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Bungkalan as natural praxis: Peasant agroecology in the land struggle in Hacienda Luisita, Tarlac

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ABSTRACT

One of the longest-standing forms of resistance in Hacienda Luisita, Tarlac is *bungkalan* (lit. tillage), the practice of farmworkers of direct farming on unjustly undistributed lands. Spearheaded by peasant sector organizations Alyansa ng mga Manggagawang Bukid sa Asyenda Luisita (Alliance of Farmworkers in Hacienda Luisita [AMBALA]), the United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU), and Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (Federation of Agricultural Workers [UMA]), *bungkalan* at its peak transformed around 2,000 hectares of former sugar lands into thriving organic farms for rice, corn, vegetables, and fruit trees.

This paper historicizes and highlights the role of *bungkalan* in the struggle for land reform against semi-feudalism, an antiquated mode of production represented by the hacienda system of land ownership. I argue that the farmworkers' collective and cooperative cultivation of sustainable polycultures through agroecology subverts both the hacienda's semi-feudal relations and profiteering mechanisms, and the rapacious exhaustion of land and the diminution of on-farm biodiversity. In doing so, *bungkalan* exemplifies what political ecologists call a "natural praxis," a militant undertaking that braids environmental concern with human welfare. While the practice precedes the category, interpreting *bungkalan* as praxis can offer us a blueprint for radical and peasant-led environmentalism.

KEYWORDS

agroecology, bungkalan, Hacienda Luisita, natural praxis,
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The continued dominance of *haciendas* attests to the backwardness and semi-feudal character of the Philippine agriculture sector. For social formations in the "Third World," semi-feudalism is principally determined by the coexistence of unevenly developed modes of production that contradict each other: global monopoly capitalism and domestic feudalism (Guerrero 1970; Rivera 1982). Here, the peasant segment constitutes an antiquated feudal mode of production that simultaneously undermines and perpetuates wage labor relations (Aguilar 1989). The *hacienda*, as big landed property, accumulates profit by economizing (i.e., exhausting) fixed costs at the expense of workers tilling the land, and the land itself (Guerrero 1970; Lenin 1956; Marx 1975).

Nevertheless, bound to severely exploitative histories, the rural poor have emerged time and again as a political force in the process of challenging this (Putzel 1995, 665; Wright and Labiste 2018, 1). A case in point is the farmworkers of Hacienda Luisita, Inc. (HLI)—a 6,453-hectare sugar estate owned by the Cojuangco-Aquino clan in the province of Tarlac—who continue to play an active role in the Philippine peasant movement. One of their longest-standing forms of protest is *bungkalan* (lit. "tillage"), the farmworkers' repossession and cultivation of unjustly undistributed and untilled land. In the past 16 years, *bungkalan* has transformed almost 2,000 hectares of once-sugar lands into thriving organic farms for rice, corn, vegetables, and fruit trees. This subverts tenancy-centered semi-feudal economic relations, where landless peasants till on borrowed land to earn what would hardly be enough to sustain their families (Aguilar 1989; PAKED 2006). Harvests from *bungkalan* put food on the farmworkers' tables and income in their pockets, a veritable prologue to the land distribution campaign carried out by many peasant organizations across the Philippines.

This paper takes interest in *bungkalan* because of this project's commitment to agroecological organic farming. Agroecology, "a fledgling academic discipline," has evolved into a citizen science that guides the application of ecological principles to the design and management of sustainable food systems (Wibbelmann et al. 2013, 4). Agroecological practice thus recommends small-scale farming using endemic inputs. While the practice of sustainable farming alternatives is not new, *bungkalan* grounds it in the collective history of farmers and the continued struggle for genuine land reform. This case is not dissimilar to efforts towards food sovereignty made by La Via Campesina (LVC) since 1996. LVC is an international movement that coordinates peasant organizations of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and Indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America, and Europe (Focus 2020). LVC and the *bungkalan* project share some key activities such as building cooperatives among peasant communities and maintaining community agroecology schools and demo farms.

As noted by peasant advocates, the *bungkalan* protest reveals the "critical intersection between organic farming and healthy eating on one hand, and issues like land ownership and food sovereignty" (Bueno 2019). Such an intersection becomes clear considering the environmental impacts of conventional agriculture[1]

in the Philippines. Steered by large agribusinesses and elite landowners, the drastic use and poor management of soil resources and high-pressure crop production have brought long-term problems with the soil quality of the country's agricultural lands (Calaquib, Navarette, and Sanchez 2016; Monteferio and Johnson 2019). Large-scale monocultures and input-intensive approaches have levied significant stress on local ecologies as well, threatening not only on-farm biodiversity but also the health of farmworkers (Bachmann, Cruzada, and Wright 2009; Prudente, Malarvannan, and Tanabe 2007). Thus, part of the exploitative histories tied to the *hacienda* are the poor environmental outcomes posing danger to a vulnerable peasant population.

While efforts in critical agrarian studies have documented the peasant struggle in the Philippines, (Aguilar 1989; Putzel 1995; Tadem 2015) little attention has been given to the movement's ecological dimension. Motivated by *bungkalan*'s long-standing success, this paper highlights the role of agroecology in the narrative of anti-feudalism in Hacienda Luisita.

The farmworkers' repossession of unjustly undistributed lands and their cultivation of sustainable polycultures subvert (a) the *hacienda*'s semi-feudal relations and profiteering mechanisms, and (b) the exhaustion of land and the diminution of on-farm biodiversity. In so doing, *bungkalan* exemplifies what political ecologists conceive as "natural praxis," a militant undertaking that braids environmental concern with social (and sectoral) welfare (Foster, Clark, and York 2010). While the practice precedes the category, interpreting *bungkalan* as praxis can offer us a blueprint of a radical environmentalism that addresses what Marxists (and Karl Marx himself) perceive as "rifts" in the planetary "metabolism"—the alienation of society from nature itself (Foster 2000; Marx 1981).

Methodology and scope

This paper makes its case about farmers' praxis on agricultural land. Wright and Labiste (2018, 140) assert that "land itself lies at the center of a web of social, economic, and political relations." From exploiters, the human species can turn into the stewards of what is left of Earth after capitalism. The transformation of capitalism into this society of associated producers, with wage labor abolished, involves a transformation of human relations to the land, the wellspring of production itself (Marx 1973, 276).

This paper figures the *bungkalan* project as natural praxis by locating its place in the historical narrative of semi-feudalism and anti-feudal land struggle in Hacienda Luisita. My reflections are constructed from a variety of textual sources, including and most especially *Bungkalan: Manwal sa Organikong Pagsasaka* [A Manual for Organic Farming], a multivocal collage of narratives of the land, farmers' accounts, and instructions for organic farming collated by UMA (2017). I also draw from (1) community integration and participation in production in one *bungkalan* learning farm in Barangay Mapalacsiao, Hacienda Luisita in September

2015; (2) a semi-structured interview conducted in October 2015 with a leader of AMBALA (anonymized as "Ka Pong") about their local struggle for land distribution; and (3) an educational discussion with two farmworker members and a community organizer of UMA on lessons peasant communities learned from the *bungkalan* project in November 2016. I refer to them collectively as UMA as they were engaged as representatives of the organization. The study was also validated and updated in 2020 through an online consultation by UMA and the Kilusang Mambubukid ng Pilipinas (Peasant Movement of the Philippines [KMP]) in which AMBALA and UMA are member organizations.

