


CASE STUDY

## Stories, Art, and an Orphanage: Writing against Duterte's Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines

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(Received 10 August 2024; revised 16 March 2025; accepted 18 March 2025)

### Abstract

Ever since Rodrigo Duterte was sworn into office in 2016, until the end of his term in 2022, his so-called “drug war” has claimed 12,000–30,000 lives. Over 150 victims were children. Seventeen-year-old Kian de los Santos, mistakenly identified as a drug addict, was gunned down on the evening of 16 August 2017. His death prompted a group of teachers and students to express themselves through empathic creative writing. What started as an assignment grew into a community of writers, activists, artists, journalists, and curators from diverse disciplines, generations, and social classes. Four years later, the project found a name: *Triggered: Creative Responses to the Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines*—an illustrated young adult fiction collection with a dimension of outreach towards an orphanage. The *Triggered* project illustrated three key features of public humanities, especially during a time of impunity: first, an imperfect but self-reflexive and reciprocal collaboration between the academe and the field; second, the book's non-elitist accessibility in both content and material; and third, the funds of the book went to an orphanage.

**Keywords:** empathy; extrajudicial killings; fiction; Philippines; social impact

*What's he doing kneeling again?  
Face to the ground again?  
Praying Sir Huwag Po.  
Ay drag him out by the hair,  
give him some air.  
'Sup pare, road trip tayo  
before the sun rises  
shows our chill corpses  
about us rockstar dudes...  
Si Kian, Si Kulot, at Si Karl...  
We're the dreams that went nowhere...*

– Excerpt from “Kalokohan in Kalookan” by Cyan Abad Jugo<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this reflection essay draws from my Introduction in the book *Triggered: Creative Responses to the Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines* (2021).

<sup>1</sup> Abad-Jugo 2021.

Kian, Kulot, and Karl were only three of the 150 child victims of the former Philippine President's "war on drugs." Ever since Rodrigo Duterte was sworn into office in 2016, until the end of his term in 2022, his so-called "war" has claimed 12,000–30,000 lives. One of them was seventeen-year-old Kian de los Santos, who, mistaken for a drug addict, was gunned down on the evening of 16 August 2017. Caught on CCTV, Kian's death provided evidence for all other summary executions that are currently under investigation in the International Criminal Court (ICC). On 12 September 2021, the ICC launched its pre-trial phase with the following statement:

the Chamber finds that it has been sufficiently established for the purpose of an authorisation to investigate that the contextual elements of crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the Statute have been met with respect to the killings in the Philippines between 1 November 2011 and 16 March 2019 in the context of the so-called 'war on drugs' campaign (#108).<sup>2</sup>

With his "friendship" with current President Marcos, Jr. now turned sour, Rodrigo Duterte, in a dramatic turn of events, was arrested on 11 March 2025 and handed over to the ICC in The Hague.

But justice did not happen on the evening of 16 August 2017 for Kian, the student. To the police who were harassing him, the child managed to utter the following words: "Please stop; I have a test tomorrow!" My God, what diligence even at gunpoint. Kian's plea made an impression on me as a human being and as a teacher. Like many others, I found myself asking what a simple literature teacher could do, aside from already going onto the streets and signing petitions. It wasn't a time to be silent, at least, not a silence that contributes to a "complicit forgetting" that protects perpetrators and feeds an oblivion of the murdered.<sup>3</sup>

However, I remembered fiction's role in mourning, empathy, and imagining new worlds. I wondered: what if the interrupted lives of the Kians, Kulots, and Karls could be "prolonged," even just through a poem, even just on a page? Perhaps, through fiction writing, by making present a trace to the absent, one can witness to a life taken.

So, I turned to my young seventeen- to eighteen-year-old Bachelor students, who almost had the same age as Kian, and asked what they thought about the extrajudicial killings (EJKs). My freshman "Introduction to Fiction" class thus gave way to empathic creative writing sessions that allowed the students to express themselves through short story writing, if they so wished. The initial activity asked them to research the lives and deaths of any of the child victims and, through narration and imagination, to pay tribute to the children, mourn them, or imagine new worlds for them.

I was surprised to receive 20 short stories. Among them, around 12 pieces really impressed me. Touched by my students' creativity, empathy, and sense of justice, I toyed with the possibility of publishing their creations. However, I knew the conventions of academic publishing, which are not very hospitable to undergraduates, let alone first-year students.

<sup>2</sup> International Criminal Court 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Assman 2016.

