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Book Review

***Affect, Narratives and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration* by Carlos M. Piocos III**

Publisher: Routledge

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Reviewed by

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Carlos Piocos's ground-breaking book, *Affect, Narratives and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration* published earlier this year by Routledge, provides an in-depth analysis of the intimate labour(ed) landscape of Filipina and Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong and Singapore, and how their (im)mobilities are not just hastened and aggravated by the neoliberal framework of global labor and the policies of their sending and receiving nation-states, but also in terms of the emotionality that circulates within the global care chains network. Piocos specifically turns our attention to the "felt" politics that emanate from films and fictions of and by Southeast Asian migrant workers and how these cultural productions create an affective economy that, according to him, is not just "sticky" as feminist critic Sarah Ahmed describes, but demonstrates varying viscosities of "thickening and thinning out," reflecting a "messiness" of feelings that do not necessarily coalesce in these texts (p. 10).

The author tracts the unevenness of affect within the textual tropes of "belonging and displacement, shame and desire, vulnerability and victimization, and their sacrifices for their home and homeland" (p. 5) that are imbricated in the featured migrant print and visual media; Xyza Cruz Bacani's photographs in her book, *We are Like Air*; the short stories of Indonesian migrant worker-writers, Susie Utomo, Erfa Handayani, Maria Bo Niok, Tiwi, Juwanna, Susana Nisa, Arista Devi, Indira Margareta and Etik Juwita; the novels *Soledad's Sister* by Jose Dalisay and *Sebongkah Tanah Retak* (A Lump of Cracked Land) by Rida Fitria; the films *Remittance* by Patrick Daly and Joel Fendelman, Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*, *Still Human* by Oliver Chan Siu-Kuen, and from Filipino directors Mes de Guzman and Zig Madamba Dulay, *Balikbayan Box* and *Bagahe*, respectively; and migrant documentaries *Mengusahakan Cinta* (Effort for Love) by Ani Ema Susanti and *Sunday Beauty Queen* by Baby Ruth Villarama. These are structured into five chapters that illustrate the landscape and politics of migrant "feelings." While each chapter focuses on a certain affect(s), these chapters "affect" each other by consciously aligning the discussions to connect structurally and emotionally. In this way, migrant feelings emanating from these cultural productions are not discrete emotional categories but are thickening and thinning out beyond the generic constraint and, by extension,

permeating within the actual spaces and bodies of domestic migration in both countries. The analysis drawn across generic and formal considerations shows that “border crossing” among migrants does not just happen geographically but extends to the genres of migrant cultural production from which this “rhizomatic” quality merits equal attention. Piocos interfaces his close reading of these texts against the wider discourses impinging Southeast Asian migrant labour and how the affects teased out from these texts influence government “mood” and policy on domestic migration (such as in the featured opinions of Indonesian president Joko Widodo, former Philippine president Ninoy Aquino, and Hong Kong legislator, Regina Ip), reinforce or negate popular representations of migrant labourers, and ultimately show how the interiority of feelings can be harnessed to affect the on-going political movements and struggles of migrant workers in Singapore and Hong Kong. All these shows what Piocos argues as the migrant affective economy where these cultural productions and representations or “viral texts” (p. 156) are reiterated, reproduced, consumed, and/or repudiated by Filipina and Indonesian migrant labourers alongside the precarious narratives and politics of their supposed national heroism as *bagong bayani* or *pahlawan devisa*. From alienation and belonging discussed in the first chapter down to grief and/in anger, the book shows not just a spectrum of emotions and feelings, but the journey of migrant political identification that ends in the hopeful note of resistance borne by the on-going transnational migrant labour rights movement shaped and buoyed by an array of migrant affect, proving how “literary and visual texts can take on the political task of affecting a social movement” (Piocos, 2021, p. 167). In this way, Piocos highlights agency in the immobility of migrants by showing how these women subvert their precarious conditions through movement itself.

Overall, the strength of this book is not just how it pioneers the affective turn within migration and migrant studies that are classed, gendered, and racialized in predominant scholarly analyses and activisms, but how Piocos steers this intersection to account for the “thickening of emotionality” as migrant remittances accrue in nation-states whose coffers are bellied by their suffering. Begging the question, how do we turn suffering into empowerment? And while it sounds unfortunate that migrants need to be subordinated to come into the agency, this paradoxical, albeit violent, relationship is precisely what makes emotions, feelings, and subjectivities complex and therefore cannot be decoupled from the migrant subject formation. Non-representational theories such as affect and how Piocos highlights how cultural productions are “aesthetic mediations and political interventions” (p. 6) show how upward social mobility and/or migrant political struggle require fluid motions of emotional negotiations found in the interstices of being accepted in the home/host country against knowing one’s “place,” being allowed certain intimacies while wholeheartedly accepting exclusion, and accepting sacrifice as a necessary catalyst for radical change, all illustrated by the fictions and films featured in this book. Ultimately, this shows how emotionality and the viscosity from which it moves migrants are not just ambivalent, dichotomized, or even dialectically opposing but are contronymic, which is to say how these presumably subordinated, negative feelings of alienation, sexual othering, and sacrificial motherhood are understood to be the necessary affective drives to claim or arrive at positive migrant agency.

However, while there remains so much more to say about what this book can potentially “affect” in terms of migrant scholarship, it has ironically shown a minor shortcoming in what it has chosen to privilege. The cultural productions of fiction and film featured by Piocos in this book

leave out the dynamism of the everydayness of lived “emotionality.” And there are clear opportunities from which this book could have benefitted from the equally “thick” description from ethnographic data such as the author mentioning his engagement with his network of Filipina and Indonesian domestics in his “Sunday group” from his stay in Hong Kong from 2012-2016 (p. 156) that informed much of his own “feelings” and textual analyses. It would have been equally fascinating if the researcher’s own ethnographic notes from this immersion or certain interviews conducted by him with these migrants as both subject and creator of these featured texts would have been included in the shaping of affect. While this book’s success can also be attributed to its material density where Picos has analyzed 19 “texts” in total, the potential to further the affective through ethnographic detail remains. Arguably, emotions are made to be “trackable” within the curated frames and borders of these films and fictions, revealing how emotions can sometimes be predicated on or affected by the prevailing standard, rules, and/or conventions of a given genre, and this leaves the readers wanting to know more how they can observe and/or apprehend migrant emotions as actual lived experiences, vocabularies, and gestures in the field.

Perhaps the book’s possibilities can be an opportunity for scholars of varying levels of academic career to use this book not just as an illuminating introduction to Southeast Asian migration, affect theory, and emergent migrant fiction and film but as a field guide in ethnographic studies as well. As I write this review, I am also immersed in my own ethnographic work among Filipina migrant workers in Hong Kong and I can see how this book opens the possibility of tracking and apprehending these felt politics as gestures, discourses, and emotions that unfold and circulate in the field. This book also engages with critical ethnographic concerns such as adapting a certain sensitivity in decoupling our interlocutors from their perceived subordinate status and disengaging ourselves from the paternalistic intentions of well-meaning research for and about Southeast Asian migrants, and where the book’s resounding recognition of hope in migrant political movements can help ethnographic researches document a more nuanced migrant agency.

Reference

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