Marxism in/as environmentalism

Drawing insights from political ecology, this paper emphasizes the social—instead of a solely subjective (self/nature) or objective (species/nature)—character of ecological economics (distribution) and politics (conflict) (Barry 1994; Martinez-Alier 2002). Ventures toward an ecological Marxism (sometimes termed "eco-Marxism") help investigate the political, economic, and historical conditions wherein environmental problems arise (Hughes 2000). A Marxist framing also teases out the dialectical engagement between farmworker and land in the juncture of protest. This clears the way for understanding how ecologically un/conscious subjects attempt to unalienate themselves from nature in the occasion of natural praxis, an emancipatory and dialogical activity exemplified by *bungkalan*.

Labor and planetary metabolism. A Marxist approach to ecology emphasizes the dialectical relationship occasioned by human practice within their environment. This is not to reiterate the nature-as-capital position that facilitates the exploitation of natural resources for profit generation. After all, matter exchange, the basis of life, could reproduce their own conditions without life (Engels 1975a, 75). Contrary to a one-way relationship, the dialectics between humans and their natural environment are metabolic. Marx and Friedrich Engels provided an insight into the ecological dimension of social existence with their consideration of the ecosystem as a "material metabolism," where living bodies participate in assimilation and alienation activities for the sustenance of life (Han 2010, 24–5). As Marx explains in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1975, 275–6), physical exchanges among species via natural cycles involving both organic and inorganic objects constitute both human consciousness (sensory perception itself) and the "direct means of life" (the products of labor applied to nature like food, clothes, dwelling, and others).

All species conduct what Marx calls "life activity" to sustain life at the levels of both species and nature (275). In his *Anti-Dühring*, Engels (1975a, 76–7) concurs by suggesting that "life, the mode of existence of an albuminous body, therefore consists primarily in fact that every moment it is itself and at the same time something else." The self-implementing phenomenon of life is itself a metabolism between nutrition and excretion, conditions that allow for the possibility of growth

and reproduction. He reiterates his point in the *Dialectics of Nature:* "In nature nothing takes place in isolation. Everything affects and is affected by every other thing" (1975b, 459).

As a human practice, labor, "a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature," is a mediator of this dialectical "metabolism" (Marx 1976, 192). The practical object of labor itself, asserts Marx, is life and its reproduction. Labor characterizes humans as a "species-being" (and not only a "species") due to their capacity to change nature consciously for other species (1975, 277). Thus, labor involves not a transformation of nature as objects of the human subject; instead, it occasions the reconfiguration of the relations between them. It becomes, in other words, the "universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature" (283, 290). Production through labor draws energy and resources from the larger metabolism of the planet. The interdependent relations of animals, plants, microorganisms, and human beings in the ecosystem constitute this circulation of life. Nature presupposes human activity, determining production (i.e. physical and mental labor, climate, materials) and in turn is determined by that production (Hughes 2000; Parsons 1977).

Metabolic rifts. Estranged labor under capitalist relations of production tears away the being from the species in that the substance of life is no longer a human activity (Marx 1976, 277). In *Capital*, Marx (1981) lodges a critique of capitalism through an ecological perspective:

> Capitalist production, by collecting the population in great centres, and causing an ever-increasing preponderance of town population, on the one hand concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the circulation of matter between man and the soil, i.e., prevents the return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it therefore violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil. (528)

Marx's political economy illustrates how mass production and consumption in concentrated areas disrupt the flow of life in the ecosystem, particularly between the urban and the rural. At a social level, this antagonism was also evident in colonial expansion where societies were robbed of land and resources for the industrialization of colonizing countries (Foster 2000, 164). An "irreparable rift" has emerged in this metabolism, "a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself" (Marx 1981, 949–50), due to expanding corporate-led markets, unequal productive relations in the global assembly chain, and overproduction under capitalism in its imperial phase (Engels 1975a; Foster 2000). In *Dialectics,* Engels (1975b, 460–1) registers a clear warning against disrupting the metabolism among species: "each victory […] in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first." Advancements in mass production that overcome

the limitations imposed by natural cycles widen the rift between human beings and nature. Following Marx's logic of human-as-nature, these "victories" suggest self-destruction. Both Marx and Engels consistently argued in their writings that big landlordship and the monopoly of resources have only exaggerated this rift against the Earth (Foster 2000; Marx 1975, 1981; Engels 1975a).

Development is equated to the upshot of a global enterprise that scours "new markets […] raw materials, goods and labour" across the world, contributing to a loss of rights over nature for the sake of the expansion of capital and generation of profit (Loomba 2015, 256, 258). As agricultural production is reliant on environmental health, fragile ecosystems guarantee fragile livelihoods (Dalgaard, Hutchings and Porter 2003; Jouzi et al. 2017).

A natural praxis. A Marxist approach may "help us to diagnose the weaknesses of green politics and the inadequacy of mainstream responses to ecological problems" (Hughes 2000, 3) without effacing class divisions. It makes us ask, what ways of living, desiring, and resisting can serve as conditions for a mode of production that spurns capitalism?

Marx (1976, 637) may have already prefigured an answer in *Capital*: "Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries." Socialist relations must fashion stewards out of gravediggers. Indeed, Marx has grasped the foundations of present-day sustainable development more than a century ago. He captured the very essence of this notion, famously described by the Brundtland Commission as the kind of "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Foster 2000, 164). In fact, the nexus between Marx's revolutionary vision and ecological sustainability is evident in how socialism itself has been defined in ecological terms; it requires the "socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism of nature in a rational way" (Marx 1981, 959). Envisioned here is that humanity, once liberated from the spell of the value-law and the imperial obsession for constant expansion, would no longer be compelled to ravage nature, choosing instead to limit its powers to more sustainable activities such as protecting biodiversity (Cassegård 2017).

Looking into praxes like *bungkalan* that challenge the profit-driven exploitation of labor and the natural environment allows for an investigation of (potential) human-nature relations. "Praxis" is any human activity that changes and transforms social-natural realities through the dialectics of reflection and action (Petrović 1983). As a category of action and unit of analysis, it sublimates and espouses theoretical categories where blueprints of further action could be sourced (Freenberg 2014). An anti-oppressive praxis aims toward creating un-alienating conditions, transforming structures of exploitation at varying scales to subvert the reality by which the oppressed are oppressed. Considering how sociality bears on naturality and vice versa, social change "could also unite subject and object, thought and being, man and nature" (21).

The category of natural praxis foregrounds the relationship between human activity and ecological metabolism lodged in historical materialism. It is any action, contemplated or not, that directly espouses a non-human, environmental transformation, one that is "unrelated to praxis and divorced from dialectical conceptions, […] a mere mechanical myth and can itself be a tool of domination" (Foster, Clark and York 2010, 247). By emphasizing the "natural" in an already natural (that is, social) category, natural praxis presses the fact that human beings themselves belong to the natural environment, and that "we", as an ecosystem dependent on nutritional, habitational, and populational balance for survival, is in direct contradistinction to the exploitative and exhaustive design of capitalist mass production and, especially in the case of Filipino farmworkers, semi-feudal landownership.

