

BOOK REVIEW

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

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Abstract

In *Affect, Narratives, and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration* (2021), Carlos Pioscos III deploys multidisciplinary approaches to understand contemporary issues surrounding Southeast Asian migration within the framework of what is now generally called Affect Theory. Ethnographic accounts and literary and visual analyses are juxtaposed, interfacing the collective experiences of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers and migration policies that expose, enable, and mobilize such precarious politics of gendered labor. This book-review essay examines how Pioscos advances the various texts, textualities, and contexts that situate affect in narratives, in order to underscore the plight of Filipina and Indonesian women domestic workers and how their struggles characterize women's social movements in the region. This book plays a vital role in exploring affect theory, migrant studies, and Southeast Asia.

Keywords

Introduction

What has been referred to as “emotions” is one of the most crucial representations of the cultural aspect of social scientific inquiries, whose visible manifestations “appear [in order] to tell us about our true selves” (Boellstorff and Lindquist 437). Drawing from Affect Theory in the analysis of their representations, contexts are critically mobilized toward cultural discourse by locating and acknowledging where these emotions are located connecting fields and disciplines such as anthropology, social psychology, and political theory as the book attempts to unpack emotions as a cultural lexicon in understanding texts, textualities, and contexts, particularly in the process of investigating contemporary Southeast Asia (Leys 436).

Over the years, Southeast Asia has been a subject worthy of critical inquiries that emanate from its dynamic cultural mobility. For instance, the region’s marked increase in both local and transnational migration offers dialogues on Southeast Asian narratives of movement. Theorists and scholars working on aspects such as globalization have posited that these movements of people, media, economy, and culture are “crucial in theorizing transnational processes” (Boellstorff and Lindquist 439). Hence, it is suitable to look into these ethnographies of affect to reconfigure the cultural mileage of Southeast Asia as this book tries to do.

Indeed, in *Affect, Narratives and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration*, by deploying multidisciplinary approaches, Carlos M. Piosos III in understanding contemporary issues surrounding Southeast Asian migration through a combination of ethnographic narratives and literary and visual analyses, exploring the collective experiences of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers confronting migration policies that expose, enable, and mobilize the precarious politics of gendered labor. The book aims to unload these experiences to reify women’s portrayal in public discourses and popular. As such, the book asks: how do films, literary works, and performances “represent” the politics of gendered labor migration in Southeast Asia? How important is the articulation of affective states that accord to the rise and development of women’s social movements within the region?

Piocos focusses on affect and its immediate impact on the development of the labor dynamics of women. The chapters highlight conflicting and complementing themes that are structured to carefully guide readers into its immersive track: “belonging and displacement, shame and desire, vulnerability and resistance, sacrifice, and grief” (Piocos 5). These tropes are made manifest by illustrating the experiences of these women labor migrants. It is through their voices that Piocos constructs the involvement of emotions in the tradition of the ethnographies and literatures of women’s migration. These voices, in turn, constitute the experiences of labor migrants, their host countries, their homeland, and eventually, the Southeast Asian region.

How do we manage emotions on a national scale? Piocos opens with the significance of affect and how emotions have the power of influencing our understanding of mere statistics when dealing with labor migration and labor exports. These affective states inform political rhetoric, which is then “deployed toward specific discursive ends” (Piocos 2). Philippine and Indonesia are rooted in political economics as he argues that while host countries or city- states benefit from labor migration of women from the Philippines and Indonesia, their home countries also profit from this transnational exportation of women’s domestic labor. While women’s domestic labor contributes to the economic stability of their home countries, their lived experiences abroad are affected by policies set by the host countries.

His book derives from and contributes to the continuing dialogue on the affective turn of feminist and transnational discourse. In dealing with emotion-work and the global care chain, he operationalizes the concept of intimate labor “to explore how emotions are configured into the experience of border-crossing” (6). Through the analysis of literature, films, and photography, Piocos advances Brooks and Simpson’s position regarding the connection of emotions with gender and migration. Still, while Brooks and Simpson argue that the changes in migrant women’s subjectivity, identity, and belongingness is heavily impacted by their experiences in border-crossing, Piocos extends this argument further to discuss how gender relates to transnational migration, specifically. This adds a layer of representation

that figures into the discursive dialogue of transnationalism, women's labor migration, and the politics of affect.

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It is important to note how Pocos deploys the Deleuzian notion of affect to differentiate it from feelings or emotions. Through the positioning of affect as a Deleuzian concept, it is imperative to consider conditions, structures, and relationships in the conversation. Moreover, Pocos builds upon and expands Ahmed's concept of affective stickiness. While Ahmed suggests how emotions and feelings are made to "congeal" and "cohere in a certain way" (231), Pocos further argues how this stickiness should also include the possibilities of incoherence and disjointedness in dealing with affective viscosity. Hence, these uneven, contradicting, and almost conflicting natures of affect permit scholars to experience the degrees to which we understand emotions and experiences.

