Embodied Cartography in Masinloc, West Philippine Sea

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Introduction

Scarborough Shoal, locally known as Bajo de Masinloc or Panatag Shoal, has long served as a natural refuge for small-scale fishing boats. The shoal's natural formation, with its lagoon surrounded by reefs, has historically offered calm and safe shelter during stormy weather, which is the basis for its local name 'Panatag' (Lopez, 2024), meaning "calm" or "tranquil" in Filipino. The term holds both emotional and historical resonance for Filipino fisherfolk. However, this sense of refuge has been disrupted by intensifying geopolitical conflict in recent years.

220 kilometers off the Philippines' largest island, Luzon, Panatag Shoal sits within the exclusive economic zone and municipal fishing grounds. Its strategic location in the West Philippine Sea places it on a corridor carrying about $3.4 trillion in trade annually. Over the past two decades, China's aggressive military expansion in the region has prompted increased naval and surveillance activity from other foreign powers seeking to protect vital trade routes. Local communities now face restricted fishing, constant monitoring, and militarized waters, straining both their livelihood and their bond to the sea. In this climate, the right to represent one's place, to name and narrate it, becomes both an act of agency and survival.

Drawing on the Subjective Atlas framework's emphasis on lived, emotional, and sensory geographies, we organized a workshop with the fisherfolk as narrative-makers and visual co-authors of place. Memory, story, and embodied knowledge are validated through subjective mapping as essential ways of knowing, capable of challenging colonial and technocratic norms of representation. This participatory art-based approach engages in reframing its cartography, not as an extractive or imperial tool, but as a method of listening, reciprocity, and co-authorship.

The activity was part of Project PANATAG, led by artist Josephine Turalba. The workshop applied the Subjective Atlas methodology, developed through Subjective Editions as part of Annelys de Vet's design practice in critical and participatory cartography. Their joint *Subjective Atlas of the Philippines* brings this methodology into local contexts through collaborative visual mapping. This article reflects on the participatory mapping workshop held in Masinloc, Zambales, where our respective artistic research practices intersected through embodied cartography and subjective mapping. In Masinloc, we came together with fisherfolk, marine biology students, and local artists to co-create drawings and visual narratives that surfaced memory, cultural knowledge, and lived experience in the West Philippine Sea.

While building on the momentum from prior workshops in the context of the *Subjective Atlas of the Philippines*, the Masinloc workshop stood out for its immediate geopolitical relevance and emotional depth. While still being in the middle of the process, and eager to learn from our experiences, this article examines how participatory visual methods may contribute to place-making, narrative sovereignty, and political presence in contested maritime spaces. Through this reflection, we seek to understand how embodied cartography can become a tool for both representation and resistance.



Figure 1. Young learners actively contributing their insights and creativity during the workshop. Photo by Viado, 2025.

Methodology

A conceptual anchor of PANATAG is the *Mapa de las Islas Filipinas* (1734), created by Jesuit priest Pedro Murillo Velarde and engraved by Filipino artist Nicolás de la Cruz Bagay. While often cited in legal efforts to assert Philippine territorial claims, the map is also a colonial artifact, designed to fix borders and assert imperial control. By juxtaposing this map with the community-generated visual expressions from Masinloc, with our way of working, we aim to reclaim the right to draw and to redraw. It repositions cartographic authority from the state to the sea's stewards, demonstrating that maps can emerge not only from surveyors' tools but from the hands of those who fish, remember, and resist.

To understand the socio-political and cultural dimensions of coastal life in Masinloc, we employed a framework that is grounded in artistic research, participatory design, and embodied cartography. These methodologies are rooted in the Subjective Atlas framework, which positions mapping as a political and cultural act shaped by lived experience (De Vet, 2007, 2015). Here we treat cartography not as a static or objective tool, but as a performative, sensory, and participatory process that centers co-creation and local authorship.

The workshop design evolved organically as well as was intentional, shaped by the participants' responses, available energy, and unfolding conversations. Rather than following a linear structure, the day unfolded fluidly, beginning with a simple icebreaker, followed by a short presentation of previous workshop outputs to help set expectations and establish rapport, then drawing, sharing, and collaborative engagements that emerged naturally from the group dynamic. While the overall day unfolded with flexibility, many components were intentionally designed. Flag collages, for instance, were offered as a continuous option throughout the workshop. Participants engaged with it voluntarily—some during breaks, others in between drawing or after completing their main work. This open structure allowed for layered engagement and self-paced participation. This flexibility supported varied expressions and levels of participation.

Drawing was prioritized as a low-barrier yet expressive form that allowed for both individual and collective meaning-making. Collaborative drawing with Casa San Miguel resident artists enabled layered interpretations, while participants also shared media—photos and videos—from their mobile devices, which were collected by the project documenter with their consent. Facilitators posed questions such as "What's the first word that comes to mind when you think of your region of the Philippines?" and "How do you experience your environment through daily life?" to activate reflection. These guided prompts were supported by group discussions and hands-on art-making.