Land ownership, reform, and struggle in semi-feudal Philippines

The perpetual state of crisis in land situates the struggle against semi-feudal exploitation and extraction in HLI. Over three hundred years of Spanish rule shaped today's dominant pattern of landownership—the most unequal in Southeast Asia—comparable to erstwhile colonies in Latin America (Wright and Labiste 2018). In this relation of production, an intransigent landlord class composed of very few continue to exercise control over hectares of arable land in the country (KMP 2014; Lenin 1956; PAKED 2006). The failure of land reform policy, a distributive mechanism that subverts the centuries-long relation of production, sustains a contemporary and misshapen offshoot of archaic feudal relations: semi-feudalism (Tadem 2015).

The semi-feudal thesis could be traced to the success of the 1949 Chinese revolution, which identified landlordism as a hindrance to agrarian transition and thus sought to dismantle it (Brass 2002). In semi-feudalism, the principal material contradiction lies not between capital and labor, but between an external imperialism coupled with the local "feudal" landlord class on one hand, and the peasantry along with its allies on the other, all constituting a highly polarized rural society (KMP 2014). Archaic mechanisms such as moneylending and debt bondage, unfree labor, and private land accumulation machinate capital accumulation and expansion for the elite (Brass 2002; Kimura 2006).

The differentiation of the peasantry creates a home market for capital by converting peasants into either farmworkers who engage in sharecropping or smallholding owner-cultivators who exercise domination by hiring field workers (Lenin 1956). This social matrix, which includes rich peasants, middle peasants, and the more numerous poor peasants, reveals an opposition between the small farm operator and the landless hired laborers as well (Aguilar 1989; KMP 2014). The lack of farm implements, and the little money left after the payment of land rent set conditions for political organization and mobilization towards better labor conditions (Mao 244–45). In the Philippines, semi-feudal relations and the

land distribution system have gone through various reforms and morphologies beginning with the imposition of the Regalian Doctrine, which vested all lands not registered as private under the Spanish Crown (Dressler and Guieb 2015). Sugar and tobacco plantations were established in the first few years of the seventeenth century; the profits from which helped fuel the European imperial enterprise (Wright and Labiste 2018).

American efforts in land reform in the Philippines—the purchase of Spanish friar lands, land ownership limits, tenancy regulation laws, and resettlement programs—only increased the concentration of land in the hands of the elite few (Dressler and Guieb 2015; Wright and Labiste 2018). At the onset of the twentieth century, farmers had already begun organizing themselves, often in unions, to "fight debt slavery, evictions, unfair crop sharing, low wages and other landlord abuses" (PKP 1996, 62–63). After "independence" in 1946, the same political economy characterized the Philippines. Governments, such as Ramon Magsaysay's in the 1950s, attempted to diffuse land-based peasant movements through limited reforms (Kimura 2006). From the 1930s to the 1950s, systems such as usury and *aryenda*—where poor peasants were forced to surrender their land due to indebtedness—provoked peasant uprisings (Lara and Morales 1990).

The 1960s became a landmark in the history of the Philippine peasant movement. Throughout the decade, leftist movements gained momentum due in part to the anti-imperialist sentiment that arose globally from the Vietnam War. National democracy, a political movement that identifies feudal relations, bureaucrat capitalism, and imperial domination as roots of social injustices, gained traction especially in the countryside. It was in 1969 that a revived Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (Philippine Communist Party [PKP]) with a national democratic orientation formed the Bagong Hukbong Bayan (New People's Army [BHB]) (Lara and Morales 1990). The PKP-BHB characterized the mode of production as semi-feudal and thus focused their operations among the peasantry (Putzel 1995, 649).

Ferdinand Marcos' martial law regime formally declared that the entire country was subject to land reform in a quest to end the "century-old, feudalistic system of sharecropping" (Ofreneo 1980, 161). By the 1970s, agricultural land had expanded by 44 percent, but this was followed by an extremely minimal expansion from 1980 to 1990 at 1.4 percent (PAKED 2006, 22–3). However, no large-scale land distribution was implemented. The high costs of production under the corporate-driven "Green Revolution" program resulted in declines in real incomes of peasants by 53 percent from 1976 to 1984 (Tadem 2015, 402).

Marcos' deposition and the installment of a Cojuangco-Aquino as Philippine President contributed little to the struggle for land distribution and reform. Organized farmers were quick to recognize that Corazon Aquino herself belongs to a powerful family of landlords (Wright and Labiste 2018). Landlords sitting in Congress also made sure that the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law or Republic Act 6657 was toothless, favoring the landed instead of the landless (36).

Many presidents that followed Aquino continued to proffer land reform only to score popular points and deal with social tension and poverty in the countryside, tailoring the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) to suit market- and export-oriented ends (42).

By the late twentieth century, 7 out of 10 rural producers in the Philippines did not own or control land, working instead as tenants, leaseholders, or wage-laborers while roughly 20 percent of the population owned 80 percent of the country's land (Lara and Morales 1990, 144–5). Seventy-three percent of the total 11 million labor force in agriculture comprised of tenants (KMP 2014, 108). The middle to lowest strata have inherited the practice of sharecropping from the original friar estates in the form of the *kasama* system, where the propertyless peasant, alienated from the land, must sell their farming skills, that is, their labor power to the *kasamahan* contract to earn wages (Aguilar 1989; Constantino 1975). A patron-client bondage between a *kasama* and their landlord mystifies the inequitable nature of the relationship.

By the 2010s, 70 percent of Filipino peasants did not own the land they tilled, and 80 percent of the sector were tenants (KMP 2014, 107). Tenant farmers, *hacienda* farmworkers, and small owner-cultivators—who work on half to one hectare of land on average—all suffer overpriced inputs and depressed prices, uneven market relations, and a high incidence of poverty, disincentivizing the improvement of land and farming methods (Lara and Morales 1990; Monteferio and Johnson 2019). The 2012 Census on Agriculture and Fisheries of the Philippine Statistics Authority reveals that agricultural production remains small-scale and backward, with more than half of farm holdings (3.2 million) having sizes of only 1 hectare or less, and about 32 percent (1.8 million) measuring from 1.01 to 2.9 hectares. On the other hand, corporate holdings owned an average of 97.1 hectares. Around 99.1 percent or 5.5 million of these holdings are managed by households or individual proprietors (11–15). The Census seems to obfuscate the definition of "individuals", however, in that it encompasses landowner, lessee, tenant, and laborer with hired managers (29). By 2012, almost 8000 farms nationwide, amounting to more than 200,000 hectares of land, were corporation-owned (KMP 2014, 210).

A history of Hacienda Luisita

Despite shifts in power and a series of reforms, land continues to be in the hands of the elite. *Haciendas* are a symptom of this national malaise. First established by the Spanish Crown, *haciendas* are agricultural lands that serve as rice paddies, cornfields, coconut farms, orchards, ranches, and industrial or commercial plantations (PAKED 2006). In the semi-feudal mode of the *hacienda*, tenant farmers are employed to improve the land, helping the property accumulate capital. The exploitative relations are exacerbated through the ownership of the land, which gives the *haciendero* the right of inheritance and free disposition. Table 1 shows the largest *haciendas* in Luzon, Philippines.

