Third World Studies Centre, UP Diliman:

Reflections on the Completion of a Research Internship in the Philippines

Zachariah J. Williams, Cardiff University

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Introduction

The result of a request by Cardiff University’s Seafarers International Research Centre to detail my experience of partaking in a month-long research internship that they had organised in coalition with UP Diliman’s Third World Studies Centre (TWSC), this report begins with a discussion of the premise on which I initially chose to apply. In doing so, not only is the report able to help clarify that which I sought to gain from partaking in the programme, but it also provides a basis for discussion around the satisfaction of these expectations during the report’s conclusion. In addition, it allows the conclusion to talk of the unexpected benefits I derived from partaking in this Philippines-based programme. Following the report’s musing on the reasons behind my application, a discussion of my arrival in the Philippines and my introduction to research staff at the TWSC ensues. The report then seeks to outline the research project in which I partook, the role I played within that project, and any additional activities I was involved in aside from the research project itself. Subsequently, the report details in paragraphs preceding the aforementioned conclusion that which I was able to explore and visit whilst in the Philippines.
Application

Upon initially acknowledging the call for applications to the one-month research internship in the Philippines being offered by Cardiff University’s Seafarers International Research Centre, I hesitated. Indeed, initially declining to apply, I only reverted my decision knowing that the application deadline had been extended. Rather than recount the reasons behind my hesitation, I believe that it is sufficient to say that such a sentiment was misplaced. For as I now reflect upon my experience, I do so with the knowledge of the very benefits that such an opportunity endows upon its participant(s). However, I do believe that it is a worthwhile endeavour to recall the three main grounds upon which my motivation to apply was premised:

1. As a second-year BA Journalism, Media and Sociology student possessing a genuine interest in the topics covered across selected modules over the past two years both within the School of Journalism, Media and Culture and the School of Social Sciences, much of my initial curiosity regarding the research internship derived from the very correlation between these modules and the themes covered by the research project – the academic aims of which will be discussed later in this report. For the fact that a research internship should straddle such a breadth of topics across two differing academic departments so succinctly was opportune, as was the actuality that the very aims of the project
corresponded neatly in terms of my particular interests within those topics, including sub-topics and theorisations around those topics.

2. With UP Diliman being widely regarded as the leading university in the Philippines and the TWSC existing as a revered faculty of the university’s College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, the research internship represented an exciting opportunity to learn and gain a greater appreciation of that which is demanded of those involved in academic research. In turn, I believed that the opportunity represented the possibility to advance progression in four key areas. Firstly, the development of the skills necessary to meet the demands of academic research and thus, the ability to conduct a worthwhile piece of research when undertaking a third-year dissertation. Secondly, the selecting of topics and theorisations I would like to explore during such a dissertation. Thirdly, deciphering whether further study is the kind of path I would like to follow at the end of my undergraduate degree. Fourthly, the enhancement of my CV.

3. Despite relatively extensive globetrotting, before visiting the Philippines I had never previously ventured upon Asian or third world territory. However, my love of travelling, exploring new places and learning about such places made this an exciting prospect.

Following a lengthy period of travel to Manila’s Ninoy Aquino International Airport, I was greeted by Cardiff University’s Filipino-born academic, Iris Acejo – a greeting made possible by her coincidental presence in the Philippines following a period of recently completely research in the country. Meeting me alongside various members of her family,
Iris assisted me in both travelling and checking-in to the hotel at which I would be staying for
the entire period of my month-long internship. Set to return to the United Kingdom (UK) the
day after I was due to begin my internship on the Monday, I was extremely grateful to Iris for
using the remainder of her time to help me settle-in. After sharing lunch with an assortment
of her friends and family across the Saturday and Sunday and showing me around the
university’s campus, Iris introduced me to the TWSC in the Monday morning. Upon arrival
to the faculty we were met by the centre’s administration staff and Elinor May K. Cruz, or
‘May’ – the latter of whom was to be my supervisor for the entire period of my stay. Then
guided into the centre’s sole conference room, May delivered a presentation outlining the
research project I would be partaking in, my role within that project, and various activities
with which I would be involved in aside from the research project itself. This was followed
by the chance to ask any questions, though Iris unfortunately had to depart halfway through
in order to ensure that she had enough time to prepare for her flight the following morning.

Notwithstanding, I was next introduced to the rest of the centre’s research staff before
spending the remainder of the day following instructions to read-up on all literature necessary
to fully understand the aims and structure of the research. For from day two it was expected
that I begin to get involved with the very task that would come to dominate the majority of
my time whilst at the centre – a task which is described in more detail in succeeding
paragraphs. For now, however, it is sufficient to state that the task revolved around the
formulation of a database concerned primarily with President Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘War on
Drugs’. To come to terms with the role I was expected to play in relation to this database,
much of day two was spent shadowing one of the centre’s research assistants.

