

Maps are usually impersonal objects that conceal the experiences of the people inhabiting a represented space. Beneath the cartographic surface are stories upon stories of struggle and survival.

Throughout the history of cartography, maps have often served scientific, political or military functions. They have been created and used by centralized bodies (states, corporations, institutions) disseminating information and enforcing notions such as territory, ownership, statehood, among others.

Rudimentary visual elements (lines, colors, shapes) are activated to delineate colonially drawn borders and other geopolitical (foreign policy) concepts that contain and control the people.



Entire populations and ecosystems are subject to these ideas. What is known, what is controlled, what is contained are all laid out in an inanimate object and regarded as truth. Thus, maps are tools of institutions to exercise power, crafted to justify various acts from exploration to exploitation.

When you pay too much attention to the dominant boundaries and categories, you tend to forget to look at the bigger picture.

All maps can be weaponized. As they chart projections of space and place, they also hide entire networks of reality. While showing us a prescribed view of the world, they also control how we move and how we think. They not only inform but they also impose.

HOW DO WE
TAKE BACK
MAPPING?
HOW DO WE
MAP AGAINST
HEGEMONIC
POWER?

Counter-mapping is a practice of producing maps which counter dominant narratives imposed by positions of power. These include maps that were made by institutionalized, professionalized cartographic houses working for the state or large corporations. In broader terms, it counters dominant power structures to further more progressive and pro-people agendas. (Hodgson & Shroeder, 2002). It recognizes the idea that maps were never neutral or value free images. (Harvey, 1988). The term is coined by Nancy Peluso (1995) who argues that the technique gives communities the power to control their own representation and elaborately describe the resources and their use in everyday life.

Counter-mapping is a reversal, a subversion, of the state practiced boundary-making and the cartographic gaze. It is mapping the ground from the ground, and not from an elitist authoritative position. But then, we can also recognize and come to realize, that the ground is, in fact a position of authority.

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Consolidating information.

Gather stories, narratives, beliefs, data, observations. How do we draw them all up in a map?

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Engaging the public.

Ask others. Verify claims. Share Knowledge. Assess together. Generate wider discourse.



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Exposing and grounding contradictions.

What doesn't make sense? Where do we find oppression, violence, injustice? Where is there inequality in resources, access to basic social services?



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Resistance.

Know and assert your rights! It can be used to expose and address rights violations, displacement, harassments, aggression and structural violence. It can also be used to present space based on everyday shared experiences of a community and ultimately articulate collective aspirations for a shared space, which, at this day and age, may be deemed subversive. As Dennis Wood (2012) aptly put it, geographic imaginations are an important site for struggle.

There are several available formats in which we can practice counter-mapping. Geographic information systems, participatory 3D mapping, infographic maps in reproducible formats, web based open street mapping.

For this project, we turn to

COGNITIVE MAPPING

[mental maps, mental sketch maps, hand drawn, analogue, low tech...]

Cognitive mapping is a mental representation of the environment that captures the spatial relations among things in the world (Nadel).

It is a process composed of a series of psychological transformation by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his everyday spatial environment (Downs and Stea).

Properties of cognitive maps (that people tend to worry about but shouldn't overthink) to rethink: Details, Accuracy, Features. In fact, put details only as you see fit. Ignore accuracy. All maps are distortions. Highlight features that matter to you. And if you can, highlight features that matter to you AND your community. Scale. The scale of the space you will represent your map will depend on the stories you will put on it. It can be as vast as you want or it can be as intimate as your own skin. Totally up to you. Orientation. This project is not interested in the cardinal directions. We want to orient the participants towards solidarity.

Towards accountability. Towards vigilance.
Towards justice. Towards care.
We activate cognitive mapping with the context of counter-mapping.