Table 1. Partial list of haciendas in Luzon, Philippines as of 2014

Hacienda	Size (in hectares)	Province
Hacienda Luisita	6,453	Tarlac
Hacienda San Antonio – Sta. Isabel	11,370	Isabela
Hacienda Sta. Isabel	2,806	Isabela
Hacienda Dimzon-Zulueta	3,087	Isabela
Hacienda Ballao	749	Isabela
Hacienda Sevillana	402	Isabela
Hacienda Puzon	397	Isabela
Hacienda Nueza	300	Isabela
Villamar Estate	300	Isabela
Hacienda Bueno	3,000	Nueva Ecija
Hacienda Gabaldon, Kilantang, and Anggara	822	Nueva Ecija
Hacienda de Santos	569	Nueva Ecija
Hacienda Rueda	238	Nueva Ecija
Hacienda Tinio	154	Nueva Ecija
Hacienda Madrigal	12,000	Cagayan Valley
Hacienda Villacete	6,000	Cagayan Valley
Hacienda Intal	796	Cagayan Valley
Catral Estate	500	Cagayan Valley
Catolico Estate	400	Cagayan Valley
Torres Estate	286	Cagayan Valley
Hacienda Florentino	200	Cagayan Valley
Puzon Estate	175	Cagayan Valley
Lizardo Estate	168	Cagayan Valley
Pallgao Estate	130	Cagayan Valley
Hacienda de los Reyes	400	Laguna
Hacienda Escudero	4,000	Laguna and Quezon
Hacienda Reyes	13,000	Quezon
Tumbaga Ranch	6,000	Quezon
Hacienda Matias	5,000	Quezon
Hacienda Uy	2,415	Quezon
Hacienda Tan	1,000	Quezon
Hacienda Zobel	12,627	Batangas
Hacienda Roxas	4,783	Batangas
Hacienda Puyat	2,400	Batangas
Hacienda Manzano-Rubio	1,003	Batangas
Hacienda Binay	350	Batangas
Hacienda Canuto, Lascano, and Imperial	500	Camarines Sur
Hacienda Manubay	184	Camarines Sur
Hacienda Almeda	169	Camarines Sur
Hacienda Fuentabella, Dizon, and Obias	>100	Camarines Sur

Hacienda Tyhangco	80	Camarines Sur
Hacienda Beruenger	700	Sorsogon
Hacienda Peralte	49	Sorsogon
Hacienda Espinosa	10,000	Masbate

Sources: IBON 2017, Manzano 2017, and PAKED 2006.

While HLI pales in size compared to other landholdings such as Haciendas San Antonio and Sta. Isabela, it is notable for the prominence of the Cojuangco family in Philippine politics for at least four generations, including two former presidents of the Republic. The vast *hacienda*, which encompasses territory in the towns of Tarlac, La Paz, Concepcion, and Capas, remains a microcosm of the continuing landlessness of peasants and dominance of landlords in the Philippines (Constantino 1975; KMP 2014).

What we know now as HLI has gone through a history of failed land reform and state-backed violence. For more than half a century, sugar production built the wealth of the Cojuangco family (KMP 2014, 110). It was in 1957 when Jose Cojuangco Sr., an immigrant from Fukien, China, procured the Central Azucarera de Tarlac (CAT) and Hacienda Luisita from Don Antonio Lopez's Compaña General de Tabacos de Filipinas, also known as La Tabacalera, through a loan from the Government Service Insurance System. This was endorsed by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) under former president Ramon Magsaysay upon the condition that the land must be distributed to the tillers a decade after the purchase, which never happened (UMA 2013).

HLI was founded on 23 August 1988 for the purpose of operationalizing the Stock Distribution Option (SDO) in the Hacienda. On November 1989, then President Corazon Aquino approved the Hacienda Luisita Stock Plan through the SDO under CARP. This exempted the sugar estate from being distributed to the farmers. Through the Hacienda Luisita Stock Plan, farmers and agricultural workers may be endowed with a Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA). Over 33,000 supposed farmworker "beneficiaries" or "stockholders" endured declines in their income; the promised dividends were undistributed (UMA 2013, 5). According to Ka Pong, the inequitable structure further impoverished farmworkers: "*Ang trabaho namin sa isang linggo, ₱194* [Philippine pesos] *ang sahod namin, ang ilalabas mo sa isang araw, sasahod ka sa Sabado, ₱9.50*." [For our work every week, we only get ₱194, given on Saturdays, but we need to shell out money every day, so in a day, we only get ₱9.50 on average.]

In 2003, the estimated 5,000 members of AMBALA filed a petition against the SDO and land conversion. As a response to protests, HLI fired 327 of its workers, including Rene Galang, then leader of ULWU-AMBALA. Violence was also inflicted on peasant communities. Ka Pong recounted that "*binulldozer noong* December [2003] *yung mga pananim namin, isang linggo na lang aanihin na namin*

yung palay pero binulldozer pa rin nila. Giniba yung bahay namin, inubos nila, pati yung mga hayop namin ninakaw." [In December 2003, they bulldozed our crops, one week before we were supposed to harvest rice, but they still bulldozed it. They destroyed our house, everything, they even stole our livestock.]

On 6 November 2004, over 5,700 sugarcane farmers, milling operators, and agricultural workers, including their families, staged the *Welgang Bayan* (mass protest), a historic protest in the history of Philippine peasantry. They trooped to Gate 1 of CAT, which was located inside the Cojuangcos' compound in Tarlac City, to declare the strike and demanded the following: (a) that retired seasonal and permanent workers be replaced by their next of kin; (b) that daily wages be increased by ₱100 for permanent workers, ₱75 for seasonal workers, and ₱60 for casual workers; (c) that medical fees at the St. Martin de Porres Hospital inside the *hacienda* be waived as stated in the SDO agreement; and (d) that additional benefits such as two-month Christmas and service bonuses be granted. Ten days into the *Welgang Bayan*, the Assumption of Jurisdiction of the Department of Labor and Employment forced the protesters to resume work. During the dispersal, military forces hailed the protesters with a salvo of bullets, leaving seven killed and 121 others wounded in what has been dubbed the Hacienda Luisita Massacre (UMA 2013). Despite this tragedy, the *Welgang Bayan* and other forms of protest have continued to stir in HLI. As explained by farmworker members of UMA, "*Ang Welgang Bayan ay naging malaking paaralan ng pakikibaka para sa tunay na reporma sa lupa, sahod, trabaho, at karapatan*." [The Welgang Bayan became a school for the struggle for genuine reform in land, wages, jobs, and rights.]

It took eight years of struggle to compel the Supreme Court to affirm the scrapping of the SDO scheme implemented in HLI. While this court decision ordered HLI to pay farmworker-beneficiaries for the illegal sale of more than 580 hectares of sugar land, the Cojuangcos insisted on playing an active role in the auditing process instead of enlisting third-party auditors. The list of peasants that received land included dummy beneficiaries that bloated the number and shrunk the size of land for redistribution. Moreover, parcels of land were designated through a raffle draw using a *tambiolo* system, which tendered unproductive lots to genuine beneficiaries. This also sowed disunity among the ranks of farmworkers (Castañeda 2004; KMP 2014; UMA 2017). Ka Pong recounted how military and police attacks continued to thwart attempts of farmers and farmworkers to organize: "*Dinisesyunan na nga ng Korte Suprema pero ano ba ang binibigay sa amin? Dahas. Sinasaktan kami. Halos sirain pa yung tanim namin na pagkain ng sambayanan.*" [The Supreme Court decided on it already but what did (the Cojuangco-Aquinos) give us? Violence. They hurt us. They almost destroyed all the food we planted for the country.]

