alternative future.

In tracing out this shared history, we have been especially indebted to the Jamaican theorist, Sylvia Wynter, whose writing seeks again and again to unsettle those supposedly human truths that have been produced and enforced through the dominant lens of Western thought. In her essay "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," Wynter outlines what she calls a "secretive history" of the colonial plantation system in the Caribbean, one that is centered on the small plots of land that were given by planters to their African slave transplants so that they could grow their own food. Despite this being a direct product of the plantation system, a cost-efficient way to reproduce labor-power, Wynter emphasizes how the collective cultivation of various subsistence crops inside the plot also nurtured an oppositional mode of life, a culture that was antithetical to the dominant market-oriented system in which it was embedded. "This culture recreated traditional values—use values," Wynter writes. "This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system."

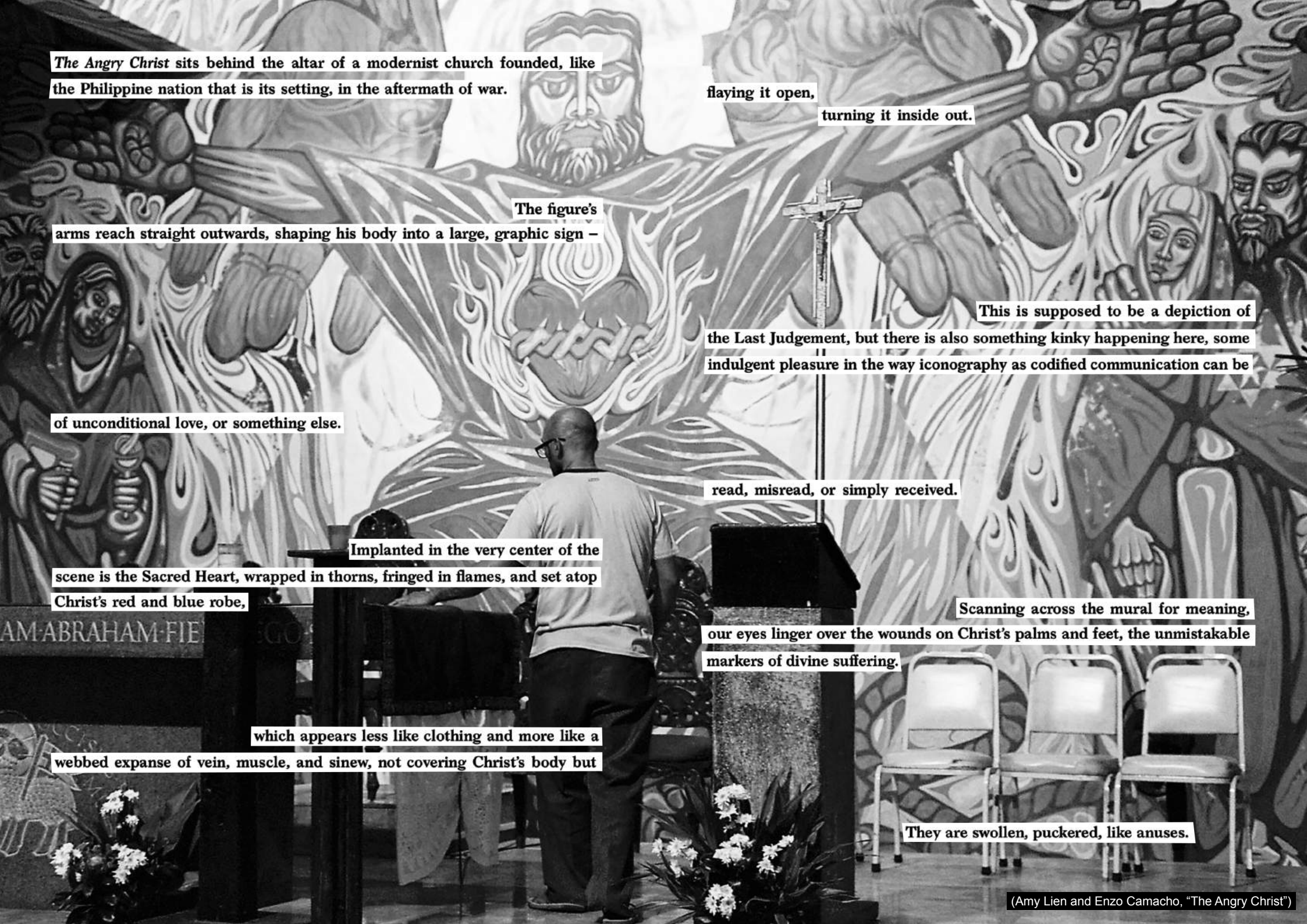


For us, the plot and bungkalan have provided a rich frame through which to think about *The Angry Christ*. In our work on and around this art object, we have been trying to uncover a hidden use value, to see if the mural's queer "anger" might be radically reprogrammed towards other ends. We feel that such a (mis)reading of the mural poses important questions about the potentials of artistic practice more generally, especially as it relates to a wider project of collective liberation. For us as working artists, it has helped to unsettle certain internalized frameworks for making (and making sense of) art within the context of a heavily guarded global art system that is modeled, like so much else, on the blueprint of the plantation. We have come to understand that we have indeed never left. Given this, we seek to learn from those modes of living and persisting that have emerged from the most difficult pockets of space, and to cultivate this learning, over time and with work, into organized modes of confrontation.