LET'S MAP

This is not an introduction to “mapping”

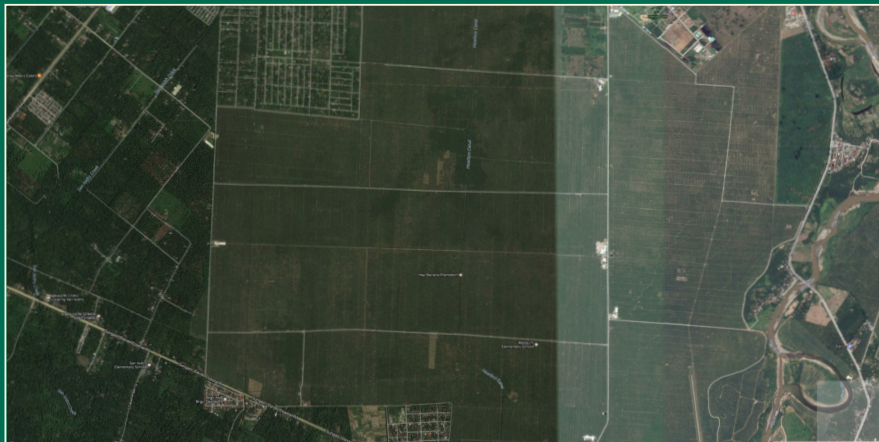
It is a re-introduction to the idea of mapping as a political gesture where we can reclaim authorship of representations of spaces we occupy.

Although this is an individual exercise, it is best done with a group.

Map alone >> **Map together.** **Map individually** >> **Map collectively.**

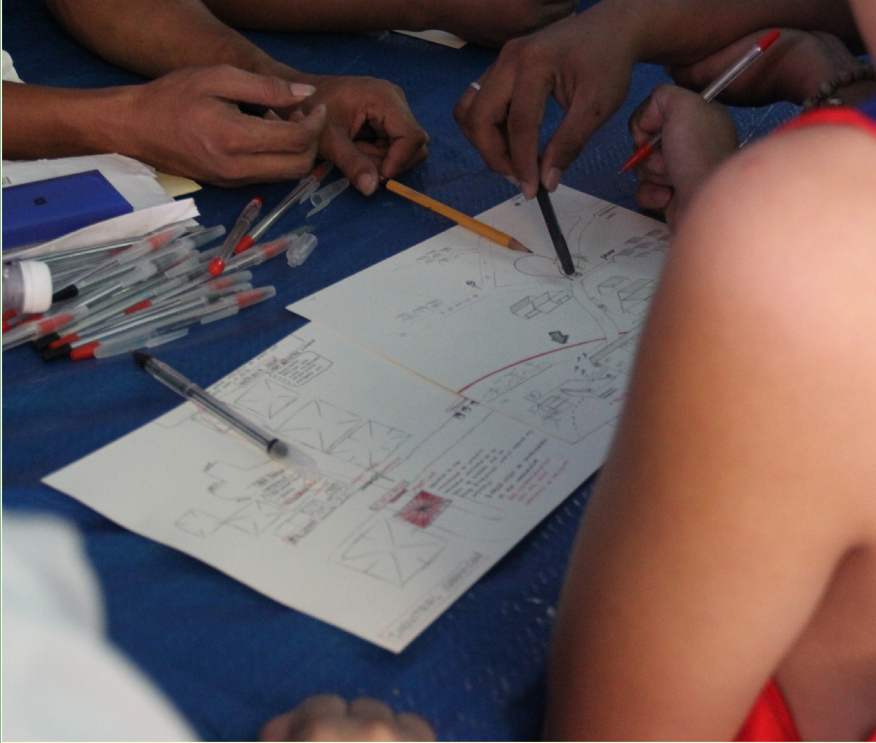
Participants are asked to individually draw their maps in relation to shared conditions of community.

In most cases, the project of cognitive counter-mapping is directed towards marginalized communities in addressing issues around human rights and social justice.



As the session unfolds, we
Detect shared issues,
Define collective identities
Articulate collective visions and strategies
Identify common enemies.





MATERIALS

Usually we use a4 sized (manageable) off-white (a lot less intimidating than white but clean and neutral enough) board paper (sturdy enough to work on the floor, against a carried flat surface, won't easily tear).

For drawing and writing, we use pencils and black and red pens. Participants are encouraged to finish with the ink pens as they are more deliberate and legible. Though soft materials such as crayons and pastels are welcome and can afford an entirely different expressive texture, line drawings and text bring the stories closer to a discursive quality of mappings that we are after.