Outline the Research Project

Entitled Violence, Human Rights, and Democracy in the Philippines: Strengthening
the Quality and Impact of Academic Research, the two-year research project can be broadly
stated as a multi-faceted study seeking to investigate the state of democracy, human rights
and violence in the Philippines. Though instigated by the TWSC and Ghent University’s
Conflict Research Group (CRG), the general aim(s) and direction(s) of the research are all
determined by a collaborative network of various individuals drawn from differing spheres
including academic, journalistic and human rights communities, and who each seek to
produce research in lieu with the aforementioned aspiration to investigate the state of
democracy, human rights and violence in the Philippines. To achieve this aspiration, the varying members who constitute the network have constructed plans for a series of case studies, each of which looks to contribute via an examination of sub-themes and the execution of research in relation to those sub-themes. In its attempt to contribute to both the overall ambition of the network and aid the accompanying case studies, the TWSC has committed itself to probing more intensely into the so-called ‘War on Drugs’ that has heavily characterised the presidency of existing leader, Rodrigo Duterte. Crucial in this process is the construing of a database capable of adequately archiving all explicitly state-enacted and/or explicitly state-encouraged killings visibly linked with suspected drug-related activities.

With work to formulate the database beginning only one week prior to my arrival in the Philippines, the study remained in the primitive stages of its development. As such, the research staff at the centre set an initial target to cover a four-year period stretching from the last two years of the Benigno Aquino III administration to the first two years of the Duterte administration, with a view to extend the covered period into both administrations preceding that of Aquino III and any future administrations post-Duterte. Assigned the responsibility of working backwards through the Aquino III administration, over the course of my time there I was able to cover around eight to ten weeks-worth of data. Though not necessarily a large quantity, in the context of the knowledge that the database was still very much in the early stages of its development, this was relatively significant. For as problems ensued and subsequent discussions led to the revision of the database’s variables, constant backtracking became a necessary part of the process. This elementary quality characterising the database also led to us using only one newspaper source – the Philippine Daily Inquirer – to harness data for the database, both as a means of trialling the methodology and to avoid the complications created via a cross-referencing of sources.

As a general rule, the expected data entry process worked as follows. Tracking backwards from the start of Duterte’s presidential reign, I would scan the articles for each day displayed in the newspaper’s online archive, reading in depth all those which I suspected may be able to yield information relevant to the aims of the database. Where my suspicions were confirmed, I would enter as much of the information demanded by the database’s variables as was possible. Where an article was less relevant, the only information entered was links to both a saved and online version of it. Of course, with the aforementioned need to constantly discuss and revise variables where problems were encountered with certain articles, the outlined process was rarely as linear as this. Nevertheless, after having covered
approximately twelve to fourteen weeks-worth of data when including the progress that had been made working forwards from Duterte’s inauguration, we were able to establish the emergence of several important trends. However, two important notations must be made. Firstly, claims regarding the validity of these trends should be taken lightly given that the methodology used remains heavily in the trial phase of its existence and that the database so far only covers a small time-span. Secondly, I have not opted to disclose the nature of these trends for fear of transgressing the desires of research staff at the TWSC.

Additional Activities at the Centre

Alongside Aran and ‘Eff’, the centre’s other two research interns at the time of my stay in the Philippines, I also partook in a series of lectures. The first of these was a presentation on Philippine history delivered by the centre’s director, Dr. Ricardo T. Jose – an academic of whom I am informed ranks not only as one of the most highly-respected historians in the Philippines, but also as the expert on World War Two history in the Philippines. A second lecture, delivered by Joel F. Ariate Jr. and Miguel Paolo P. Reyes, focussed on the topics of authorship and plagiarism. Though it is true that many lecturers at Cardiff University discuss these subjects with first-year students to a considerable degree, it was novel for me to listen to Joel and Miguel to the extent that they were able to talk of their
experiences as the editors of the centre’s academic journal, *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*. For a third lecture, each of the research staff assembled together to set-up a Q and A-type session which covered a range of topics, including their experiences of conducting research in the Philippines, the unique challenges that this presents, how they have overcome these challenges, the development of their ideas, and current research at the centre.