24 Participants included seventeen (17) fisherfolk and extended community (mostly men) and eight (8) student trainees of B.S. Fisheries from President Ramon Magsaysay State University. Tables were initially mixed to encourage dialogue across backgrounds, but participants naturally gravitated toward configurations where they felt most comfortable. Each table was supported by facilitators and CSM artists to assist with translation, motivation, and story-to-image development.

The project was structured with embedded ethical care. Informed consent was secured at registration, and participants received a modest honorarium to compensate for lost income. A gender sensitivity briefing was conducted by a social worker. Facilitators remained flexible, allowing participants to engage in their own ways, through quiet drawing, spontaneous karaoke, or oral storytelling. The atmosphere was kept relaxed and hospitable, supported by unlimited coffee, a mid-morning snack, a full lunch, and a mid-afternoon snack served before the workshop concluded. These provisions were essential in sustaining energy and signaling care throughout the day. In Filipino culture, eating together fosters connection and dialogue, and mealtimes are moments of informal exchange and trust-building among participants and facilitators.

This situated research methodology affirmed the agency of all participants, not merely as contributors, but as co-authors. Rather than imposing rigid forms, PANATAG facilitated conditions for an emergent and embodied mapping practice grounded in lived experience, cultural rhythm, and community trust. By facilitating processes rather than imposing form, PANATAG cultivates the conditions for an alternative cartography, rooted in lived experience, sensory presence, and the fluid rhythm of coastal life.

The contributions will appear in the *Subjective Atlas of the Philippines*, internationally distributed as both a printed volume and a downloadable PDF. Published under a Creative Commons license, the work can be freely circulated and republished across platforms, expanding its accessibility and reach. The book will also be shared directly with the fisherfolk and other participants upon completion. Beyond its printed format, select contributors will be invited to speak at public launch events to present their contributions and use their visualisations as storytelling tools. These presentations offer participants an opportunity to further articulate their lived realities, allowing the visual material to function not only as a representation but also as a generative tool for personal and political narration.

The reflections and observations in the following section are drawn from this single-day workshop and informed by the authors' field notes, facilitation, and documentation of the co-creative process. While mediated through researcher observation, they reflect the voices, drawings, and shared experiences of Masinloc participants.

Findings / Field-Based Insights

The following four insights emerged from our shared fieldwork during the Masinloc workshop. The reflections are drawn from conversations with the participants, informal storytelling, and artistic expressions exchanged throughout the day. They represent our collective interpretation of the experiences voiced and visualized by the community. They are grounded in unpublished field notes by three of the workshop's primary facilitators and documenters: Annelys de Vet, Josephine Turalba, and Lyn Viado (June 2025).

1. **Community maps reveal profound emotional ties to the sea that challenge official narratives.**
   Participants' responses during the Masinloc workshop revealed deeply rooted emotional and cultural ties to the sea that challenge dominant territorial framings. As Turalba recounts, "The act of naming terms like laot [open sea], layag [sail], tyaga [perseverance], banayad [calm], and mamamana [hunter/fisher with bow and arrow] reflects deeply felt experiences and relationships with the sea, which contribute to the emotional and cultural mapping of maritime space." These terms go beyond mere geographic markers; they carry affective, ancestral, and livelihood meanings.



Figure 2. Responses for the one-word ice breaker. Photo taken by Annelys De Vet.

Community-generated maps transcend traditional cartographic boundaries by capturing these emotional, cultural, and spiritual connections—dimensions often absent from official representations. We further observed that their songs, drawings, and stories created a collective mapping, rooted in a sum of individual voices, and inspired or informed by each other. The workshop space itself became a site of both vulnerability and vitality. These expressive cartographies reveal affective geographies that directly challenge dominant state narratives, reframing maritime discourse through deeply personal storytelling and art, focusing on experiences with place rather than depicting 'neutral' geography.

Lyn Viado's detailed observations provide vivid insight into the lived realities behind these maps:

"Geovani is a local artist in Masinloc. He creates reggae music and sometimes performs at the beach resorts with his band. He is also a local tattoo artist in the area and was recognized by his fisherfolk friends as a great artist. During the workshop, he created a flag that symbolizes free sailing or 'Malayang Paglalayag' [Free Sailing]. He also drew the common food of the fisher folks, known locally as 'daing' [sun-dried fish], paired with fresh tomatoes and seaweed. According to Geovani, they typically eat this dish when they can't go out to sea because of bad weather."