Now the plantation is an institution in just as real a sense as the Catholic Church is an institution. It too arises to deal with certain seemingly eternal problems of an ordered society. It is made up of people but, like the church, it is an automatism impersonal and implacable having a character and a set of norms which react back to control the people, including the highest functionaries, who constitute it. The plantation is a way of "reckoning together" a body of people all of whom, planter and laborers alike, "belong" to the estate as though the estate were a third something existing apart from its people. The plantation demands this and the plantation dictates that. As in institutions generally the individual members acquire from the plantation particular beliefs and ways of participating which become part of the very fiber of their lives.

The nature of this contradiction is such that even where particular Christian churches have, at given times and places, adopted certain theological positions as orthodox and policed them as such, the unorthodox position remains hanging in the air, readable between the lines in Scripture, and implied as the logical opposite of what is most insisted upon by the authorities. Hence the heretical is constantly reoccurring and being reinvented in new forms.



The Angry Christ sits behind the altar of a modernist church founded, like the Philippine nation that is its setting, in the aftermath of war.

flaying it open,

turning it inside out.

The figure's

arms reach straight outwards, shaping his body into a large, graphic sign –

of unconditional love, or something else.

This is supposed to be a depiction of the Last Judgement, but there is also something kinky happening here, some indulgent pleasure in the way iconography as codified communication can be

read, misread, or simply received.

Implanted in the very center of the scene is the Sacred Heart, wrapped in thorns, fringed in flames, and set atop Christ's red and blue robe,

Scanning across the mural for meaning, our eyes linger over the wounds on Christ's palms and feet, the unmistakable markers of divine suffering.

which appears less like clothing and more like a webbed expanse of vein, muscle, and sinew, not covering Christ's body but

They are swollen, puckered, like anuses.

(Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, "The Angry Christ")

