

Reintegration: On leaving, and starting over

May 24th, 2016 — It is exactly ten days since I left Manila on a flight bound for Vancouver, where I spent some time with fellow intern and dear friend, Nadya in her home in East Vancouver. From there, I slowly made my way home to Toronto. And by slowly, I mean *slowly*—by train, over four days, with limited Internet, a single electrical outlet to serve all sleeper class passengers, and an overwhelming inability to “sum up” this experience for the blog that was already late.

Strangely, what made it easier, was submitting my last assignments for CMA, which I did just now, at 3:30 AM Eastern Standard Time, which is luckily, a less embarrassing hour Philippine Time. My last couple of weeks in Quezon City were hectic in a way that I did not adequately anticipate.

Between moving out of my house in Cubao and into the home of one of CMA’s most wonderfully supportive staff members, Irynn, in Teacher’s Village, to presenting research on recruitment reform and why the Philippines should ratify International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Private Employment Agencies Convention (No. 181) to a small but intimidating room of government researchers, policy-makers, recruiters, and rights advocates (who I was told were all “on our side”, though that somehow made it more terrifying), there was not a lot of time to think about what the end of this experience meant. What would I regret not doing in these last few weeks? What had I forgotten to figure out? What aspects of my life here would I inexplicably miss? *How late is my blog?* These were questions that did not have answers. I enjoyed believing that.

Sending off my last report—a partial draft of CMA’s submission to the independent committee tasked with monitoring the Philippines’ obligations to promote gender equality in all aspects of public and private life under CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)—I realized that what made this last blog hard to write was the intractability of this experience. I felt frustrated for a lot of reasons that I still can’t completely understand. They were not wholly caused by the cultural experience or the work environment, but were shaped by the realities of the internship all the same.

In the past, I have had rather straight forward experiences of understanding how overcoming challenges is part of any new experience, how big problems eventually become routine aspects of daily life, sometimes even becoming easy to solve with the right information. But here, I never quite “solved” anything, or felt at ease about what I was trying to do with my life. Many of the anxieties I felt when I first arrived, knowing so little, I still felt by the time I left, and many of them were amplified by the certainty (the absoluteness?) of going home. Going home presented fewer possibilities than arriving, and I didn’t know how to reconcile that.

Many things took time and effort to become accustomed to in Quezon City (QC), particularly what it meant to navigate my life there more or less independently, on the receiving end of all kinds of street harassment and comments I could both understand and not understand. These were things that were not unique to QC. What made them, at times, unbearable, was that sometimes they were the only forms of interaction I would have in an entire day. Discouraging and demeaning, there was nothing I could use to buffer against them, or to remind myself that I was capable of anything of value. I think that what I learned (not that I am suggesting everything needs to be a moment of learning) is that not having close friends around you, or regular forms of recognition, make even routine challenges harder to place into perspective. I think of this as a success, because it is not something I knew well about myself before, and I know better now how to ask for support.

My other main challenge was that I was terrified of squandering this opportunity. Coming from many years of limited meaningful work, unpaid work, short-term work, working three or four jobs at once to gain relevant, albeit unpaid, work experience, are all experiences that shape how you deal with rare, good fortune. Contributing to something I believe in is important to me. Migration research, and being able to use skills that I have developed over years and put a lot of work into improving (which I graciously had opportunities to do here) are definitely part of that.

Sometimes, I feel as though I am past the point of *not* being anxious about all of this. I don’t know how many more years I can put into precarious work and insecurity. Having had the opportunity to work through CAPI, to take a break from job hunting for several consecutive months, was an emotional break that I can’t compare to much else. It feels strange to say this in the face of migrant labour rights, considering the stark differences in wages, social security, and long-term

stability in employment between the global north and global south, but I also feel like these are real forms of stress that are legitimate to name.

One of the most interesting and initially demoralizing conversations I have had about “career planning” led someone to ask me to pinpoint exactly what it was that I wanted to do. I paused to think about it, and I eventually said, “I don’t know if what I want is possible.” Not because my goals are lofty, but because over the past several years, there have been few indications that they are possible. She also paused, before saying, “Maybe it’s time to start wanting something else.”

Pulling into Toronto, I felt disappointed that I was the same person. I often feel this way at the end of something. I don’t know why, considering it is so rare to change in a fundamental way. I supposed that none of this would make appropriate blog material, so I tried to put off writing this until something changed. Finishing my reports tonight helped, and so did emailing Ellene, larger than life and endlessly patient, and then a friend at the Women’s Human Rights and Legal Bureau, who unknowingly provided so much support in Manila during times when I felt like the ways I felt about feminism, migrant labour, and north-south relationships were destructive to the pragmatic and skillfully cultivated relationships between civil society and government. I leave with a lot to think about, a great wealth of new knowledge, and many new friendships to grow and watch transform over time.

All of this happens gradually, and then suddenly. Someone I admire shared this thought with me: *I think sometimes these things are revealed slowly, we're always changing and some experiences change us more drastically than others, I think.*

And from the wisest, most dedicated person I know, who tirelessly helped me for six months, worked earlier and later than anyone around, and always made time, no matter what: *take care of yourself. i should do the same.*

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