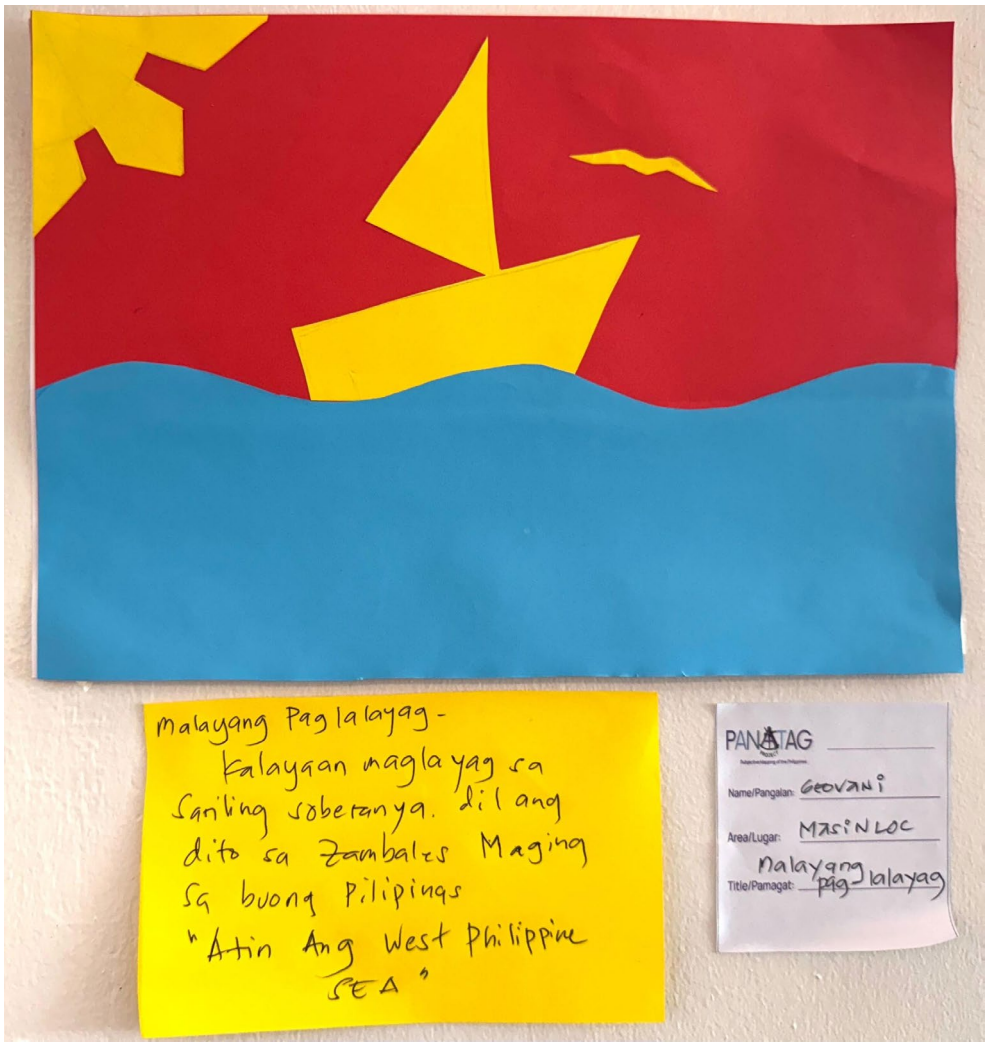

Figure 3. *Malayang Paglalayag* by Geovani Macatuno. Photo taken by Josephine Turalba.

> Viado also recounts how environmental and geopolitical challenges shape the community's experiences:

"We used to catch a lot of fish, but now, due to dredging activities in their area, their catch of fish has significantly reduced. Geovani verbalized that, 'Marami na po ang tatlong isda sa isang laot.'[Catching even just three fish in one fishing trip is already considered plenty.] There are also recent mining activities in their area, which result in flooding whenever there's a typhoon. Other fishermen shared that they usually fish in the area of Scarborough Shoal because this is where a lot of different fish live, and they catch a lot of fish for a living. However, due to the presence of Chinese personalities and infrastructure in the area, they are not allowed to go there or even near the Scarborough Shoal. They fear reprisals by water cannons from the Chinese if they are spotted in the area. Since the territorial dispute has been affecting their source of living, fisherfolk are forced to find alternative work aside from fishing."

In addition to these hardships, cultural practices remain vital:

"Some participants also shared how they honor their cultural practices when fishing. One fisherman averred, 'Pag pumapalaot po kami, may mga baon po kaming pagkain. Binibigyan

po namin ng kapiraso ng pagkain naming ang mga isda at hinuhulog sa dagat para maka huli kami ng maraming isda.' It is also their way of giving back to the God of the sea, which they call 'Bathala,' for all the fish that they catch when fishing. Also, this serves as their charm to catch more fish every time they sail."
Echoing these perspectives, De Vet states, "I believe art opens another space... we ask for their stories, any story, not a particular story," highlighting the power of open-ended, participatory storytelling in shaping alternative spatial imaginaries grounded in lived experience.