NEGROS BY THE NUMBERS

66
REPORTED
EXTRAJUDICIAL
KILLINGS



20
KILLED
UNDER OPLAN
SAURON
PULIS



1.56 M
POOR
NEGRENSES



57
JAILED ON
TRUMPED UP
CHARGES



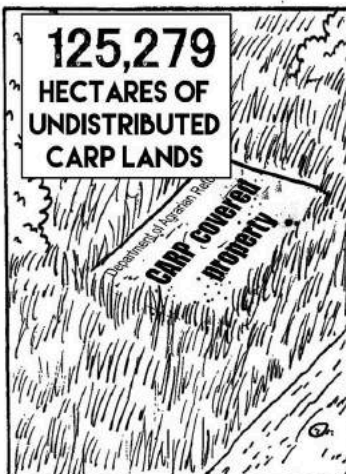
335,00
LANDLESS SUGAR
FARMWORKERS



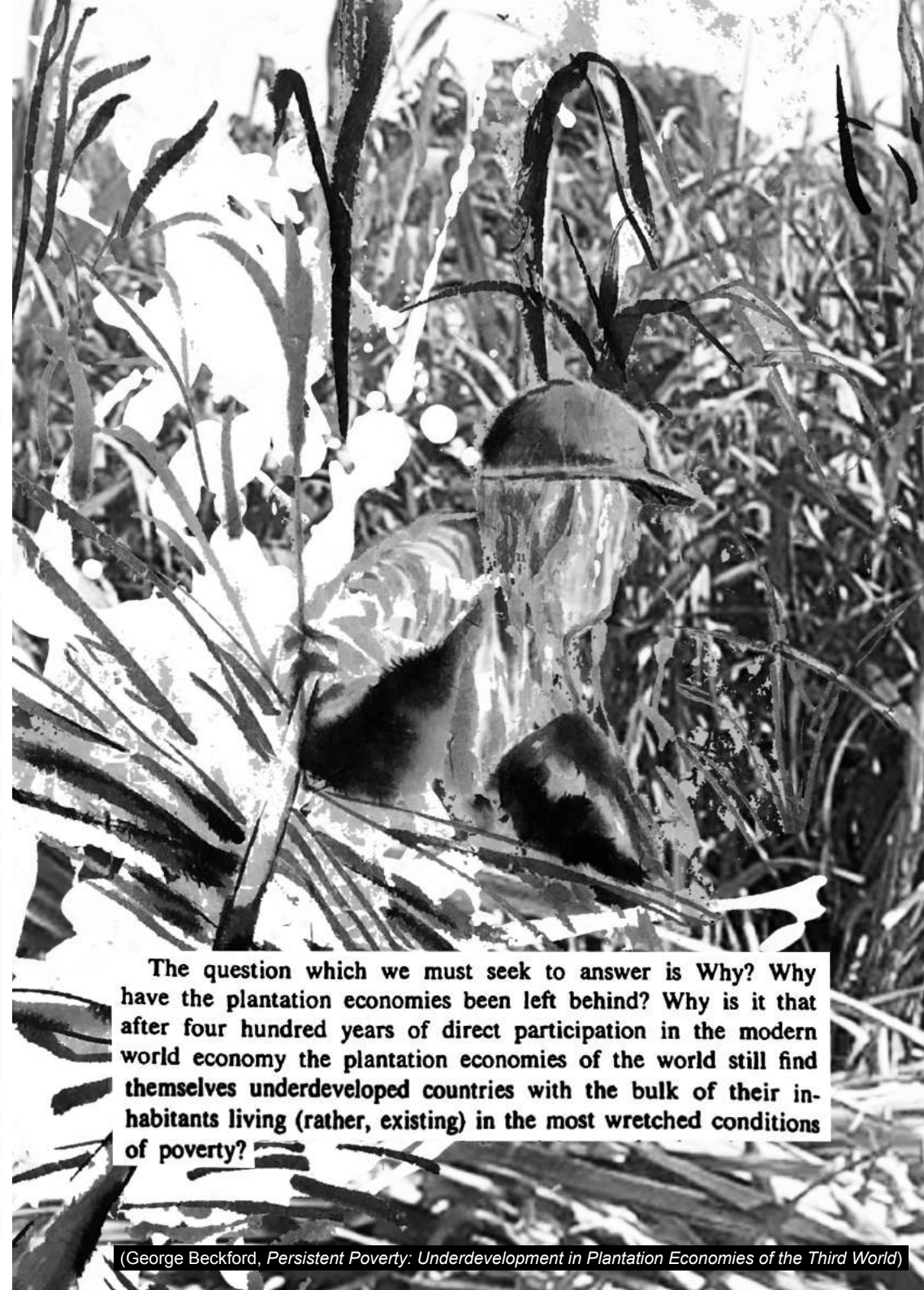
PHP **50 TO 67**
TYPICAL DAILY INCOME OF
A SUGAR FARMWORKER



125,279
HECTARES OF
UNDISTRIBUTED
CARP LANDS




#STOPKILLINGFARMERS
#STOPTHEATTACKS
#DEFENDNEGROS



The question which we must seek to answer is Why? Why have the plantation economies been left behind? Why is it that after four hundred years of direct participation in the modern world economy the plantation economies of the world still find themselves underdeveloped countries with the bulk of their inhabitants living (rather, existing) in the most wretched conditions of poverty?

