

## REFLECTIVE REPORT - SUMMER 1

### OANA TASCA

My summer research for the programme has been an exciting journey with quite a few speed bumps on the road, which taught me a great deal about myself and my approach to leadership.

Throughout these past few months, I have been looking at the way in which the very Eurocentric approach our Western society has to literature and culture has shaped the writing of African American children's authors. The first speed bump? My project was supposed to be much larger than this. Initially, I had planned a comparative research that looked at both African and African American writers, so that I could better investigate the differences that the environment of these authors brought. The reason I had to put this part aside was simply a practical one, the African texts I had selected were not available in Ireland. After a moment of panic and some reshaping with the help of my supervisors, it dawned on me how this was a huge obstacle not so much for my project, but rather for the academic research as a whole. African literature deserves a respected seat in the academic community and in the global conversation, but it had never really occurred to me how hard that can be even on a very practical level because of the inaccessibility of some of the texts. This realisation pushed me to further look into the matter, and I am currently thinking of ways in which I could integrate this issue into my Leadership in Action project, but for the moment it is still a work in progress.

The way in which I approached my research has been quite simple and straightforward. During the first two weeks I read and analysed in detail the main texts I had selected, so that I could gather my ideas and first impressions. During the remaining weeks, I looked at secondary sources, building my argument and drawing my conclusions. I would meet with my supervisors every two weeks, more or less, and we would discuss my findings and the ideas that came out of them. They have been instrumental in pointing me towards the right direction and in keeping me focused on my main thesis, suggesting secondary sources that proved essential.

I am quite happy with the 5000 words essay I got out of my research, even though I know that so much more could be said and done. This was one of my major factors of stress during

the 6 weeks, the pressure of looking at more material all the time. Nonetheless, I have come to realise during the summer that my time was in fact limited and my findings and my work are appropriate for that amount of time.

However, I do wish I had been able to manage my time a little bit better. Even though I was very focused in the official 6 weeks of the research, I lost significant time looking at papers and secondary sources that I found interesting but were not completely in line with the topics I had set for this specific project. This was not for some masochistic wish to spend all my summer in the library, but rather because my initial planning was not detailed enough. I had sketched an overall idea of where I wanted to go when I first started but, I realise now, I did not make practical plans for what to do if things did not go as I expected. This led me to jump from main thesis to main thesis every time I found a new interesting point of view in my secondary sources, prolonging my 6 weeks to 9. I have now learned on my own skin that flexibility is crucial, but so is prioritising. I have found that this applies to my work but also to my life in general. In fact, every time I was overly concentrated on my project, not allowing myself a good balance with my hobbies and free time, my research did not thrive at all. I expected that all that absorbed work discipline would give astonishing results. On the contrary, I was often too tired and overwhelmed to put in the creative and reflective aspect that my project required. This has been a very meaningful lesson for me as I have always had trouble managing my time efficiently, and without the pressure I have always felt during school and college, I was able to identify exactly why and find the best solutions for me.

At first, I must admit, I was scared that the nature of my research would lead me to a solitary confinement. Unlike many others in the programme, I was not working in a lab with a team of PhD students. Instead, it was just me and my books sitting in the library. And even though it did get quite lonely at times, this experience has taught me the importance of multidisciplinary exchange. I indeed found that I was most proficient in my work when doing it with other members of my cohort. I would meet most days with some of them to work together and, during our breaks, the most interesting conversations would come up while we went over our projects. Even though not all the observations made during these discussions ended up in my paper, the different points of view of people who are not part of my field, gave me a freshness that helped me look deeper and beyond the issues at hand. I am now so much more interested in architecture, law and business than ever before and I try to

intertwine the (for now) still limited knowledge I have of these disciplines with literature and culture.

Now that I realise the importance of this kind of confrontation, I wish I had taken even greater advantage of the tools the Laidlaw Foundation has to offer and got in touch with people all around the world through the Network. However, it is never too late and I plan on doing that in the near future.

This past summer has not just been one entirely focused on research, but on myself as well. The first workshops we had on leadership pushed me on an introspective journey I had not anticipated. I not only started questioning the idea of leadership I had had up until that point, but myself too. I started listening to podcasts and reading books on leadership and I came to realise that it is far from just a skill. It is a way of living. I came to understand that leadership does not come from power and authority, but rather that power and authority revolve almost naturally around those who display true leadership. In order to achieve that, however, you truly need to know yourself, or your “true core”, as Hitendra Wadhwa puts it in *Inner Mastery, Outer Impact*. When I first started the programme I was quite confident I knew who I was but, even though some pillars of those beliefs still stand, I am not entirely sure anymore. This journey is raising so many more questions than it is answering. Even though this can at times be frustrating, I think the awareness of not knowing is a good point to start from. I started looking more deeply within myself, my personal growth so far and my aspirations for the future. I realised I am more subject to the expectations of others than I like to admit and that this needs to change. I need to find my real purpose on my own if I want to become the best version of myself that I can possibly be. I did understand that I am a listener and that I have a great compassion for the unseen and the voiceless. I enjoy research, but I want practical change to be a big part of my future as well. I know now that a true leader is not necessarily a mythical figure with incredible charisma and great at public speaking, but it can be someone who shares more quietly their vision and is a nurturer of their cause and of their team. This type of servant leader is much more in line with my attitudes and aspirations. I learned that ethical leadership needs to be the fundamental core of my leadership style, and this has led me to raise some questions about the Leadership in Action I will engage with next year. Before I started the programme I had an undefined idea for a workshop I wanted to deliver to the students of one of the schools of an organisation called *Still I Rise*, which is committed to bringing high levels of education in vulnerable communities. Upon some deeper reflection and more thorough research on the organisation itself, I came to the

conclusion that my initial plan does not align with my own ethics nor with those of *Still I Rise*. A workshop delivered by someone who, like me, is not qualified to deal with children who have possibly experienced trauma and abuse could be extremely detrimental for numerous reasons. This is why I am now designing a new approach, redefining my initial plan so that I do not have to be in direct contact with the students in this context.

Lastly, there was only one thing that I wish I would have explored more throughout the summer but did not really have the chance to, and that is public speaking. This has always been something that fascinated and frightened me at the same time. I never really had any opportunity to practice it except for occasional presentations in school, but I was hoping I would get a bit more insight into it through this programme. So far, the *Lir* workshop has been extremely interesting and fun but I am still struggling to understand just how useful it has been for me personally. I must admit that even though Cathal Quinn was incredibly compelling, the workshop was just too long to fully benefit from his teachings. I wish there had been more casual opportunities for us to practice this, but I also understand the difficulty in planning them during summer. I am thinking of proposing some casual practice sessions among the members of my cohort, so that we can all benefit from it and probably have a good laugh as well.

Going forward I plan on continuing my personal development journey and integrating my findings into the activities proposed by the programme. I am looking forward to expanding my network and engaging with scholars from different cohorts and universities, and even professors or organisations. I am committed to taking full advantage of the opportunities offered to me and taking even more initiative than I did this summer. The process and the results of my project have been incredibly useful to me, as they allowed me to get to know myself better and understand the way I approach research. They have also taught me to be more aware of my environment and the kind of entertainment I consume, sharpening my critical thinking even more.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunities this programme is offering me as it is not just developing my skills, but it is helping me through my personal growth journey. It is also allowing me to make great friends that are also intellectually challenging and have similar goals and aspirations, from whom I can learn and with whom I can share my experiences. I am excited for the next steps in the programme and the learning that will come with it!

