

Migration, affects subjectivation

designing a post-western methodological practice

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Introduction



- ▶ **Empirical case:** Indonesian migrant workers (mainly women) in Malaysia and Singapore.
- ▶ **Initial finding:** Indonesian women, in migration, develop new practices that would have been impossible in their home communities. However, this practical subversion never seems to translate into a critical discourse
- ▶ **Hypothesis:** developing a sociology of affects is a way of shedding light on subaltern social experiences and forms of knowledge.
- ▶ **Aim:** developing a methodological strategy to study affects




Women's migrations: a split social experience


- ▶ Why focus on women? Because for them, migration only reinforces experiences of social marginalization.
- ▶ Women develop new practices and new identifications abroad. Yet, these practices and identifications are highly stigmatized, back home. However, this discrepancy does not bring women into criticizing social norms and values, in their home communities.
- ▶ **Thus:** women oscillate between the expression of a deep attachment to their new identities, abroad, and expressions of a haunting nostalgia and claims of loyalty toward their home communities.
- ▶ We are thus faced with **practical subversions** of social norms, which do not translate into an **articulated critique** of the social order which produces them.





Affects and the emergence of critique

- ▶ If political subjectivation emerges out of a claim for social change, it is thus related to the emergence of a critical discourse.
- ▶ In order to analyze this dimension of social experiences, i use the concept of **critique** developed by **Luc Boltanski**.
- ▶ For Boltanski, critique is rooted in our relationship to **the real**. The real can be divided in two dimensions:
 - ▶ The **world**: raw flux of things, non mediated by language.
 - ▶ **Reality**: humanization of the world. The world is captured in semantic categories which make it intelligible.
- ▶ **Critique** emerges when the world disrupts reality, by exposing its conventional nature. E.g. the emergence of alternative sexualities disrupting ategories of gender.

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- This definition presupposes a pre-semantic level of perception, otherwise the **world** could not disrupt **reality**.
 - I posit that **affects** can account for this pre-discursive level of perception, which allows connecting to the world outside of the discursive mediation of reality.


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- ▶ I define affects following **William Reddy** and **Vincent Crapanzano**:
 - ▶ Affects are defined as **affections of the body**. To this extent, they are **non-representational** in the terms of **Nigel Thrift**, as they are not experienced through linguistic categories.
 - ▶ Affects can become an object of discourses, when one attempts to speak about them. This discursive relation to affects is what Crapanzano terms « **emotional experience** », as distinct from « affective experience ».
 - ▶ We thus have this foundational distinction between affects, and discourses about affects.
 - ▶ For Reddy, this discursive elaboration of affects takes the form of a **translation**: it is at the same time **referential**, since it tries to describe an underlying reality, and **performative**, as the discursive formulation of an affect transforms the underlying affect. Describing an affect has a retro-active action on the underlying affect.

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- ▶ **By thinking of affects as non-representational, we can conceive of modalities of perception of the “world”. By thinking of the relationship between affectivity and discourse in the terms of a process of translation, we have all the necessary tools to analyze the transition between the world and reality. We thus have the means to account for the *social emergence of critique*.**



Affects and subjectivation

- ▶ When we look at Indonesian migrant women's experience, we see that the tensions between their lives abroad and in Indonesia creates a general unease, a **malaise**.
- ▶ This malaise is rooted in the split of language between disjunctive social affiliations and social norms. But it is also the product of a **split of affects**.
- ▶ Indeed, women's relations to their different places involve complex « structures of feelings » (Raymond Williams) : a general feeling of unease, tied to their home places, thus often combines with strong affective ties, with some of the people who live there.
- ▶ Structures of feelings are thus internally split between conflicting affects. Splits also occur between structures of feelings attached to different places.

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- ▶ Affects draw complex spatial configurations, made of attractions and repulsions. For instance:
 - ▶ Nostalgia or melancholia tied to home communities vs. the impossibility to settle back unless one is ready to give up practices and identifications developed in migration
 - ▶ A deeply felt attachment to their current lives vs. the impossibility to settle in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, because of migration laws that evince them from any perennial form of citizenship
 - ▶ Malaise is thus tied to 3 lines of splitting in women's experiences:
 - ▶ In language, between conflicting discourses about home and their current lives abroad
 - ▶ In the order of affects, within and between structures of feelings
 - ▶ Between discourses and affects. **E.g.** *women's exitment in their new lives vs. Persisting claims of loyalty towards social norms and traditions, back in Indonesia.*



Capturing affects: methodological outcomes

- This theoretical discussion has several consequences in terms of qualitative research methods.
- 1. we should pay attention to **discursive expression of affects**.
- 2. However, affects cannot be observed directly. My strategy thus consists in:
 - A. identifying recurring tensions within discourse. As I have shown, they can be related to connected structures of feeling.
 - B. Paying attention to non-discursive behaviours, including tone.
 - C. **Space is also a good entry point**: since strong affects are attached to specific places, migrant workers often deal with affects by circulating. **Spatial practices and spatial representations are thus strongly connected to affects**.



Conclusion

- ▶ I have shown that uncovering the affective dimension of subjectivities allows shedding light on **subaltern experiences which otherwise remain hidden**. In this respect, it is coherent with the project to build a post-western (and non-hegemonic) sociology.
- ▶ This remains a tentative research program, however, which requires the definition and testing of systematic methods of inquiry and analysis.



THANK YOU