(George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*)



There are several reasons why the plantation system creates persistent underdevelopment, as we saw in the last chapter. In our view, the most important of these are: (1) the plantation system denies the majority of the people of plantation society a real stake in their country; (2) the system creates a legacy of dependence because the locus of decision making concerning fundamental economic issues resides outside of plantation society, so that a chronic dependency syndrome is characteristic of the whole population; and (3) the majority of people are not sufficiently motivated toward the development effort because of the first two considerations. No meaningful social change can take place without measures to correct these three basic deficiencies.

To put the matter rather bluntly, the plantation system must be destroyed if the people of plantation society are to secure economic, social, political, and psychological advancement.




So, when I think about the question, *what is a plantation*, some combination of these things seems to me to be pretty much always present across a 500-year period: radical simplification; substitution of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms; forced labor; and, crucially, the disordering of times of generation across species, including human beings. I'm avoiding the word reproduction because of its productionist aspect, but I want to emphasize the radical interruption of the possibility of the care of generations and, as Anna taught me, the breaking of the tie to place—that the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation. Thinking from the plantation, all of those things seem to be always present in various combinations.

The plantation was precisely the conjuncture between ecological simplifications, the discipline of plants in particular, and the discipline of humans to work on those. That legacy, which I think is very much with us today, is so naturalized that many people believe that that is the meaning of the term agriculture; we forget that there are other ways to farm. The plantation takes us into that discipline-of-people/discipline-of-plants conjuncture.

That is to say, the plantation-societies of the Caribbean came into being as adjuncts to the market system; their peoples came into being as an adjunct to the product, to the single crop commodity — the sugar cane — which they produced.

What made the early plantation system agro-industrial was the combination of agriculture and processing under one authority: *discipline* was probably its first essential feature.





The destruction of a society and the reduction of its members to a state of slavery is one point at which the planter can begin to reconstitute human material into a social order consistent with his purpose. Every New World plantation society passed through the stage of slavery on its way to system-building, and plantations elsewhere employed other forms of unfree labor. To build the institution and its system the planter undertook first to secure broken, fragmented and degraded laborers in order to put them together again in a new and different combination. Merely to command the labor of the slave was not sufficient; it was much more important to be able to order the kind of relations that a slave might have with all other men (and women) with reference to his utility and the utility of his children as more or less permanent cogs in an industrial machine.

Thus, in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces—the prison, the city, the resort—a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially.



It is a system that depends on forced human labor of some kind because if labor can escape, it will escape the plantation.

(Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, "The Angry Christ")

"Anger" is perhaps shorthand for the vibratory intensity that the mural sets in motion,

activating the distance between Christ's body and our own.

"The conversion of surface distance into intensity," says philosopher Brian Massumi,

"is also the conversion of the materiality of the body into an event."

(Graphic courtesy of SAKA)

PLANT TERROR



REAP REVOLT

HACIENDA, BUWAGIN!



DUTERTE, PATALSIKIN!

The history of modern democracy is, at bottom, a history with two faces, and even two bodies—the solar body, on the one hand, and *the nocturnal body*, on the other. The major emblems of this nocturnal body are the colonial empire and the pro-slavery state—and more precisely the plantation and the penal colony.