Under the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, criminal charges against the perpetrators of the 2004 massacre were dismissed. The regime's Department of Agrarian Reform issued a notice of land reform coverage for some 358 hectares

in two barangays in HLI, but this did not hinder the Cojuangco-Aquino family from evicting peasants, bulldozing ready-to-harvest rice, and filing trumped-up charges against tillers who participated in protests organized by AMBALA, UMA, and KMP. Through Oplan April Spring in July 2013, hidden agricultural lands in HLI have since been fenced and heavily guarded by armed private personnel, police, and military to keep "outsiders" away, including members of peasant organizations (UMA 2013). In 2014, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) hit an impasse. By then, more than a hundred farmworkers had already been evicted from holdings they had been tilling for decades (Murphy 2014).

Cultivating resistance through *bungkalan*

This sweltering panorama of oppression and resistance set the stage for the genesis and quick success of *bungkalan*, which, for more than 15 years, has become a site of the HLI farmworkers' struggle against both class and environmental exploitation. Farmworker members of UMA described the project as a form of resistance: "*[Ito] ay mapangahas na pagposisyon at paglilinang sa mga lupaing kinokontrol ng mga panginoong-maylupa at dambuhalang kompanya. Isinasagawa ito ng organisadong hanay ng mga magbubukid na ang pangunahing layunin ay para sa produksiyon ng pagkain*." [This is a militant positioning and cultivation of land controlled by landlords and big companies. This is accomplished by organized ranks of farmworkers and its primary objective is food production.] The progressive nomenclature of the project itself draws from the rich agricultural terminology of Tagalog farmers (Tariman-Acosta 2017).

The campaign had a most radical inception during the *Welgang Bayan* of ULWU-AMBALA in 2004. In 2005, leaders of AMBALA and ULWU, led by peasant worker Tirso Cruz, initiated the land reclamation campaign (UMA 2013). Since the farmers and their families all camped in the cramped picket line to protest, they had to find an alternative food source—a material contradiction that emerged from their decision to cease production. Seeing the untilled lands skirting the Hacienda's gate, families began sowing seeds to grow food that sustained the picket line. Plots of land were repossessed for *bungkalan* to grow rice and vegetables instead of sugar; many of the families earned better incomes from the sale of those products than what they had received from HLI (Fig. 1). At its height, this direct-action collective farming took over 2,000 hectares of land in HLI (Castañeda 2004; Murphy 2014). Despite the communities' efforts to sustain this peak, *bungkalan* projects across the Hacienda have been disrupted throughout the years by (1) military and police surveillance such as Tarlac Development Corp.'s establishment of watchtowers surrounding AMBALA's *bungkalan* pilot area in 2013; (2) environmental hazards such as Typhoon Lando in 2015; and (3) the extra-judicial killing of organized farmers and farmworkers such as the vigilante killing of Dennis dela Cruz while he was in a *bungkalan* plot (UMA 2013; UMA 2017).

Fig. 1. An organic farm in a *bungkalan* plot in Barangay Mapalacsiao, Hacienda Luisita.
Source: the author

Since 2005, AMBALA has been maintaining *bungkalan* projects in different barangays to break the monopoly over vast tracts of land of one of the most powerful clans in the Philippines (Ayroso 2016). The *Welgang Bayan* and *bungkalan* occasioned the return of hundreds of HLI farmers to a communal and sustainable farming system, which in turn is a form of protest against the feudal and exploitative practices imposed by the Cojuangco-Aquinos (UMA 2017). The *bungkalan* campaign was almost a decade long when the study and practice of organic and sustainable agriculture was introduced to the farmers and agricultural workers of HLI, which was facilitated by UMA (2). According to farmworker members of UMA, they had already tried practicing organic farming in HLI, but the efforts were scattered and mistakes such as mixing toxic and organic fertilizers were common. In 2015, organized efforts introduced agroecology to the *bungkalan* project through the construction of learning farms where members of AMBALA, ULWU, and other peasant organizations can study agroecology to replicate organic farming methods in their plots. That the collective action of farmworkers increased the productivity of land braids both political and ecological subversion. Thus, two dimensions of the project shall be given emphasis in this paper: (a) organic farming and (b) collective farming.

Organic farming. Farmworkers and organizations engaged in the *bungkalan* joint alternative agriculture movements across the world in embracing the principles of agroecology for food and non-food production (Wibbelmann et al. 2013). A citizen science, agroecology draws from the natural flows of local ecosystems—metabolisms, in Marx's terms—to amend agricultural practices

for the sake not only of farmers, but also of other species thriving off the same land. Organic farming, a central method in agroecology, uses organic materials available in the surroundings to lift the need for chemicals that harm soil quality. Focusing mainly on vegetable and cash crops, organic farming employs strategies and long-term plans to rehabilitate the soil, protect watersheds, prevent landslides, and enrich the local biodiversity (Seufert 2012). In contrast to intensive chemical monocultural crop production, which saps the life out of soil (in many ways), small-scale polycultural organic farming seeks to conserve and diversify biodiversity, improve soil quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthen adaptation strategies to calamities (Jouzi et al. 2017; Seufert 2012).

Even outside the context of *bungkalan*, organic farming could be tied to political resistance. According to Focus on the Global South (2020, 93), a think tank offering perspectives on globalization, besides improving traditional small-scale agrarian practices, agroecology is also cultivated by peasant movements such as LVC "as an approach to reclaim community rights on land, water and forest resources; influence government policies and programs on agriculture; establish autonomy and self-determination in food production; and to broaden solidarities among rural communities." In the Philippines, the roots of organic production date back to the 1980s when smallholder farmers protested the Green Revolution of Marcos and the prevailing control of agrobusiness concessions in the Philippines. Significant progress occurred in the 1990s through collaborations springing up across various sectors to develop organic markets (Carating and Tejada qtd. in Monteferio and Johnson 2019, 5). However, "official"—that is, state-endorsed or corporate-led—organic production constitutes less than 1 percent of the country's total agricultural area, with tools and methods becoming more and more inaccessible especially to less privileged farmers (4).

Bungkalan democratizes organic farming and agroecological practice to the farmworkers of HLI through solidarity among peasant and peasant advocate organizations. The decision to integrate agroecology in the land seizure and cultivation protests harks back to "traditional farming." Farmworker members from UMA explained that sustainable food production had been the norm for the peasant class. The monopoly of land through the *hacienda* system under Spanish colonialism and the entry of agrocorporations and industrial plantations through American imperialism laid down the conditions of large-scale farming, which endanger soil productivity.

The organic and sustainable agricultural system facilitated by UMA consists of a number of core projects such as a natural farming system, wherein fertilizers and insecticides are made naturally through composting, manuring, and other methods (Fig. 2); a model organic farm where livestock integration and seed banking can be practiced; and the "*Sipag-Palay*" system (System of Rice Intensification [SRI]), an organic, sustainable, and prolific calendarization of rice planting developed in Africa and practiced as well in the Negros region (UMA 2017).