Otherwise, use anything you see fit depending on the needs of your participants and access to materials.

Mapping sessions may take place in communities during solidarity visits, picket lines and protest camps, peoples homes, classrooms, churches, the streets, anywhere

This can be any place and time that we activate into a space where we critically think of space.

INSTRUCTIONS

- ◇ 1 Write your name. Claim authorship. Your perspective is central. Draw your general idea of the space(s) you want to map. Your town, your ancestral domain, your city, your house, your route, your body, your community, your universe(s), your mind
- ◇ 2 Visualize lines and landmarks. Illustrate Movement. Connections. Relationships.
- ◇ 3 Plot resources. Necessities. Home, food, water, health, faith, community, knowledge, institutions.
- ◇ 4 Identify spaces where you feel safe, comfortable, hopeful.
- ◇ 5 Identify spaces where you feel fear, danger, distress. Spaces where you have experienced trauma. Land grabbing. Militarization. Mineral extraction. Armed conflict. Rights abuses. Disputed spaces. Prison. Plantation. Factory. Gentrification.
- ◇ 6 Label your drawings. Name what needs to be named but in your own terms. Reclaim place names. Use your own language. vernacularize
- ◇ 7 Finally, Articulate shared conditions and experiences of your community. Write your narrative statement. Register your collective calls.



WHAT TO DO WITH THE MAPS

Gather and share your maps, build and consolidate community. Map drawings can be used for grassroots organizing, social investigation and class analysis (SICA), resource management, psychosocial interventions to fuel people's campaigns, engage the public, engage the state, engage dominant power structures.