In addition to these lectures, the other interns and I joined the centre’s research staff and interested academics from the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy to listen to Dr. Toshihiro Swayana – an academic from Japan’s Kansai University whom the TWSC were set to host until around March 2019 – present a summary, followed by questions, of the research he would be conducting whilst in the Philippines. Meanwhile, during the final week of the internship, ‘Eff’, Aran and I were instructed to prepare a presentation of our own ahead of our final day. After using this opportunity to reflect on the research project, my role in the project, the internship more generally, and my overall experience of the Philippines, a Q and A session followed before a farewell lunch provided by the centre. Granted an early finish on the final day, much of the afternoon was spent strolling around the university’s campus with May and others from the centre, visiting both the university’s publication house and the Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Centre.

*Exploring and Appreciating the Philippines*

With most of my time in the Philippines devoted to working at the TWSC, exploring the Philippines was an endeavour limited to only the weekends. After having spent the first weekend settling-in and navigating the university’s campus, I spent most of the second week scouting the surrounding area. On the Saturday morning I took a jeepney ride out of the
campus to Krus na Ligas. This was followed in the afternoon by a walk down Commonwealth Avenue. Though more the result of being slightly lost, my walk besides this road did allow me to gain a good view of the lavishly-built Iglesia Ni Christo Locale of Capitol – a church recently established by Philippines-based religious sect, the Iglesia ni Cristo. On the Sunday, I decided to take a short walk along Katipunan Avenue, followed by a second trip down Commonwealth Avenue, though this time heading in the direction of the Philcoa area via a Jeepney. After an hour or so of walking, I made my way towards the Quezon Memorial Circle, at the heart of which stands the Quezon Memorial Shrine – a monument dedicated to former president, Manuel L. Quezon.

Prior to the next weekend, I met with Associate Prof. Ma Theresa T. Payongayoung, or ‘Tess’ – an academic from the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. After having taken me for dinner with her family on multiple occasions, Tess invited me to join her on a trip to UP Los Banos alongside several of her friends. Taking place on the Saturday, the trip was a nice opportunity to get out of Quezon City itself, as well as visit the Rizal Shrine in Calamba – the birthplace of one of the Philippines’ national heroes, Jose Rizal. By coincidence, the trip also included a sighting of the campaigning Emilio Ramon Pelayo Ejercito III, or E. R. Ejercito – an actor, former governor of the province of Laguna and nephew of former president, Joseph ‘Erap’ Ejercito Estrada. Meanwhile, the Sunday was spent exploring Quezon City’s two neighbouring malls, SM North EDSA and TriNoma, as well as the surrounding vicinity.

On the Saturday of the following weekend I took the MRT-3 to Makati’s Ayala station. After getting off the MRT-3, a short walk saw me arrive at Ayala Museum. The museum, with its collection of indigenous textiles and pre-Hispanic artefacts and jewellery, was a worthwhile venture, as was a subsequent walk around Makati. For the Sunday, May and Joel had organised to take me and the other two interns to Manila’s Intramuros. Arriving in central Manila via a series of trains, we started the day by visiting the newly-opened National Museum of Natural History. Following several hours spent here, we passed a mass gathering of the Iglesia ni Cristo in Rizal Park and crossed the Pasig River into the Binondo area for lunch – an area which constitutes the oldest Chinatown in the world. After consuming an interesting selection of food, we then visited Fort Santiago before making our
way towards the National Museum of Fine Arts, though the lateness of the day meant that we were unable to gain entry.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I believe that it is worthwhile to revisit the three key expectations outlined at the beginning of this report that formed the basis of my decision to apply:

1. The first, which regarded my interest in the topics covered by the research project, was certainly satisfied. For not only was it interesting to learn about the subject of the research – President Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’ – in greater depth, it was also interesting to learn about the context from which such situation has emerged, be it politically, economically, culturally, etc.

2. The second, concerning a desire to gain a greater appreciation of that which is demanded of those involved in academic research, was also something that I believed was satisfied. For the relatively small number of researchers at the centre allowed me to experience a heavier and more intimate involvement in both the research project and the wider operations of the centre than would have been the case had the centre been larger. Whether I can necessarily claim to have developed the skills necessary to meet every demand that the academic sphere makes is questionable, though I now certainly feel that I have been endowed with the confidence to undertake a worthwhile piece of research
during a third-year dissertation. I cannot claim that the internship has helped me decide upon the sort of topic I would like to explore for such a dissertation, though I can say that the internship has helped me somewhat in deciphering whether further study is right for me – something which I wish not to disclose in this report.

3. The third, which regarded my love for travelling and exploring, was also satisfied. For whilst it is true that my desire to explore was limited insofar as a lack of time, I feel sure that I have seen enough to want to return to the Philippines at some point in the future.

In addition to the satisfaction of these expectation, one of the greatest benefits of partaking in the programme has been the opportunity to network with a number of academics, both at the TWSC and beyond. Indeed, many of these have since become friends with whom I remain in contact.