URGENT ALERT

30 March 2019

Black Saturday in Negros Oriental: 14 farmers have been killed in one day. 8 were massacred in Canlaon, 4 murdered in Manjuyod, 2 more in Sta. Catalina. The Canlaon 8 were gunned down by 10 uniformed personnel of the police and the military who had barged into the home of a peasant leader past midnight, pretending to have a search warrant. Since March 29, the area has been heavily militarized, with the 94th Infantry Battalion conducting military operations.

#StopKillingFarmers #StopTheAttacks

URGENT ALERT

22 April 2019

Election-related violence ensues as another peasant leader gets killed in Negros. Ka Toto Patigas, Bayan Muna coordinator and secretary general of the Northern Negros Alliance for Human Rights, was shot in the head this afternoon as he was riding his motorcycle home. A survivor of the Escalante Massacre in 1985 under the US-Marcos regime, Ka Toto remained a firm human rights and peasant advocate even as he joined local politics as a city councilor.

#StopKillingFarmers #StopTheAttacks

(Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation")

there is a profound peasant sense of justice which is separate from the abstract concept of the law of the plantation.

Democracy, the plantation, and the colonial empire are objectively all part of the same historical matrix. This originary and structuring fact lies at the heart of every historical understanding of the violence of the contemporary global order.

(Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*)

What if the plantation offered

us something else? What if its practices of racial segregation, economic exploitation, and sexual violence mapped not a normal way of life but a different way of life? What if we acknowledged that the plantation is, as Toni Morrison writes, a space that everybody runs from but nobody stops talking about, and thus that it is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future?

URGENT ALERT

24 June 2020

Yesterday, 16 days before the Anti-Terrorism Bill could lapse into law, a **farmer whose organization had been redtagged was killed** in Escalante City. **Jose Jerry Catalogo** was feeding his carabao in Brgy. Paitan when he was shot dead by unidentified gunmen. A member of a farmers' association affiliated with the **National Federation of Sugar Workers**, Jose was the father of Cheryl Catalogo, a theater activist and political prisoner who has been behind bars since the series of illegal raids conducted last October by the police in the offices of mass organizations in Bacolod. To date, there have been **260 peasant killings under Duterte**.