Figure 4. *Ingat Papa* by Anthony "Kapitan Tony" Collado, Rendered map.

2. Naming Panatag asserts local sovereignty and cultural memory.

This theme emerged directly from the stories and discussions shared during the workshop, where naming practices—both formal and informal—surfaced as key expressions of identity, memory, and place. In the broader geopolitical context, the contested shoal is referred to by the Philippines as *Panatag Shoal* or *Bajo de Masinloc*, while China calls it *Huangyan Dao*（黄岩岛）. These divergent names reflect competing territorial claims and geopolitical narratives. Against this backdrop, the fisherfolk's continued use of "Panatag" or "Bajo de Masinloc" reclaims a localized, lived relationship to the sea, rooted in history, livelihood, and cultural memory.

We heard fisherfolk speak about Scarborough Shoal and their historical fishing rights there, asserting their connection and traditional knowledge about the territory. As Lyn Viado recorded:

"Other fishermen shared that they usually fish in the area of Scarborough Shoal because this is where a lot of different fish live, and they catch a lot of fish for a living. However, due to the presence of Chinese personalities and infrastructure in the area, they are not allowed to go there or even go near the Scarborough Shoal. They fear reprisals by water cannons from the Chinese if they are spotted in the area."

This highlights how naming *Scarborough* affirms their lived experience, cultural memory, and claims to local sovereignty despite territorial restrictions. As Turalba explains, the term *Panatag* embodies resistance by asserting community identity and memory against external impositions

By invoking Panatag, the community reclaims a narrative of peace and safety in a geopolitically tense region. This localized naming functions as both an act of poetic resistance and a tool for galvanizing solidarity. It fosters pride, continuity, and stewardship of land and sea. Naming transforms Abstract geopolitical struggles into lived realities—where identity, memory, and place intersect meaningfully (A. De Vet & L. Viado, unpublished field notes, June 2025).

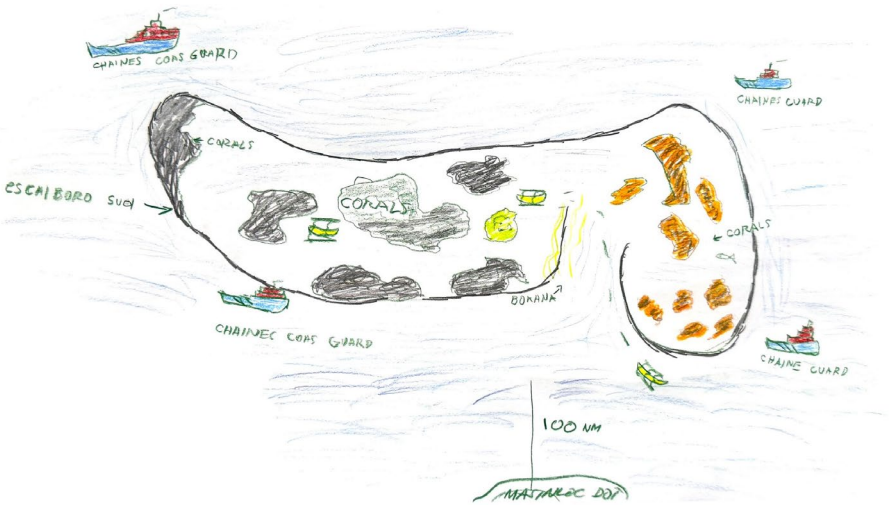

Figure 5. *Bawal Mangisda* by Marcial Lequiron, Rendered map.

Thus, naming reclaims agency, articulates belonging, and resists erasure. It reinforces the community's stake in shaping their maritime future on their own terms.

3. **Embodied cartography contributes to collective solidarity.**
Throughout the workshop, we witnessed how mapping and image-making became practices of togetherness. Group artworks—such as Geovani's flag, symbolizing "Malayang Paglalayag" (Free Sailing)—emerged as powerful expressions of shared identity and aspiration. As Viado wrote, "He also drew the common food of the fisher folks, known locally as 'daing,' paired with fresh tomatoes and seaweed" (Viado, unpublished field notes, June 2025).