I then sought the help of a colleague and creative writer, Cyan Abad-Jugo. Equally impressed by the potential of these stories, she agreed, to my delight, to team up with me to see through possible publication. Thus, Cyan and I started our collaboration with six talented and brave students in 2017: Sam, Amiel, Pat, Red, Jan, and Kat. None of them were literature majors, but all of them were on fire and dared to write about a subject that was taboo, uncomfortable, and unsafe. Following the suggestion of Ateneo de Manila University Press Director Karina Bolasco, we provided each student with a writer mentor—either a professional writer or an academic—whose role was to accompany each student, help process the events, and, in turn, respond to the written pieces through their own work.

Word got around, and suddenly, an art hub provided financing, workshops, and symposia with social actors who were knowledgeable about the issue of the killings. Fine Arts students then took inspiration from the short stories to create an exhibit in May 2019. By mid-2020, the editors decided that, instead of publishing with the university press, which actually already accepted the proposal, they opted for a publisher specialising in graphic novels in order to render the work more accessible to the public. Cyan and I then benefitted from the help of the head of Chamber Shell Publications, Jamie Bautista, who was also one of the generous mentors of the students.

The project took four years in the making because of crucial questions related to empathy, the politics of mourning, the ethics of representation, and, especially, security—we were all locals. On the one hand, we could imagine protection from our respective university affiliations; on the other hand, we were still “hunnable.” Moreover, we had minors in our team.

Other locally based groups working against the killings also had to find their own “creative responses” despite the environment of impunity. For example, as part of the activities of RESBAK (Respond and Break the Silence against the Killings), Arumpac produced short viral videos that were uploaded online as an awareness campaign against the war on drugs.<sup>4</sup> In collaboration with Gantala Press, they also held zine-making workshops with the widows and orphans of the victims.<sup>5</sup> Curato, likewise, underscores the initiative of disadvantaged communities via their deliberative agency in photography and documentary.<sup>6</sup> We were not alone in this “creative resistance.”

Four years after our initial classroom activity, our project found a name: *Triggered: Creative Responses to the Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines*, an illustrated young adult fiction collection with a dimension of outreach to an orphanage. Because of the nature of the project, the editors and writers agreed that the ethical choice would be to forward all financial profit to the bereaved of the EJKs, as an expression of the initial classroom exercise of *mourning with* the child victims. In the Philippine culture of *pakikiramay*—mourning, especially during a wake—it is normal to contribute financially to the bereaved. Consequently, in 2021, we officialised our collaboration with an orphanage for victims in Kalookan, one of the poorest areas of Manila.

Thus, what started as an assignment involving six students and three teachers eventually grew into a community of writers, activists, artists, journalists, and curators from diverse disciplines, generations, and social classes. In 2022, the “Triggered team” received a Social

<sup>4</sup> Arumpac 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Arumpac 2020, 129.

<sup>6</sup> Curato 2020.

Impact award from a university. For the participants of the project, the impact has also been personal. For example, one student decided to pursue studies in law in order to help marginalised communities. One of the mentors, a teacher and creative artist, discouraged during the drug war, admitted that the project restored his faith in the narrative and art as forms of valid responses to the tragedies.

The *Triggered* project illustrated three key features of public humanities. First, there seemed to be an imperfect but self-reflexive and reciprocal collaboration between the academe and the field. On the one hand, current events prompted and affected the creative collaboration; on the other hand, the book idea “trickled down” from the university ivory tower to non-literature students, to mentors from other universities, to journalists, political scientists, theatre actors, social workers, religious leaders, and, finally, to survivors. As such, reciprocity between the field and the academe could be observed.

I qualify such reciprocity, however, as imperfect because of the position of the collaborators. Like other Filipinos, we were informed about the killings mostly through the media. Kian’s murder was known through cameras. We did not have first-hand experience of the events.

Yet, there is such a thing as “prosthetic memory,” which, through media, allows one to “take on” others’ experiences and memories like “an artificial limb.”<sup>7</sup> Although imperfect, prosthetic memory has real ethical consequences because of its ability “to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender.”<sup>8</sup>

There was at least one more question regarding our positionality. Except for one, none of us were from the slum areas, let alone Kalookan, the epicentre of the crimes. Again, none of us was a first-hand witness. However, perhaps even indirect witnesses are not exempt from ethical responsibility.