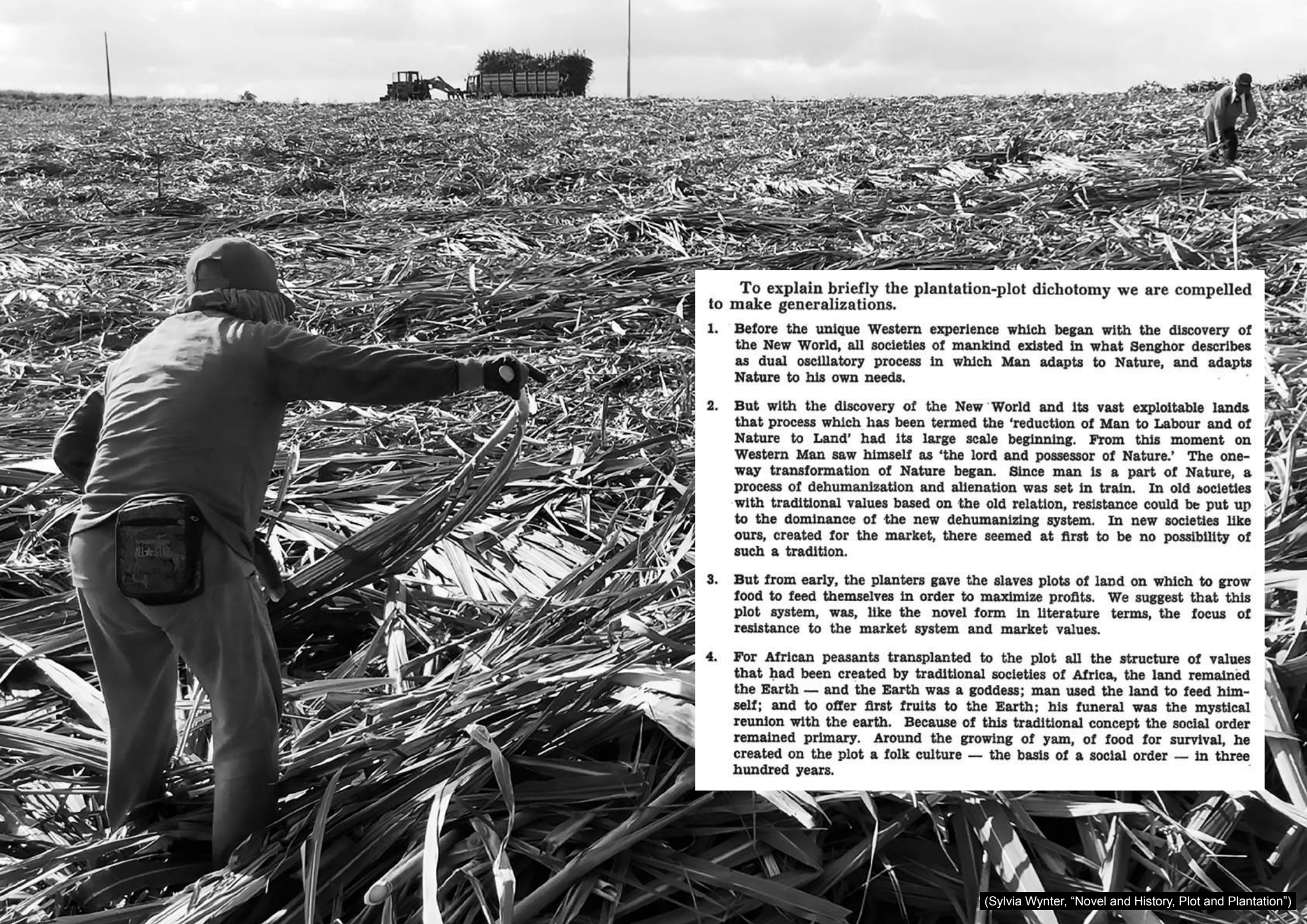
#StopKillingFarmers #JunkTerrorBill

URGENT ALERT

2 February 2021

As progressive lawyers prepared for oral arguments against the **Terror Law** this morning, another farmer affiliated with a redtagged peasant organization was murdered. **Cano Arellano**, chairman of **Paghiliusa sa Mangunguma sa Sitio Binabono** under the **National Federation of Sugar Workers**, was shot dead by four assailants. Negros remains under the shroud of **Memorandum Order 32**, which has deeply militarized the entire island and increased the number of extrajudicial killings. **He is the 314th victim on Duterte's peasant death toll.**

#StopKillingFarmers #StopTheAttacks



To explain briefly the plantation-plot dichotomy we are compelled to make generalizations.

1. Before the unique Western experience which began with the discovery of the New World, all societies of mankind existed in what Senghor describes as dual oscillatory process in which Man adapts to Nature, and adapts Nature to his own needs.
2. But with the discovery of the New World and its vast exploitable lands that process which has been termed the 'reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land' had its large scale beginning. From this moment on Western Man saw himself as 'the lord and possessor of Nature.' The one-way transformation of Nature began. Since man is a part of Nature, a process of dehumanization and alienation was set in train. In old societies with traditional values based on the old relation, resistance could be put up to the dominance of the new dehumanizing system. In new societies like ours, created for the market, there seemed at first to be no possibility of such a tradition.
3. But from early, the planters gave the slaves plots of land on which to grow food to feed themselves in order to maximize profits. We suggest that this plot system, was, like the novel form in literature terms, the focus of resistance to the market system and market values.
4. For African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa, the land remained the Earth — and the Earth was a goddess; man used the land to feed himself; and to offer first fruits to the Earth; his funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth. Because of this traditional concept the social order remained primary. Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he created on the plot a folk culture — the basis of a social order — in three hundred years.

This culture recreated traditional values — use values. This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system.