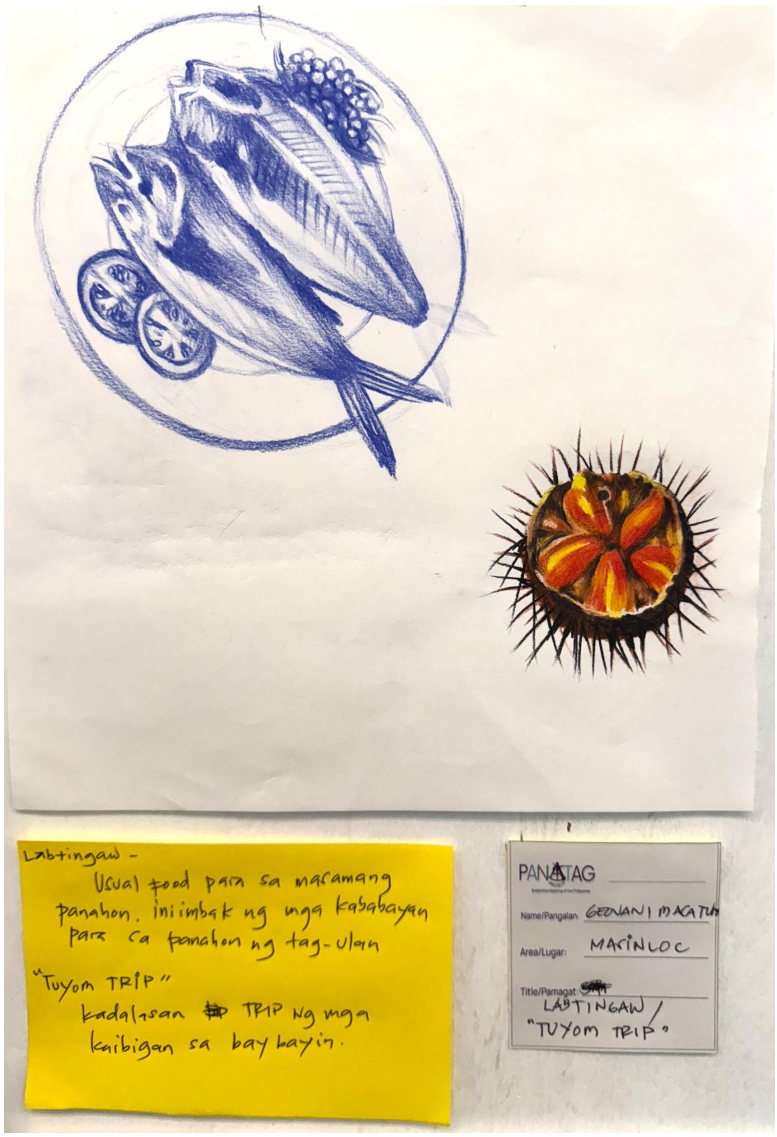

Figure 6. *Labtingaw / Tuyom Trip* by Geovani Macatuno. Photo taken by Josephine Turalba.

These drawings, hung side by side, became visual anchors of both personal expression and communal meaning. Through collaborative creation and storytelling, the artworks reflected shared hopes and fostered solidarity across the room.

Facilitators and artists played an active role in animating these expressions, moving from table to table to support, translate, and amplify the stories being told through images. De Vet (unpublished field notes, June 2025) noted that while flag-making was introduced as an optional activity, "more and more people wanted to make one." This growing interest in shared visual expression underscored the resonance of the activity.