Fig. 2. Fertilizers and inputs made by farmworkers from locally grown materials.
Source: the author

These agroecological practices were tried in learning farms, the first of which was established in four to five months. Implemented in learning farms are an organic rice plantation, seed banking, the construction of a plant nursery, the side-by-side cultivation of vegetables and flowers, livestock care for fish and ducks in a fishpond, composting, and fertilizer making. The SRI and creation of mulch, pesticides, and other eco-friendly inputs using fruits and vegetables are also practiced, learned, and developed there. Many of these practices constitute each other. Livestock manure provides inputs for composting and fertilizer making. Nursery plants, once ready, are moved to a larger land area. Flowers attract insects and potential pests away from edible crops. These methods are learned by farmers and farmworkers and applied to *bungkalan* plots across the Hacienda.

UMA observed that through these practices, food production became more accessible to the tillers and expenses for chemical products dropped given an independence from agrocorporations. According to their farmworker members, "*Mas mapahuhusay ang produksiyon ng pagkain, mapangangalagaan ang kalusugan ng komunidad, at mababawasan ang mga gastos at pagkatali ng mga magsasaka sa mga produktong kemikal ng mga dambuhalang agro korporasyong imperyalista.*" [We can improve the production of food, take care of the community's health, and minimize expenses and the reliance of farmers on chemical products by large imperialist agrocorporations.] At the core of this practice is the direct correlation between the human body (health) and the natural environment (the soil itself).

Collective farming. Cooperation and consolidated resistance are given primacy in the *bungkalan* campaign, impugning the alienated master-slave relations maintained by the landlords of HLI. Organic agriculture itself benefits from the

organizing of cooperatives and building of social networks as this provides access to training and other services (Seufert 2012, 1). Leading the *bungkalan* campaign for genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization are not only UMA and ULWU-AMBALA, but also the Samahan ng Demokratikong Kabataan sa Asyenda Luisita [Union of Democratic Youth in Hacienda Luisita], MARTYR (organization of the relatives of human rights violations), SABAK (for LGBTQ+ farmers and their relatives), and TABLU (for cultural activists). The variegation of these organizations for agricultural workers appreciates the intersectionality of their campaign for agrarian reform across all sectors.

Multiple forms of cooperation are exercised in these farms, including *damayan* (emergency aid among farmers), *suyuan* (exchange of working shifts between families or teams), *saklay-barangay* (planting of vegetables and herbal medicines for the community) and the cooperative system, where individuals or their families collectively work on a plot of land for farming (UMA 2017, 32–3). Consolidation manifests at all levels of organization in the *bungkalan* amidst the semi-feudal tenancy and sharecropping systems imposed by landlords. As in other sites of peasant resistance, the material conditions of objective crises necessitate solidarity in the very practice of agriculture itself (Manzano 2017).

Each cooperative in the *bungkalan*, composed of several farmers and their families and a plot of land, follows a work points system as a standard to measure labor exertion from sowing to harvest season. Opposing the Hacienda's fixed rate wage based on harvest, salary in the work points system is calculated based on one's participation in the production, thus fostering unity, thriftiness (in terms of equipment), and self- and inter-dependence (UMA 2017). Transparency is ensured in the tabulation system to preclude corruption and opportunism (44). Everyone is responsible both to one's self and to the whole cooperative. Land care and production must be conducted by all participants as well (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. A pilot *bungkalan* farm in Balete village that was attacked by private guards of the Cojuangcos in 2013. *Source:* Ronalyn V. Olea / *Bulatlat* (Tariman-Acosta 2017); permission granted to the author

With respect to the principles of cooperation and mutual aid—key principles in collective socialist praxis—the plots utilized in the *bungkalan* system are open to everyone who wishes to participate in such a system (UMA 2017). What is more, the participants' salary is awarded with certificates expressing supportive statements as a way of mocking the CLOA granted by landlords (131). Even the customers of cooperatives are members of peasant communities.

Lessons from the bungkalan. Farmworkers and a community organizer from UMA shared important lessons the *bungkalan* participants learned from the praxis of organic and collective farming as a way of staking a claim on land. These insights, which must be considered when initiating a *bungkalan*, span the following issues: (a) organic agricultural production, (b) cooperative and collective labor, and (c) political organization and action.

In the following lists of lessons learned, I recapitulate my discussion with members of UMA who have been participating in *bungkalan* since 2005. According to them, these insights were drawn from their on-ground practice and organizing since the start of the project until our educational discussion. Some of these are also reflected in UMA's *Manwal sa Organikong Pagsasaka.* Lessons about organic agricultural production underscore the collective and non-exploitative cultivation of land. These include the following:

1. On-ground research must be conducted to identify the best plots of land for collective tilling.
2. All idle parcels of land, private plots including backyards, and other public lands must be maximized to sustain food production and expand the *bungkalan* campaign.
3. All lands within the scope of the *bungkalan* must respond to the basic needs of the community for food, and thus must be used for planting rice and vegetables. Food crops must be prioritized over cash crops.
4. Parcels of land tilled by individuals and families must be developed cooperatively and enjoyed collectively. Harvests are to be shared by the work team based on their participation in production and not on the individual ownership of means of production, which iterates a rent or tenancy system.

Lessons on cooperative and collective labor emphasize the potential of all individuals and families across class, sex, gender, and social divides to participate not only in production but also the wider struggle for agrarian reform. These include the following:

1. It must be emphasized that the role of collective farming in the *bungkalan* not only serves local struggles but also contributes to the peasant movement's right for genuine agrarian reform and the national democratic aspirations of the Filipino masses.
2. While all farmworkers are enjoined to participate in *bungkalan*, the choice of some farmers who wish to remain engaged in individual production must

be respected. Individual producers could still participate in the *bungkalan* campaign through *bayanihan* (communal cooperation), *damayan*, *suyuan*, *saklay-barangay*, and the construction of communal gardens for food and herbal medicines.

3. Workers, semi-workers or odd-jobbers, women, and the LGBTQ+, and other sectors must be encouraged to participate in *bungkalan*. Residents who decide to leave their homes due to threat and harassment from private and state forces must be enjoined to return to their land to protest and participate in the production.
4. Peasant organizations must enlist the participation and support of other individuals and groups to participate in *bungkalan.*
5. The participation of the youth is a priority to ensure the continuance of the *bungkalan* project in the long-term.

Bungkalan, as a politically motivated project, must be organized with the long-term vision of equitable land distribution, freedom from semi-feudal bondage, and better stewardship of the natural environment. Lessons on political organization and action include the following:

1. Organizations conducting *bungkalan* must calendar a regular schedule for educational discussions, capacity-building, and trainings.
2. Organizations must also hold regular meetings to facilitate the operations of *bungkalan*. In these meetings, plans for daily production and long-term production must be democratically decided by the body. Challenges that emerge in the project must also be identified and resolved.
3. Organization leaders, who must display initiative and perseverance, play a key role in ensuring the successful division of labor. Leaders must also help organize the group into other forms of political action such as demonstrations.
4. Members of the organization must be humble and open to new ideas and technical knowledge, which must be learned through actual participation in the praxis of agricultural production.
5. There is a need for training and capacity-building around the history of land struggle and technical knowledge in agroecology, as well as discussions on timely issues and topics to ensure that farmworkers can raise their political consciousness and scientific expertise. These must also serve to exact the correct attitude for collective production, organization, and mobilization in defending the right to land.
6. There is a need to expand the theory and practice of farmers for the continued struggle for cooperation in production and stance-building on local and national issues.
7. Attention must be given to the writing and publication of primers, bulletins, and readings that could facilitate the exchange of information among *bungkalan* participants.