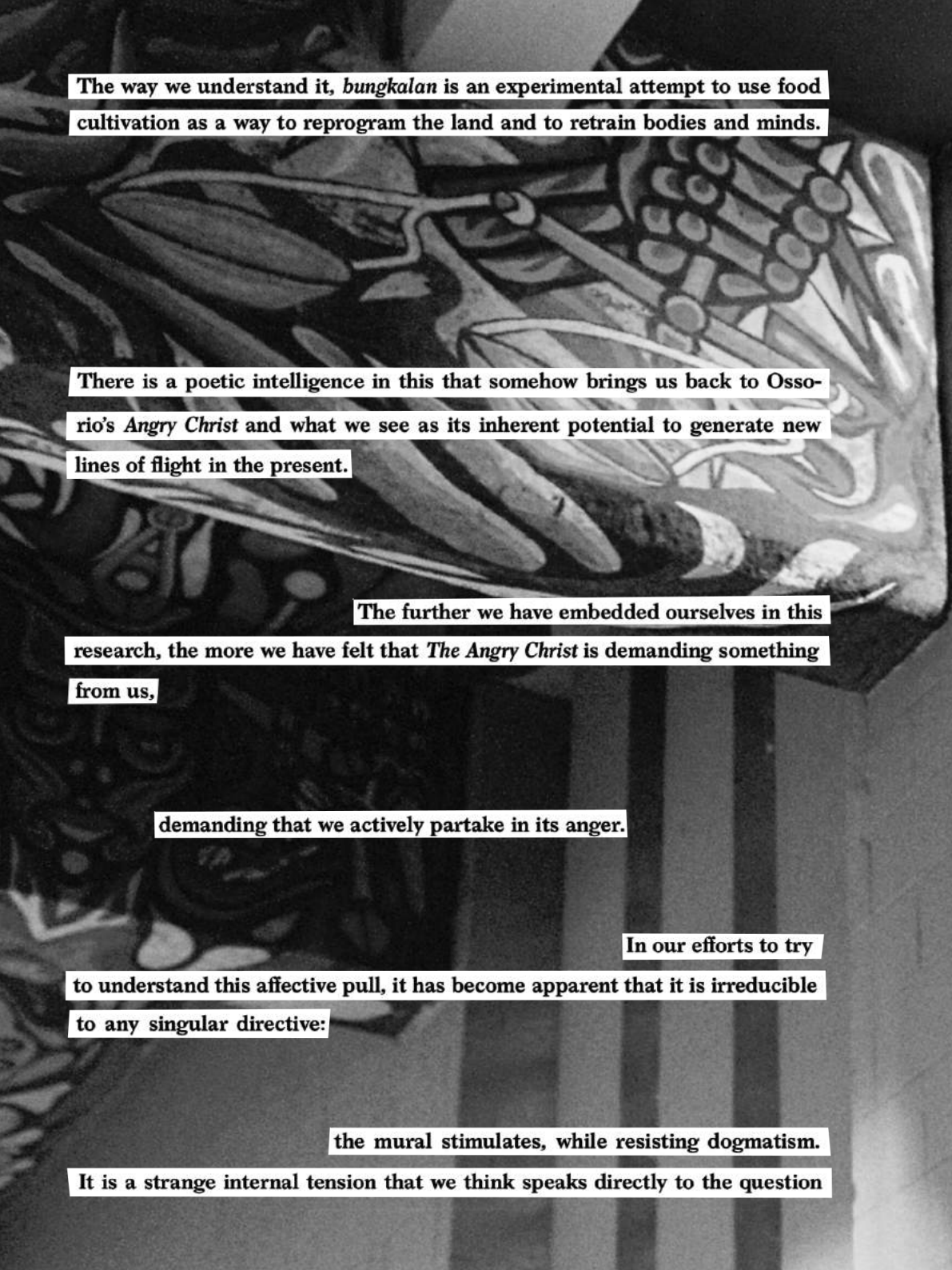
But I found myself drawn to a question: Is there a tradition of black political thought that strives to expand and generalize the non-capitalist elements immanently generated within the plantation system? Is there a tradition of black communist or anarchist thought that refuses the sequence of plantation slave to peasant producer to agrarian proletariat to some communist society to come, one that wants to leap from the plantation to the commune?