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Conclusion

In her book entitled *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler raises this question: "How is precarity enacted and opposed in sudden assemblies?" (20). I believe that Pocos' book engages with this Butlerian interrogation through his selection and analysis of his texts in an effort to contribute to the expansion of affect discourses in the region. Moreover, the visibility that the book affords to such literary and critical works on the plight of Filipina and Indonesian migrant workers constitutes an "assembled" voice that deploys compelling remarks to boost and sustain such dialogues.

The process of understanding precariousness needs to be accompanied by a thoughtful discourse on the perilous realities experienced by Filipina and Indonesian migrant workers that brings about a transformation in their psyche. As Lauren Berlant advocates in her theory of affect, emotions that are engaged mostly through narratives "imply a heightened sense of expend-

ability or disposability that is differentially distributed throughout society” (29). It is in this regard that Piocos participates in the conversation that the marginalized, often excluded, chronicles of women domestic workers need to be brought to the fore. For instance, these migrant workers confront anxieties that escalate due to the impermanent nature of their jobs, their gendered bodies constantly sexualized and commodified, and the concern for the security of the family they left home. All of these issues overlap, producing a certain kind of apprehension when thinking about their future or the future of those who are directly dependent on them. The experience of anxiety inflicts a structuring of singular accountability on the person suffering from that anxiety. Thus, what it yields is an individualized sense of suffering and apprehension.

This brief assessment of the chapters’ essential aspects and arguments focuses on the contributions that Piocos offers to the complex scholarly dialogues regarding women’s migrant situation in the region. *Affect, Narratives and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration* is definitely a rich source material for affect theory and women’s migration studies. The careful maneuvering of textual strategies of literatures and films work well in depicting the experience and emotions of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers, opening up possibilities for various endeavors for scholars and critics to engage with. The book shows how powerful it is for different fields and disciplines to converse with one another in order to produce a compelling scholarship on migration, women, and the region.

Piocos engages with scholarly and creative works, and at the same time, expands the field with possibilities for further studies. One of his main contributions to the ongoing debates on migration narratives and affect is the focus on (oftentimes) overlooked aspects when dealing with affect and gendered migrant labor experiences. His engagement with public and private spaces is one of the crucial aspects of the book. This unlocks several considerations when experiences of emotions are spatialized. Moreover, Piocos unpacks creative and critical nodes from which women migrant workers’ agency are exhibited and empowered. While their experiences are almost

always utilized as spectacular narratives, there is a need to engage, question, and challenge these dominant modes of representing their plights.

Although the book presents a wide variety of literary and visual analyses, one of the minor shortcomings is the non-inclusion of performance/performing/performative texts. The cinematic and fictive representations of the experiences of Filipina and Indonesian migrant workers have been scrutinized critically. It would have been interesting to juxtapose the chosen texts of Pioscos with performance 'texts' such as festivals and events in Hong Kong or Singapore where these women migrant workers choose to engage themselves in. In a way, this adds a supplementary layer from which readers can see the bigger picture of how emotions eventually play out in the experiences and narratives of women labor migrants abroad. Furthermore, still connected with the point raised above, it would have been interesting if the actual responses or insights from these women migrant workers were considered or included. How do Filipina and Indonesian women migrant workers view their own portrayals and representations in these selected texts? It is curious to hear the actual voices of those who are represented and studied in the book. To look into these materials enhances the critical and creative reach of the frameworks which Pioscos has established in his work.

This book is a welcome addition to the scholarly works dealing with affect theory, migrant studies, and Southeast Asia. Pioscos opens opportunities, possibilities, and trajectories for scholars and academics who may want to pursue the research on the topic expand his work. There are still several ways for those who are inspired and encouraged by his methods to advance his scholarship. One way is to expand his framework in the analysis of other texts aside from literary, visual, and cinematic. I can think of interesting conversations if performance or theatrical texts are analyzed alongside Pioscos' framework. Moreover, further studies may delve into other women migrant workers in other regions such as South Asia, or a transcontinental comparison of the struggles of these domestic workers. For instance, is it possible to look into the tendency of migrant workers coming from Sri Lanka and to be limited to men only in the construction industry? How does this affect the women migrant workers from this region and their oppor-

tunities abroad? Another intersection that can be unpacked is the affective experiences of LGBTQ migrant workers in other regions and how they are represented in media, literature, and other texts. In so doing, scholars may discover other aspects and themes of affect that have not been explored in this book.

Anchoring the narratives of domestic workers and other migrant laborers through their emotive experiences is critical as the politics of gendered labor migration continues to play out across the globe. Picos constructs a scholarly path where emotions, experiences, and expectations are engaged with contemporary mobilities happening in the region. We, as scholars, are reminded to traverse the wide opening left by Picos where we can connect, converse, and convene with the questions provided for us.