This model of a collective and cooperative *bungkalan* aims to encourage farmers in and beyond HLI to resist the semi-feudal tenancy and rent system, and land dispossession and concentration to the few. On acquiring and managing their own land, more importantly, tillers could see themselves as agents in "making their own destiny" whose own cultures, knowledge, and contributions matter in the struggle for land (Wright and Labiste 2018, 143).

Natural praxis in Hacienda Luisita

Understanding *bungkalan* as natural praxis foregrounds how critical citizen science could replenish not only the rifts in the planetary metabolism but also the alienation between laborers on land and the land itself. If labor under capitalism functions as means to the exploitation of natural resources, then we could turn to praxes that occasion the opposite. To subvert both semi-feudal relations and the rapacious exhaustion of land in HLI, *bungkalan* and its organic farms (a) observe polyculture and on-farm crop diversity and (b) mollify the influence of agrocorporations and their bourgeois compradors through self-reliance in production.

Polyculture and on-farm crop diversity. Beyond the reclamation of untilled land, organic farming also facilitates the restitution of health in such lands as farmworkers seize resources such as seeds, water supply, and others. Conventional agrochemical farming operates in a monocultural agricultural system, which necessitates the repeated cultivation of the same plant in one place, thus robbing the soil of certain kinds of nutrients. Monocultural plantations practiced in *haciendas* drain the quality of hectares of land for the maximization of profit through cash crops such as sugarcane (UMA 2018). Monoculture is the agrarian foundation of capitalist monopolization (Roche 2009). What is worse, this system does not only instigate a market economy based on private ownership and competition for profit. The velocity of capitalist market demands and backwardness of semi-feudal bondage outpace natural cycles (Martinez-Alier 2002).

How then should the pest that is monoculture be abolished? For Liebig (1859, 183), one of Marx's influences in developing his theory of the metabolic rift in *Capital*, "*rational agriculture*, in contradistinction to the spoliation system of farming, is based upon the principle of *restitution*; by giving back to the fields the conditions of their fertility, the farmer insures the permanence of the latter" (emphasis in original). Polyculture is a diversified, integrated, organic farming system that sees the need for restitution. It requires the integrated care of various species of crops and livestock in an organic farm. In monoculture, hectares of land are lent to a single species. On the other hand, in the holdings in the *bungkalan*, farmworkers plant various kinds of crops, allowing (a) the restitution of nutrients in the soil and (b) the diversification of produce farmers could consume or sell. Crops yielded by polyculture turn out safe to eat as they are grown agrochemical-free. Legume species are also purposefully planted in *bungkalan* plots to restore nitrogen in the soil (UMA 2017). According to farmworker members of UMA,

they especially plant string beans, hyacinth beans ("bataw"), and mung beans ("munggo") to both revitalize the soil and provide food, and legume trees such as madre de cacao to also function as windbreakers.

Also because of the use of organic fertilizers, mulch, insecticides, and pesticides, *bungkalan* does not harm the soil, nearby bodies of water, livestock, stray animals, and the air. Instead, it strengthens the biodiversity and ecological balance in the Hacienda by maintaining an ecosystem of livestock and crop species. The fish and ducks bred, and flowers planted in HLI farmworkers' *bungkalan* are not treated as separate enterprises; as in any organic farm, they comprise an interrelated and integrated whole (Myers 2005).

Self-reliance against imperialist exploitation. As emphasized by KMP, the evasion of expenses attached to chemical-intensive farming is the primary economic consideration in practicing agroecology in the *bungkalan*. In the Philippines, transnational companies dominate the agrochemical industry with more than 200 agricultural pesticide companies, including 30 formulation plants, operating in the archipelago (Prudente, Malarvannan and Tanabe 2007). Capital penetrates agriculture in extremely varied forms (Lenin 1956), and scientific-technical hegemony is one of them (Freenberg 2014). The monopolies established by multi- and transnational corporations (MNCs and TNCs) in the market are embedded in an imperialistic enterprise where free competition, a basic feature of capitalism, gives way to the emergence of large-scale industries that swallow small- and medium-scale production through cartels, syndicates, trusts, mergers, and finance capital.

Imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism (Lenin 1964). Expansion for the sake of alleviating the instability of capital growth includes a wide range of processes moored on land: the commodification, privatization, and conversion of land; the expulsion of peasant communities; the appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation of land; and usury, national debt, and ultimately the credit system, among others (Harvey 2003).

The *hacienda* system in the Philippines shaped the rural economy in service of trans- and multinational agribusinesses in two ways. First, *haciendas* concentrate hectares of land into contiguous parcels in an area. Secondly, it creates an efficient division of labor where tasks of cultivation, harvest, and crop processing are designated among farmworkers. The peasantry, especially the small peasant farmer, continue to experience a staggered process of transformation to landowner-cultivator due to large commercial properties and imperialistic monopolies within the agricultural industry (Putzel 1995). The semi-feudal mode in the form of the tenancy system, where rent embodies the tenant's unpaid labor, is harnessed against farmworkers to serve a "predatory imperialist bourgeoisie" (Aguilar 1989, 42).

UMA presses that the imposition of the Green Revolution during the Cold War best illustrates imperial influence in Philippine agriculture. This possibly intended to counter the spread of Chinese communist influence espoused by the success of agrarian revolution in China in 1949. According to a community organizer of

UMA, the Green Revolution made way for a "backdoor recolonization" where neocolonies such as the Philippines were forced to integrate high-yielding varieties (HYV) or "miracle seeds" that heavily depend on chemical pesticides, fertilizers, and mechanized agricultural systems. Through this "revolution", the country's agricultural sector served as a major ready market for imperialist countries' products. In the 1970s, the Philippines took out loans from international financing institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to fund programs such as Masagana 99 for rice, which increased lending for agriculture from 6 percent of the total bank lending in fiscal years 1948–1960 to 24 percent in the 1970s (IBON 2014). The program threw peasants into indebtedness and perpetual bondage due to the high production costs of Masagana 99 seeds and inputs amidst decreasing incomes (229). Trade deals with MNCs and TNCs prohibit farmers from saving and exchanging seeds; instead, farmers must cultivate genetically modified organisms such as Bt rice and Bt corn to sustain and increase market demand for the same corporations' agro-chemical products (268–69). Another "poster crop" of genetic modification multinationals is Golden Rice, which was touted as a solution to the inadequate amount of vitamin A in the diet of Filipino children. A 2001 report reveals that Golden Rice is nothing but another profiteering venture, as the rice variant only supplies a little over 10 percent of the daily vitamin A requirement of preschool children (Empson 2014, 128). These are a few Philippine examples of what Focus (2020) deems as a "glaring failure of agricultural industrialization and Green Revolution technologies to eradicate global hunger" that "have led rural social movements to reclaim losses in traditional modes of agriculture".

Both farmworkers and the soil in HLI are forced into to the clutches of the empire through the conventional farming system endorsed by the Cojuangco-Aquinos. Peasants are compelled to borrow exorbitant loans from their landlords and usurers to purchase agrochemicals manufactured by MNCs and TNCs (UMA 2017). Such chemicals render the soil acidic, causes pollution, and even invites alien pest species into the garden (55). The continued exponential economic growth of these MNCs and TNCs cannot occur without expanding the rifts in the Earth system (Foster 2000). While the peasantry of HLI is already dispossessed of land, the encroachment of imperialistic corporations further effaces their agency over land. Thus, farmworkers must contend not only against the occasional unforgiving weather in the Philippines, but also against the globalizing world market.

