

Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”

Edited by Alyssa Paredes, Sophie Chao, and Andrés León Araya

Plantation Pachinko: Serious Games in/after the Agricultural Estate

Alyssa Paredes

Anthropology, University of Michigan; aepare@umich.edu

In July 2021, the city of Polomolok, South Cotabato in the southern Philippines witnessed a spectacle like never before. Dole-Stanfilco, the multinational fruit conglomerate controlling tens of thousands of hectares in the area, had transformed its vast pineapple plantation into the world’s largest pachinko board as part of a commercial promo for a million-peso raffle draw. Sprawling across the foot of Mt. Matutum, rows of the bristly fruit were covered over with a translucent black screen and converted into a series of pins and chutes (see Image 1). A giant rubber ball bounced its way into numbered win pockets, producing the winning combination. Journalists and spectators lauded the event, but civil society actors responded with outrage. The Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (UMA), the Philippines federation of agricultural workers, declared in a written statement that “The struggle on the plantation is not a game!” (UMA Pilipinas 2021).

I was not in Polomolok when Dole-Stanfilco held its grand raffle draw. Instead, I tuned in online as the event aired live on Facebook.¹ From my screen halfway across the globe, I watched ebullient celebrity hosts introduce the game and announce the winning digits as the oversized balls came tumbling down the plantation. I followed other viewers’ messages of excitement and delight as they flooded in by the thousands from across the archipelago. All the while, back on

¹ See https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=537322491035116&ref=watch_permalink (last accessed 23 November 2023).

the plantation in Polomolok, anonymized laborers barely visible from the margins of the camera's frame pushed the balls up the sloped fields and plied through the bristly hedges underneath the pachinko board's translucent netting. I could not help but see them as displayed, in plain sight, as cogs in a machine of epic proportions (see Image 2). It seemed hardly coincidental that the company should choose to convert its plantation into the likeness of a game so closely associated with a morally suspect system and rhythms of repetition with impossible odds of reward.



Image 1: The pineapple plantation as the world's largest pachinko board (source: Raty Syka; reproduced here with permission)



Image 2: The plantation worker as a cog in a giant machine (source: Raty Syka; reproduced here with permission)

Dole-Stanfilco’s Plantation Pachinko manifests a certain ludic logic, where crossovers between danger and delight, peril and pleasure compound the ability of extractive industries to accumulate surplus value off of laboring bodies. Radically transforming landscapes in ways that confuse the farm and the arena, the ludic challenges understandings of the “factory in the field” as a zone of rational scientific management and reveals the workings of patronage and cultural

hegemony. Those who followed the event in Polomolok hailed it as a unique spectacle, indeed “the world’s very first”. But it is far from the only place where the lexicon of the plantation and of the game have intersected. From college campuses to professional athletic fields, Black communities in the United States have cited the plantation in conjunction with the gamification of life to identify new iterations of familiar structures of oppression (Byers 1997; Hawkins 2010; Lauro 2020; Williams et al. 2021). Differential colonial histories, positions in global divisions of labor, and configurations of land, among numerous other factors, separate the contemporary plantation economies of the Philippines from post-plantation societies like the United States. Yet historical resonances across these contexts serve as invitations to think about the plantation methodologically, as both bound by and exceeding the spatial fixities of the agroecological form.

Where I do fieldwork in the southern Philippines, people often describe political life surrounding the monocultured estates like a nefarious game, and the choice to speak out a high-stakes gamble. Never are these games metaphorical in the Geertzian sense of “deep play” (Geertz 1973). Instead, they are profoundly material, even life-threatening, in ways that embody instead what Sherry Ortner (2006: 128) referred to as “serious games”. A satirical cartoon released alongside UMA’s statement serves as a powerful visualization (see Image 3). In it, a menacing, rotund, pineapple-headed personification of Dole company stands atop the plantation pachinko, pineapples-turned-pinballs in hand. On the board, three laborers run, crawl, and slide between pins in their attempt to make a futile escape as the pinballs come tumbling down at them. At the far end of the board are chutes, all marked with skulls and crossbones, marking their inescapable death. The veneer of humor and play might serve as a “fictionalizing pretext”, to borrow from Gregory Bateson (1972: 180), but it bears noting the Philippines has in fact been identified as the world’s “deadliest country” for defenders of land and environment (Regencia 2019). Behind this label is the necropolitical assemblage of mining, logging, and agribusiness, which continues to define how rural communities are made to live or let to die (Li 2010).