"We tilled the lands of those who sold out to the Cojuangco-Aquinos. We uprooted the poorly-grown sugarcanes, cleared the fields of weeds, and replaced them with rice, sweet potato, peanuts, mung beans, string beans. It's been ten years now. We do all the work — from scattering the rice grains to irrigating the field, constructing bunds, spraying, and applying fertilizers. We practice bayanihan — when other collectives are done with the work in their

own farm, they come help us, and vice versa." They added, "There were many attempts to destroy our fields. Because the soldiers and goons had rifles, we could do nothing but cry. But we kept planting."

"The bungkalan taught us how to cultivate the land. It bound us like we were sisters. It made us set aside our individual pride and settle our conflicts to give each other strength and preserve their unity. We understand that the bungkalan is the cornerstone of our struggle," said the women.





The way we understand it, *bungkalan* is an experimental attempt to use food cultivation as a way to reprogram the land and to retrain bodies and minds.

There is a poetic intelligence in this that somehow brings us back to Osorio's *Angry Christ* and what we see as its inherent potential to generate new lines of flight in the present.

The further we have embedded ourselves in this research, the more we have felt that *The Angry Christ* is demanding something from us,

demanding that we actively partake in its anger.

In our efforts to try to understand this affective pull, it has become apparent that it is irreducible to any singular directive:

the mural stimulates, while resisting dogmatism.

It is a strange internal tension that we think speaks directly to the question

of desires and how to rearrange them.

What we sense in the mural, in its iconographic and formal delirium, is the creation of a space of frictional co-existence,

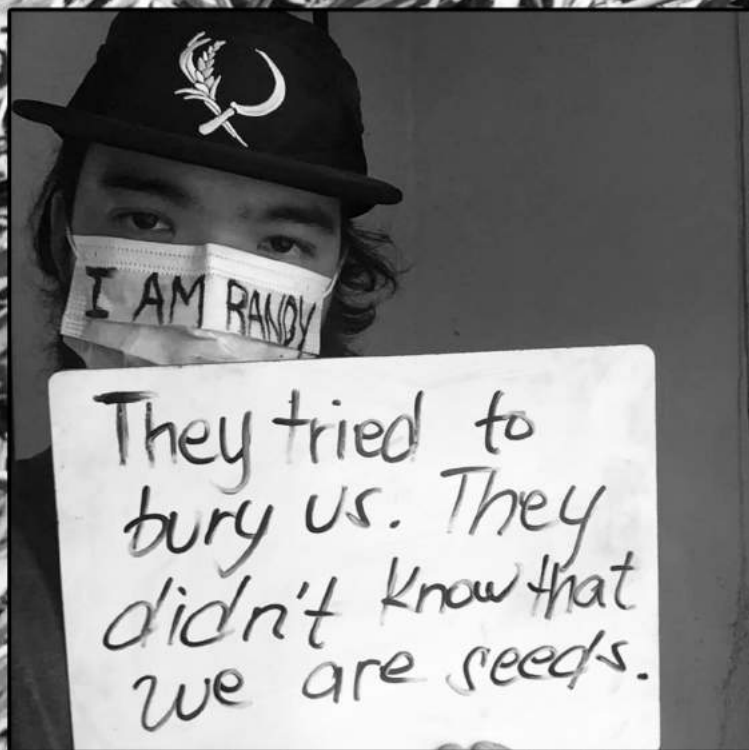
one which conjures that infantile state of polymorphous perversity prior to the inscriptions of heteronormativity, but also an indigenous state of lush biodiversity prior to the hegemony of the monocrop.

To look at the mural in this way is to read into it a demand to reassert and reactivate these queer states of being in both our bodies and our lands.



The history he has been taught is the history of the plantation, the official history of the super-structure; the only history which has been written.

But the plot too has its own history.



Special thanks to SAKA (Sama-samang Artista para sa Kilusang Agraryo, or "Artist Alliance for Genuine Land Reform and Rural Development").



AMY LIEN & ENZO CAMACHO
2021