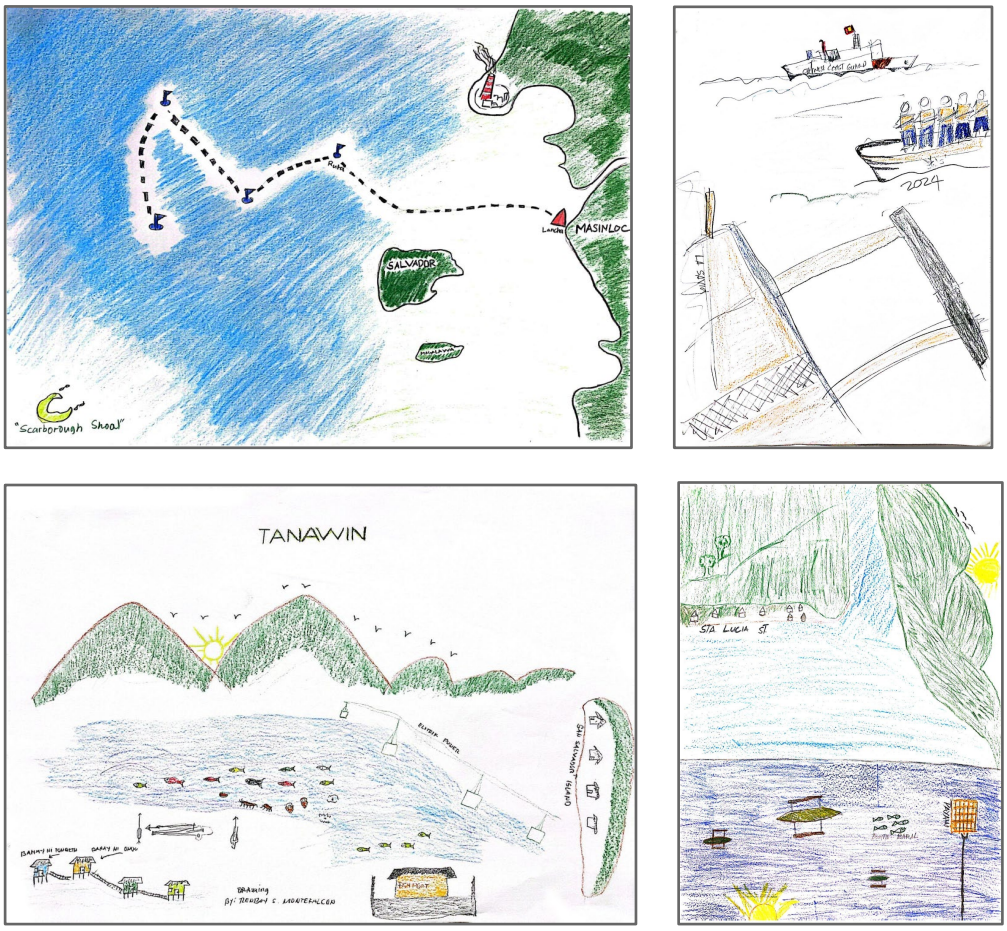

Figure 7. The maps trace movements through embodied cartography, revealing personal rhythms, memories, and emotional landscapes.



Figure 8. Series of alternative flags designed by the fisherfolk during our workshop.

Co-creation fostered camaraderie across differences. Whether participants were fisherfolk or students, seasoned artists or first-time illustrators, each group found commonality in the act of drawing. The visual nature of the process leveled the playing field, allowing for communication beyond words.

Importantly, the collective nature of the cartographic output—walls lined with flags, maps, and drawings—gave shape to a visual archive of community experience. These works did not merge into a single map, but together composed a mosaic of perspectives that collectively mapped affective, cultural, and ecological connections to place.

4. **Artistic practice opens safe spaces for dialogue amid maritime tensions.**

In an environment marked by geopolitical tension and insecurity, art emerged as a crucial medium for emotional expression and collective dialogue. The Masinloc workshop invited participants to engage not only in drawing but also in song, two culturally embedded practices that encouraged comfort, openness, and spontaneity.

As **Annelys de Vet** observed in her unpublished field notes, June 2025:"Almost all participants started to draw immediately, without hesitation. And for me, as an outsider, not understanding the language, these drawings were a beautiful way to tap into their narratives, and sometimes stimulate a certain artistic twist (like making the colours brighter)."

A key turning point came when participants were invited to sing. **Karaoke**, familiar in many Filipino coastal towns, became a gateway to storytelling and emotional vulnerability. **Kapitan Tony** stood up and sang **Max Surban's "Kaming mga Mangingisda"** ("We Fisherfolk"), a Cebuano song that describes the rhythms, hardships, and blessings of fisherfolk life:

> *Kaming mga mangingisda, kaming mga sakayanon*
> *(We are the fisherfolk, we who live on boats,)*
> *Nagasalig lamang sa dagat, nagapuyo daplin sa baybayon*
> *(Relying solely on the sea, living along the shore.)*
> *Kining kabus namong pangita, pangisda ra gyud intawon*
> *(This humble livelihood is only fishing, truly)*
> *Grasya alang kanamo, gikan sa kahitas-an.*
> *(A blessing for us, from the heavens above.)*

The performance inspired another participant to share a rap song he had written and recorded about illegal mining in Masinloc. Shifting the focus from the sea to the land, his lyrics linked the loss of fishing grounds to the degradation caused by extractive industries. In it, he critiques broken promises and corruption surrounding resource extraction:

> *Parating na ang panahon, ayan nanaman si Simon / Maririnig natin ang pangako niya noon*
> ("The time is coming, here comes Simon again / We'll hear once more the promises he made back then")
> …
> *Tatabang bulsa't kapangyarihan / Ano ba ang dahilan? Abáy, di ko alam 'yan*
> ("Power and pockets will lose their flavor / What's the reason? Well, I don't know that")

The rap underscored how threats to livelihood and environment extend beyond maritime disputes, weaving political commentary with imagery of environmental loss.

Several fisherfolk later said that they had **never spoken so openly** about their maritime lives, not even in interviews or formal consultations. The karaoke set a tone of shared joy and cultural affirmation. As one participant shared, *"The song captured the rhythm of our lives better than any news article."*

After the karaoke, a drawing session invited participants to visualize their marine encounters. **Kapitan Tony**, energized by his song, created a drawing that mapped the fish species he had named. He explained that they offer a portion of their food to the **"Datu of Skarboro"** upon entering Scarborough—a gesture of ritual respect.