Image 3: “THE STRUGGLE ON THE PLANTATION IS NOT A GAME! Does Dole find their giant pachinko in Polomolok entertaining? This is an insult to all farmers dispossessed of their land and to all laborers abused on the plantation!” (source: UMA Pilipinas 2021; reproduced here with permission)

It was curious to follow Dole-Stanfilco’s Plantation Pachinko from my home in the United States. Here, citing the lexicon of the plantation to critique racialized power dynamics and regimented structures of control has longstanding provenance in yet another world of “serious games”—American sports. Drawing on personal experience growing up in a Southern tobacco- and peach-growing town, Billy Hawkins (2010) describes the funneling of “new crops” of young Black athletes into revenue-generating college sports as constituting nothing less than “The New

Plantation” (see also Rhoden 2007). Valued for physical performance, but structurally marginalized from paths to leadership, Black athletes in the National Basketball Association have pointed to plantation structures as they challenge the overwhelming whiteness of the plantocracy of coaches, general managers, league executives, and “owners” (Streeter 2019). Public criticism of the National Football League’s policies following Colin Kaepernick’s protest (Martin 2018), and of their practices of “race norming” for legal settlements concerning concussion-related injuries (Canada and Carter 2021), have revolved around enduring plantation mentalities. But it is not only the players and critics who see these legacies at play. Authorities themselves wield the vocabulary of the planter in the ways they restrict players’ mobility. University basketball coach Greg McDermott infamously expressed that he needed “everybody [on the team] to stay on the plantation” after a major loss (Mather 2021). Decades after sociologist Harry Edwards accused the National Collegiate Athletic Association of running a plantation system in 1967, NCAA founder Walter Byers himself proceeded to condemn his own organization for the economic tyranny embedded in its code of amateurism (Byers 1997; Edwards 2017).

Such vernacular references to plantation politics, as Bianca Williams (2021: 3) and her co-authors argue, should be taken seriously as they identify machineries that propel the “hauntings of plantation life” into the future (see also McKittrick 2011, 2013). That this lexicon should surface so prominently in American sports reveals how similar logics undergird the objectification and financialization of laboring bodies into vessels for entertainment even where the rows of cotton, cane, and fruit are gone.

There are worlds of difference between the Filipino laborers on Dole plantations, enslaved Africans turned into chattel property, and American sportsmen. Indeed, they are so different that holding them in tandem compels the question of just how much is truly shared. To speak of the plantation as a methodological provocation, however, is to recognize that while plantation politics between these contexts are not commensurate, neither are they completely disconnected. They share a genealogical heritage which renders human subjects as property—mere bodies in a nefarious game—and places as playable—emptied wastelands open to civilizational design. These linkages are historical, rather than metaphoric, in nature. It was the

US colonial transfer and translation of racial ideologies of limited subjecthood that justified the 20th century American plantation project in the southern Philippines in the first place (Paredes forthcoming). That necropolitical crossovers manifest across these spaces and scales bespeaks a shared experience of the workings of capitalist accumulation. Shaping not only modes of counter-insurgency ([see, in this collection, Guillen-Araya and León Araya](#)), surveillance ([see Martinez; Strange](#)), and infrastructural design ([see McKinson](#)), the plantation also governs modes of play, entertainment, and leisure. This illuminates how the plantation has proven so recalcitrant to historical rupture, so effective at shapeshifting, and so entrenched in the fabric of social life across worlds.

References

- Bateson G (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Byers W (1997) *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Canada T and Carter C R (2021) The NFL's racist "race norming" is an afterlife of slavery. *Scientific American* 8 July <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-nfls-racist-race-norming-is-an-afterlife-of-slavery/> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- Edwards H (2017) *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (new edn). Champaign: University of Illinois Press
- Geertz C (1973) Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (pp412-453). New York: Basic Books
- Hawkins B (2010) *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Lauro S J (2020) *Kill the Overseer! The Gamification of Slave Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Li T M (2010) To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations. *Antipode* 41(s1):66-93

- Martin G (2018) Sports sociologist Harry Edwards on NFL “plantation mentality”. *California Magazine* 30 May <https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/online/sports-sociologist-harry-edwards-nfl-plantation-mentality/> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- Mather V (2021) Creighton suspends basketball coach over “plantation” pep talk. *The New York Times* 5 March <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/sports/ncaabasketball/creighton-greg-mcdermott-plantation.html> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- McKittrick K (2011) On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(8):947-963
- McKittrick K (2013) Plantation futures. *Small Axe* 17(3):1-15
- Ortner S B (2006) *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Paredes A (forthcoming) Plantation liberalism: A genealogy of personhood, property, and activism between Philippine Mindanao and the Black Atlantic. *Current Anthropology*
- Regencia T (2019) Philippines “deadliest” country for environmental, land activists. *Al Jazeera* 30 July <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/30/philippines-deadliest-country-for-environmental-land-activists> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- Rhoden W C (2007) *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. New York: Penguin Random House
- Streeter K (2019) Is slavery’s legacy in the power dynamics of sports? *The New York Times* 16 August <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/16/sports/basketball/slavery-anniversary-basketball-owners.html> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- UMA Pilipinas (2021) Hindi laro ang kahirapan sa plantasyon: Pahayag hinggil sa “Plantation Pachinko” ng Dole. [The struggle on the plantation is not a game: Statement on Dole’s “Plantation Pachinko”.] *Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura Pilipinas* 7 August <https://umapilipinas.wordpress.com/2021/08/07/hindi-laro-ang-kahirapan-sa-plantasyon-pahayag-hinggil-sa-plantation-pachinko-ng-dole/> (last accessed 23 November 2023)
- Williams B C, Squire D D and Tuitt F A (eds) (2021) *Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education*. New York: State University Press of New York