Produce new knowledge



Take action



Assess learnings



Product new knowledge

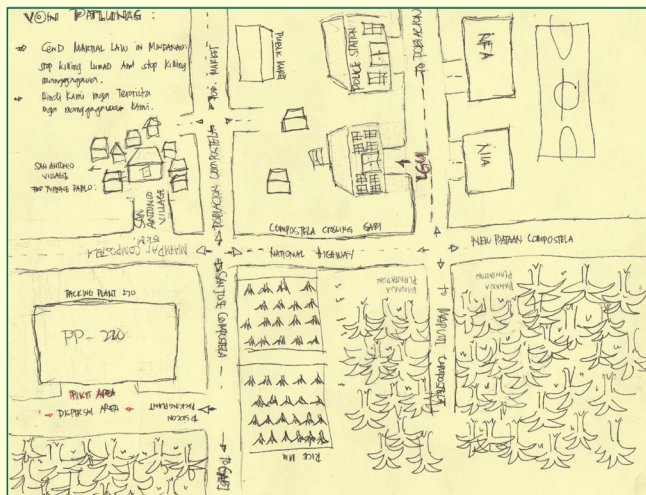
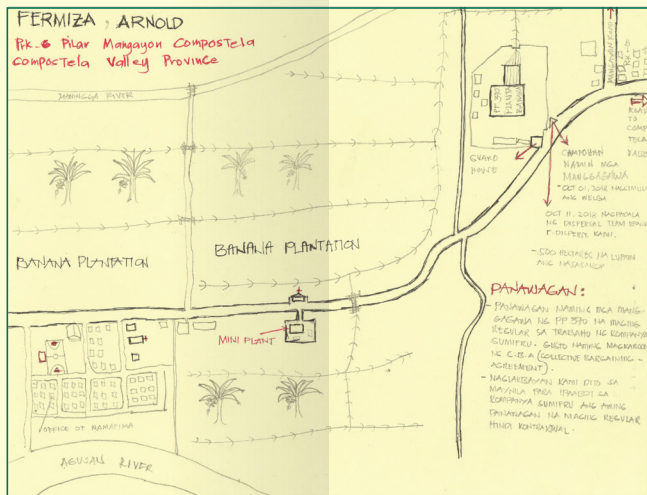
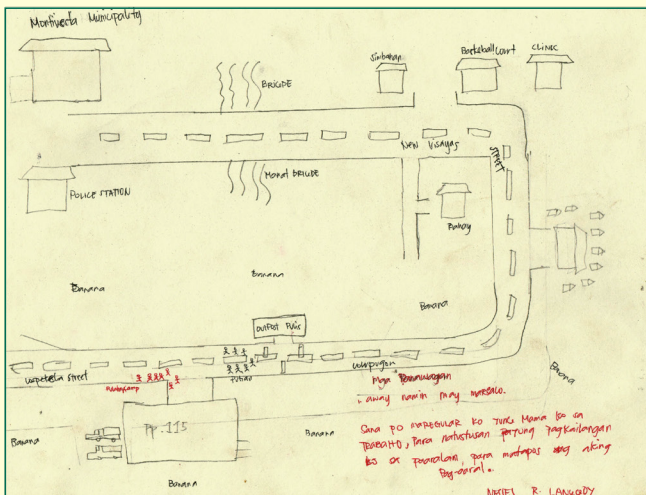
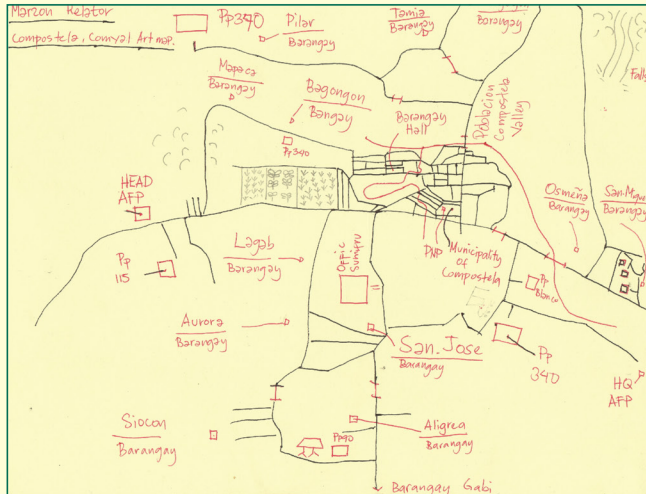
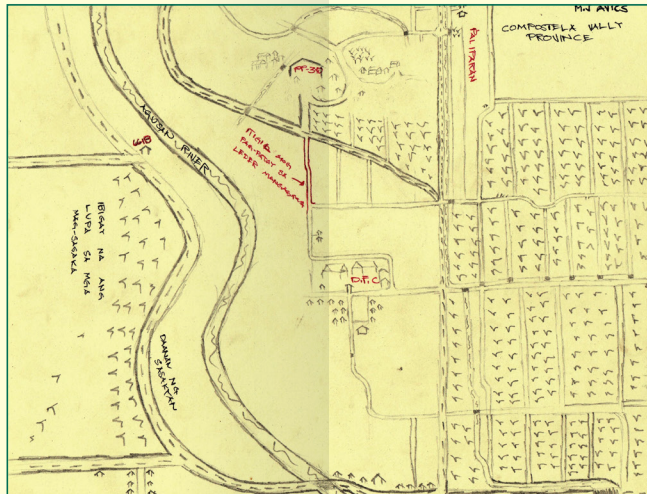
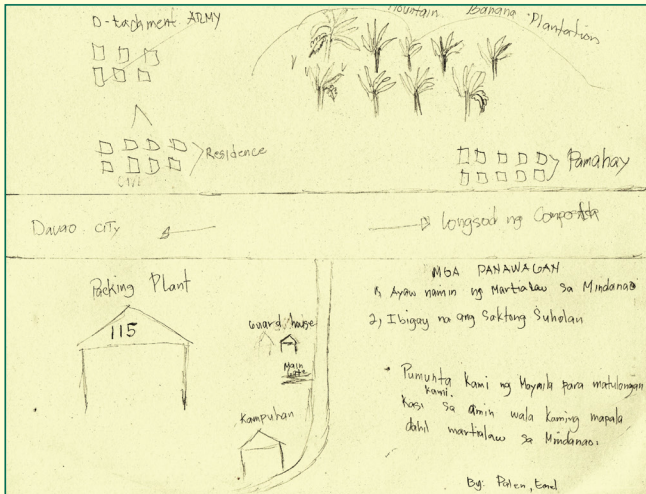
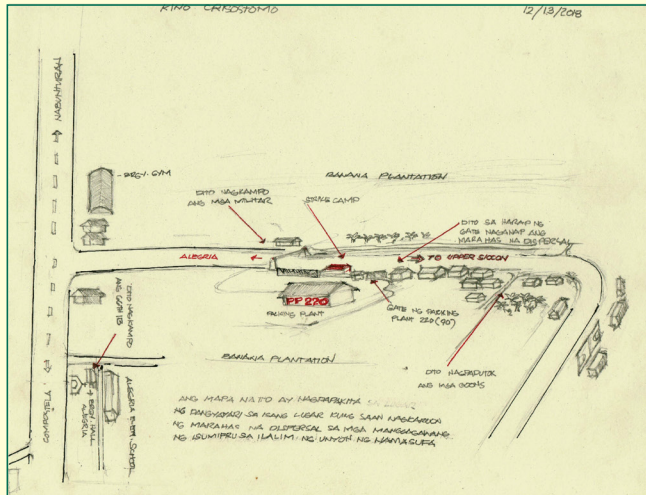
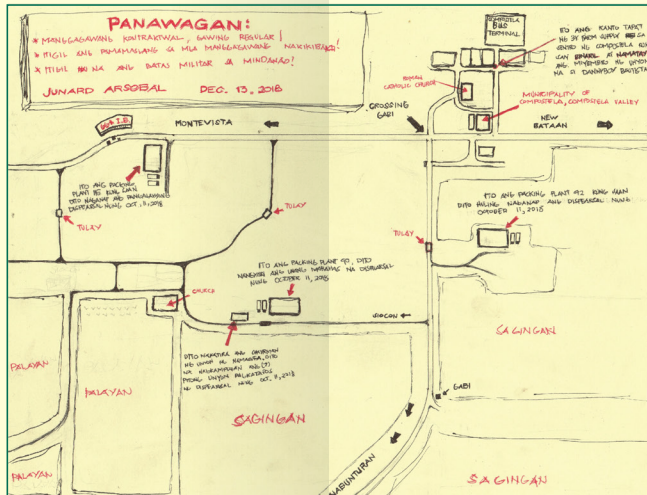
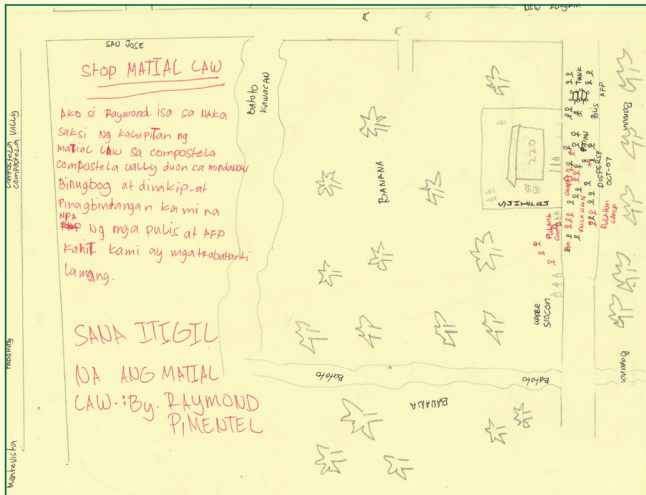


Take action

The use of this method totally depends on the participant mappers as it allows people to critically evaluate power relations in the spaces they inhabit.

These sessions should be done within circles of trust and solidarity. Much of the stories and narratives that may come up within these sessions are sensitive and the participants highly vulnerable. It is advised that the utmost respect and discretion is observed. This method maintains a critical lens to dominant power structures and prioritizes the marginalized, disenfranchised and deliberately silenced perspectives.





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Photographs in this article were taken from various mapping sessions around the Philippines 2016-2023. Consent was given to publish on platforms that maintains solidarity to the struggles of farmers, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk and workers.