Figure 9. Screenshots from the video of Kapitan Tony singing Max Surban's Cebuano song, opening a space for shared memory, vulnerability, and storytelling through music.

These spontaneous artistic moments, whether through drawing or song, **dissolved social barriers**, fostered trust, and created space for meaningful exchange.

As Annelys de Vet further reflected:

"The karaoke was brilliant (and opened a more vulnerable space). Participants became comfortable quickly. Fishermen opened up and shared their stories more easily than in journalistic settings. The fisherfolk particularly enjoyed the drawing activity."

Turalba echoed this sentiment:

"What truly energized the session was the spontaneity. Kapitan Tony became one of the central figures, singing Max Surban's "Kaming Mga Mangingisda," a joyful listing of local fish species. With Annelys' enthusiastic approval, his impromptu karaoke moment lifted the whole room. He later translated the song into a drawing, mapping out all the fish he had named, and proudly displayed his work."

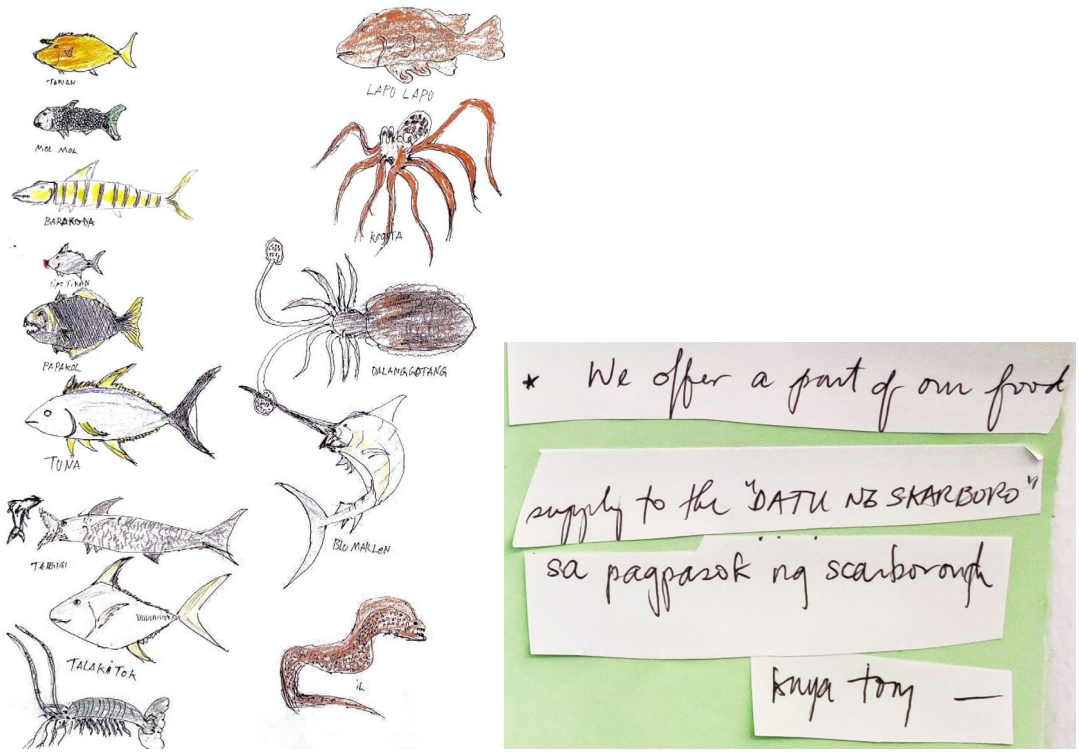

Figure 10. *The fish I catch* by Anthony "Kapitan Tony" Collado. He mentions that they offer a part of their food supply to the "Datu of Skarboro" upon entering Scarborough. Rendered image.

Art in this context functioned as a relational tool. It fostered morale, empathy, and communal recognition. The workshop reaffirmed that artistic methods can create safe spaces for dialogue, especially in communities navigating the emotional weight of displacement, militarization, and restricted access to ancestral waters.

Limitations

While our findings illuminate critical dimensions of artistic research with Masinloc fisherfolk, several limitations should be noted:

Site Specificity

This study draws from a single-day workshop held at the Masinloc Department of Tourism. While previous PANATAG engagements informed the methodology, the insights presented here are grounded in this particular session. Participants came from various coastal communities, including Masinloc (Barangay Inhobol and Goliat), as well as neighboring towns such as Santa Cruz, Candelaria, Cabangan, Botolan, and Subic. However, the workshop did not reach farther island barangays such as San Salvador, which is geographically closest to Scarborough Shoal and locally refers to it as "Bajo de Masinloc." San Salvador is widely recognized as the Philippine locality most directly affected by maritime tensions. Future research should consider on-site engagements in such communities to access firsthand perspectives from those most immediately impacted.