In *From Surviving to Living*, Catherine Gilbert explains the three categories of Witnesses. The first category belongs to the survivor-witness or direct witness from whom one demands his or her “presence at the event,” as well as “the authenticity of testimony.”<sup>9</sup> The secondary or indirect witness includes outside observers and, later, second-generation survivors.<sup>10</sup> Dominick LaCapra extends this category to include “interviewers, historians and commentators (such as academics), as well as viewers/readers of testimony.”<sup>11</sup> Lastly, the reader-witness, as the engaged receiver of testimony, can be classified under the third category.<sup>12</sup> As receivers of testimonies, the secondary witness-listener “plays an active role in the construction of the narrative rather than simply listening.”<sup>13</sup> As such, we tried to be imperfect secondary witnesses in the midst of this war on drugs.

At the same time, our collaborators were affected by “the field”: during those years, the Duterte regime stepped up its operations such that not only suspected pushers and addicts were assassinated, but lawyers and activists as well. Was it worth speaking up if we would endanger ourselves? Hence, we asked for waivers from the parents of the students, who were

<sup>7</sup> Landsberg 2004, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Landsberg 2004, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert 2018, 54, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert 2018, 54, 59.

<sup>11</sup> La Capra 2001, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert 2018, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert 2018, 135.

then minors, and extended the possibility of backing out and anonymity to all of the collaborators. The reigning impunity threatened the closure of the project several times.

Still, part of our four-year journey consisted of self-reflexive questioning: How do we position ourselves as academics, writers, and artists vis-à-vis the victims? Is it possible and ethical to represent killings? Ultimately, we “understood” that as academics, artists, but, first, as civilians, we were simply trying to do three things: *mourning with* the families of the victims; expressing an *unsettled empathy*; and, merely, *letting ourselves be disturbed*. I draw my definition of empathic unsettlement from Dominick LaCapra, who describes it as a form of empathy without fusion, respecting the singularity of the other’s experience.

The second feature of public humanities that *Triggered* illustrated relates to the non-elitist accessibility of the book in its content and materiality. Since one of the objectives was to lift the taboo on the drug war, accessibility was key. Thus, choices in content, method, and production were made in order to render the volume accessible to the greater public. We deemed that literary language, instead of a legal and journalistic one, allowed for an unsettled hermeneutics, while remaining provocative and exploratory, appropriate in a context of impunity. In the midst of the senselessness of this war on drugs, literature and the image offer the (im)possibility to narrate; they offer a “practice of meaning-making,” without even having to preoccupy with closure.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, we opted for the genre of young adult fiction, instead of university essays, in order to cater to young adults, our target audience. As such, the editors agreed to publish the collection with a house specialising in graphic novels, which also distances us from the “university publishing brand.” This also meant—in the publish-and-perish environment all too well-known in the academic world—for the academics, foregoing points in high-impact indexed journals. Carefully considered as well were the book’s selling price and its availability in popular kiosks.

Language choice was also key. Although the volume was mostly written in English, the language comfortable to most of the collaborators, bilingual Filipino and English were encouraged. Further, “millenialese,” as coined by Cyan Abad-Jugo, was imagined in order to render the language of the youth.

The third aspect of public humanities that *Triggered* illustrated involves the funds of the book going to an orphanage. Fortuitous was our encounter with social workers who knew about Bishop Pablo David’s reliable EJK Orphans programme in Kalookan, the “ground zero” of the murders. As such, all the profits of sales have gone to, and will go to, this ministry which helps the victims of this injustice. One of the most outspoken prelates against the Duterte administration’s antidrug programme and a protector of victims and their witnesses, Bishop Pablo Virgilio David was menaced by numerous death threats. He is part of what *The Guardian* has labelled the “Catholic resistance” during the bloody drug war.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while current events literally triggered our reactions, at the same time, certain “academic” concepts—*pakikiramay*, empathic unsettlement, prosthetic memory, witnessing—along with stylistic, institutional, and material preferences, built bridges between

<sup>14</sup> Brockmeier and Meretoja 2004, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Willis 2019.

theory and practice, between the tower ivory to the streets, thus bringing the Humanities into action.

As academics, we cannot claim to speak for the survivors and their loved ones. However, hopefully, our storytelling could offer “a form of recognition through which we recognise our stories as entangled with the stories of others,” until we realise that the stories of these “others” are actually not too far from ours.<sup>16</sup>

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**Author contribution.** Conceptualization: J.S.M.

**Conflicts of interests.** The author declares none.

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<sup>16</sup> Bassel 2016, 9.

**Cite this article:** Martin, Jocelyn S. 2025. “Stories, Art, and an Orphanage: Writing against Duterte’s Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines.” *Public Humanities*, 1, e102, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2977017325000222>