Exemplifying a natural praxis that braids peasant and agrarian concern, *bungkalan* replaces agrochemical products with organic and reproducible enrichers–such as fermented fertilizer juices, Indigenous microorganisms, fermented plant juice, fermented rice wash, fermented fruit juice, fruit fly traps, fish amino acid, lactic acid bacteria serum, oriental herbal nutrients, foliar calcium, calcium phosphate, bio-repellants, foliar tea, and beneficial microorganisms (extended)–all made up of animal and plant refuse found in the surroundings. As mentioned earlier, their organic farm functions as a closed system; any input or implement needed is within reach because the materials needed to create them

are in the natural environment itself. Even seeds are safely kept in seedbanks to be planted for another season—a move that rejects the HYV seeds peddled by MNCs and TNCs, with the support of the International Rice Research Institute, at an exorbitant price (UMA 2017).

Resorting to the aid of carabaos and other relatively small machines such as the hand tractor, the organic and sustainable farm both saves money and curtails gas emissions, energy consumption, and waste production (53). As Foster (2000, 145) suggests, the continual improvement of the soil through "manuring, draining, and irrigating, was possible, and productivity of the least fertile land could rise to a point that brought it much closer to that of the most fertile land". The land could be restituted through proper ecological stewardship, which profit-led ventures hinder (Engels 1975b). Nevertheless, not only is this peasant community reinforcing their agency over the land, they are also undermining the accumulative tactics of the imperial world market. The *bungkalan* does not only act as curative to the soil but also as a preventive measure against threats endorsed by an imperialist system that relies on semi-feudal relations.

Bungkalan as struggle for liberation. To this day, the *bungkalan* campaign remains at the forefront of HLI workers' struggle for land by functioning as a sustainable livelihood for individuals and families perpetually involved in protests (UMA 2017). This militancy draws inspiration from the democratic agrarian revolutions that erupted in Russia in 1917 and China in 1949, according to a community organizer of UMA. As an occasion for consolidated resistance, however, it aims not only to disrupt the status quo of Hacienda Luisita, but also to contribute to the Philippine peasantry by campaigning and providing bases for genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization, two proposals forwarded by the national democratic movement in the country (2). As underscored by members of UMA, *kilusang masa* [mass movement] sets the conditions for the emergence and development of the project, such as collective tillage, training in agroecology, and polycultural production—practices that, whether intentionally or not, provide a potential blueprint for a pro-peasant environmentalism.

At the core of *bungkalan*'s militant character is a proletarian conviction and practice that imbibes the principles of and looks forward to socialist relations in agrarian production, a tendency demonstrated by the emphasis on the welfare and needs of the people while enhancing or improving production (Tariman-Acosta 2017). Its birth amidst civil unrest manifests consolidated resistance, a militant assertion of land upon the principle of "land to the tillers," a manifesto directly belying the capitalist mode of production where tools and lands are separated from their users by way of capital (Collins 1967). Even small owner-cultivators offer their holdings to the cooperative, disavowing their material representation of the landowner or usurer's capital (Lenin 1956). Farmers and agricultural workers are tightly fastened together by a readiness to till their lands and a determination to make such lands productive outside the domain of sugar production (AMBALA 2013). Private land ownership, as Engels (1975b, 128) would put it, "fetters"

production as it constrains agrarian relations to feudal bondage, hindering the development of technical knowledge such as agroecology in farmlands. *Bungkalan* is a rightful seizure of such means of production.

Peasant rights activists from KMP pointed out that agroecology is not revolutionary per se in that corporations also coopt organic agriculture by assimilating it as a market strategy and establishing product and technology monopolies. Genetic modification has also been configured by agrocorporations for capital gain instead of positive environmental outcomes (Wibbelman et al. 2013). *Bungkalan*, on the other hand, responds to the livelihood needs of farmworkers while they forward their right to land.

Participants of *bungkalan* demonstrate natural praxis out of situated experience and struggle. ULWU-AMBALA, UMA, and KMP consolidate resistance to pave the way to genuine agrarian reform, which aims towards the nationalization of rational agriculture and industrialization to advance necessary agricultural technologies such as eco-friendly machinery, irrigation systems, alternative energy sources, and other implements (UMA 2017). The rationalization of agriculture through polyculture and the innovation of expensive TNC and MNC-sanctioned technologies could not only unchain the peasantry from feudal bondage but also restore balance in the ecosystem.

Blueprints for agrarian and ecological reform

As demonstrated by the agroecological practices of polyculture and home-growing sustainable input and elements, and through political organization and collective tillage, *bungkalan* recognizes the two-fold nature of semi-feudal exploitation—that it exploits both the underclass and the environment—and resists such a system through an organic and sustainable agriculture, which can enhance food production, protect the health of the community and, most importantly, shrink the ties between peasant and landowner. Maintaining an organic farm is likened to the history of consolidated resistance:

> *Kagaya ng pagkilos upang bawiin ang lupang matagal nang ipinagkait sa mga magsasaka, ang mapagpasyang pagbabalikwas mula sa kumbensiyonal na agrokemikal na pagsasaka ay masalimuot at hindi maiaasa sa sigasig ng ilan o hiwa-hiwalay na inisyatiba. Dapat sumalig sa organisado at sama-samang pagkilos! Bukod sa kaalamang teknikal, dapat matiyak ang pampulitikang edukasyon ng mga kalahok sa kampanyang bungkalan.* (UMA 2017, 119)
>
> [Like the struggle to seize back the lands withheld from farmers, the choice to defer from conventional agrochemical farming is too intricate to be depended on the hard work of a few or unorganized initiatives. Partake in consolidated resistance! Besides technical knowledge, we need to ensure the political education of the participants of the *bungkalan* campaign.]

Farmers and farmworker members of AMBALA, ULWU, and UMA continue to organically cultivate disputed lands in HLI to provide food for themselves (Tan 2017). In recent years, various *bungkalan* campaigns and peasant protests were also instigated all over the country. In Quezon, for instance, four peasant campouts were successfully launched around June 2017, occupying untilled lands in Hacienda Matias, Hacienda Puyal, Hacienda Uy, and Lupang Gancayco (CPP 2017). More recently, in 2020, urban communities such as Sitio San Roque in Quezon City and urban-based peasant activists have attempted to bring lessons from *bungkalan* to the cities to aid indigent groups who have access to small parcels of land.

The peasant sector's natural praxis will continue to ferment. Despite the successful implementation of the project and its replication in other landholdings in the country, the farmers and agricultural workers hold that the fight is far from over given all the challenges reinforced by semi-feudal. There is a need to empower the peasant movement towards genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization while enjoining other sectors into the *bungkalan* campaign. Its importance lies in its demonstration of ecological importance in organizing production democratically and collectively. *Bungkalan* limns a blueprint for the peasantry's environmentalism, and its site is the land of production itself.

Endnote

1 Conventional agriculture is defined here as any farming system dominant in present day, including high-input and/or industrial agriculture (Seufert 2012).

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