Language and Translation

Facilitators and CSM artists provided real-time translation across Tagalog and Visayan dialects, but nuances may have been lost. Our reflections are based on field notes and limited recordings, which may not fully capture emotional tone or idiomatic meaning.

Temporal Scope

The Masinloc workshop spanned only one (1) day. While meaningful exchanges and creative outputs emerged, longer-term engagement (e.g., repeated visits, follow-up sessions, or longitudinal tracking) would yield richer data on how art-based interventions influence community resilience over time. We acknowledge that sustaining momentum requires ongoing interaction beyond the workshop's limited timeframe.

Researcher Presence and Positionality

As facilitators, primarily Filipinos with one international collaborator, we were embedded in the dynamics we sought to observe. Our design choices, questions, and methods of interaction inevitably shaped the flow of engagement. While we practiced reflexivity through debriefs and feedback sessions, our presence influenced the outcomes. Future iterations may continue pairing local researchers with external collaborators to ensure a grounded yet critically reflective approach that honors both insider knowledge and outside perspectives.

Materials and Visual Outputs

All photos and videos shared from participants' mobile devices were collected with consent and archived alongside the artworks, which were willingly donated by both fisherfolk and student participants. While not all visual materials could be included in this article due to space and time constraints, they remain documented for future use and exhibition. In future workshops, additional tools such as mobile scanners or digital transcription setups could further enhance archival completeness.

Focus on Fisherfolk Experiences

While we directly engaged with fisherfolk, this article reflects the facilitators' observations rather than first-person narratives or co-authored texts. By conducting the workshop at the Department of Tourism office rather than in the participants' home barangays, we also missed perspectives from family members such as wives and children, whose roles are vital to understanding the broader fabric of coastal life. Additionally, by centering lived experiences, the article does not incorporate broader scientific, policy, or geopolitical analyses. We embrace this as a situated perspective but acknowledge its boundaries.

Facilitator-Driven Voice

This article speaks from the vantage point of the facilitators rather than the fisherfolk themselves. Although we draw directly from their field notes, we do not include first-person accounts from participants, nor can we reflect on the long-term fate of the visual work, as these experiences remain very fresh. Future iterations may consider incorporating fisherfolk authorship (e.g., co-written reflections or follow-up interviews) and revisit how the community sustains or adapts their creative outputs over time.

Despite these constraints, the Masinloc case remains a valuable example of how embodied cartography and participatory artistic research can foster agency, solidarity, and resilience in coastal communities facing geopolitical tensions.



Figure 11. Group photograph of workshop participants, including fisherfolk and facilitators at the Subjective Atlas of the Philippines project workshop in Masinloc, Zambales (PH), May 27, 2025. Photos taken by JL Diquit.

Conclusion

The making of the *Subjective Atlas of the Philippines* is not only a platform for expression, but also offers an infrastructure of care, resistance, and shared authorship. Through embodied cartography, where mapping becomes a physical, collaborative, and emotionally resonant act, project PANATAG fostered spaces for deep listening, storytelling, dialogue, and creative co-making. This approach challenges conventional cartography—which often abstracts and generalizes—by foregrounding lived experience, emotional geographies, and culturally rooted knowledge.

In the context of the West Philippine Sea, where maritime conflict frequently silences local voices and disrupts ties to ancestral waters, our experiences affirm that those who live in close relation to the sea should be at the forefront of the conversation that shapes its future. While their perspectives are often overlooked, they carry crucial experiential knowledge. The subjective mapping methodology helped visualize and amplify these perspectives through artistic research, offering tools, platforms, and language to articulate memories, hopes, and claims that might otherwise remain invisible.

Rather than claiming definitive outcomes, we ask: *might creative practices such as visual storytelling and image-making evoke layered ties to place, memory, and cultural continuity?* This leads us to the potential of artistic research as a space for connection in coastal communities navigating complex maritime realities.

By centering artistic research as a method of situated inquiry and relational ethics, PANATAG gestures toward narratives of refuge, memory, and belonging that can challenge extractive and militarized perspectives. Our short-term fieldwork in Masinloc, supported by CSM's locally embedded networks, suggested that co-creation may help foster trust, empathy, and shared reflection. This remains an open question, pointing to the potential of artistic research as a space for connection in coastal communities navigating complex maritime realities. When multisectoral actors—artists, fisherfolk, students, local leaders, and educators collaborate with mutual care, the potential for shared stewardship begins to emerge. Our approach gestures toward how embodied cartography and artistic research might foster dialogue, agency, and resilience. The workshop offered a glimpse of what becomes possible when local knowledge, creative practice, and collaborative exchange intersect with intention and care.

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