

“Mind the gap”: responding to the indeterminable in migration

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Prompted by the paper by Miriam Tedeschi, this commentary attempts to unsettle the dominant understanding of a relation in migration research that prioritises linkages between people, places and organisations while treating boundaries as limits to overcome. Building on geographers’ earlier engagements with Adorno, Levinas and extending this conversation to include Blanchot, the analysis attempts to move beyond the hold of mastery on a relation with alterity. The paper argues for an interruptive non-relation that resists the appropriation and affirms the dispersion of the self by the alterity it cannot internalise. It offers an alternative response to difference in migration that avoids bringing it to unifying continuity. Instead of treating interruptions in migration as gaps to be resolved through language, the paper considers the possibility of a neutral writing that reflects the powerlessness to say the unspeakable. In a movement of inscription and effacement, neutral writing invokes the unspeakable pain and affliction that exceeds the concepts to which it gives rise. The neuter answers for the non-subject of loss and trauma, the nothing often haunting international migrants.

Keywords: relation, interruption, Other, identity, neuter, language

Introduction

As a phenomenon underpinned by fluidity and radical difference, migration always escapes reductive theorisations. Tedeschi’s (2020) paper offers a broader understanding of migration by drawing on the ideas of Simondon (2005). Supported by the research findings on irregular migrants in Finland, she raises important questions about the construction of an individual and her existence on the move. Tedeschi’s ideas work at different theoretical scales as she engages with the range of fundamentally important concepts of (mobile) being, becoming, time, subjectivity, affect, relation and distance. In this critical response I focus only on a couple of conceptual issues her paper raised.

First, I explore the intersections between relationality, subjectivity and difference in migration research. Tedeschi explores the relation between an always-becoming individual and the environment (p.4), calling for a “successful resolution” of emerging spatial and temporal dissonances. Furthermore, Tedeschi’s arguments about the need to consider the

individual “in the process of becoming-the-environment” (p.5) resonate with the broader discussions about the possibilities of drawing the boundaries between inside and outside in migration (De Sausa Santos, 2004). My intention here is to open up for discussion the idea of unity between an individual and the other that continues to trouble migration scholars, and consider the very possibility of the relation to the unknown.

Second, I want to explore the ways in which movement comes to matter in responding to difference. Tedeschi’s analysis of the lives of irregular migrants points towards the “loss of the sense of space and time” (p.11) in the encounters with difference and considers affect as a way of recovering this lostness. If brought closer to the analysis of mobilities, these ideas could offer a fruitful contribution to the recent debates on the alternative temporalities and spatialities of transnational movements (Shubin, 2015; King, 2018). However, Tedeschi’s analysis leaves potential responses to these ruptures open for discussion. In an attempt to start such discussion, I want to consider alternative expressions for the relations beyond the limits of place, region and subjectivity.

Unity and relational migration subject

Existing analyses of migration often stress the importance of increased “social and economic relationships” shaping cross-border movements (Castells, de Haas and Miller, 2014: 5).

Theorisations of movement and difference in migration research are influenced by a ‘relational turn’ and to draw on the conceptualisations of space-time as ‘relative, relational’ (Massey 1999: 262). Tedeschi’s arguments explicitly build on these theorisations and work towards the closure of relationality between the environment and the individual, so that ‘the environment becomes an active, material ‘layer’ on the body’ (p.4). While raising important points about the non-linearity of connections and the importance of affects in shaping them, such analysis develops an affirmative and potentially problematic disposition towards the relation.

In the migration context this approach often translates into the construction of migrant identities through adaption or exclusion of certain things (people, environment) as “different” (Grewal, 2005). The relationship with alterity here is based on the disavowal of certain meanings migrants do not identify with, whereas these excluded elements always unsettle the coherent self-identity. The intentional subject (the migrant) is taken to establish a dialogical,

reciprocal relation to the Other on the basis of mutual recognition. However, this approach offers a limited purchase particularly in the context of irregular migration, which is explored in Tedeschi's paper. While she focuses attention on the "individuals going through traumas, losses, violence and illnesses" (p.7), she is expressing a hopeful move towards the closure of the gaps caused by irregular migration. In her interpretation of Simondon's ideas, Tedeschi argues that the closure of "disparation" between different elements of migration "must then be solved in order to bring the pair individual-environment to a new step of becoming" (p.10). It is argued that (re)integration of the relations with alterity is possible by means of establishing "intentional and affective connections between and among the subjects and their environment" (p.8). This understanding of a relation with the Other as bound to unity raises questions about what directs such a response to difference.

These relational arguments sit uneasily with the broader dialogues in geography that warn against taking relationality for granted. Harrison (2007) urges us not to consider relation as a given while treating non-relational as its opposite, 'not yet' subsumed by the opposing power. Drawing on Derrida and Ferraris (2001), he focuses on the distance with the Other that cannot be unquestionably appropriated by a relation. Similarly, Barnett (2005:7) criticises the cultural politics of otherness 'contained within a circle of recognition and misrecognition'. In a dialogue with Levinas (1969), he draws attention to the unbridgeable distance with the Other where "the neighbour is also the stranger" (ibid, 10). These approaches unsettle the debates in migration studies that aim at unification and continuity of relations across place and position.

Similarly, I drew on the ideas of Blanchot (1992) to question the very possibility of a relation with alterity (Shubin, 2020). This relationship is not given and should be considered from a position of withdrawal rather than mastery by the subject. To illustrate the impossible relation with alterity Blanchot (1992:6) uses the example of a near-death experience, which would resonate with the stories of many irregular migrants. On the one hand, death is possible as something terrible, the demise of the self. On the other hand, death as radical alterity is also impossible as it cannot be directly experienced by the subject. Unlike Tedeschi's hopeful interpretation of Simondon (2005), anxiety dividing the self offers no deliverance. The encounter with alterity leads to the destruction of the subject that through passivity and self-effacement accepts the otherness within (Blanchot, 1992). This is an impossible relation that preserves the distance with the alterity yet allows the other to be received as other (Hill et al.

2005). Importantly, as Blanchot (2003:9) stresses, this kind of relation is “irreducible to unity and to the labour of dialectics”. The encounter with alterity entails movement beyond subjectivity and intentionality, which effaces and transforms the self at the same time. It is to this movement and its interruptions that I now attend.

Movement of discontinuity

In a dialogue with Simondon, Tedeshi’s paper explores loss emergent in migration as “disparatedness, incompatibility and metastability” (p.10). Similarly, in migration studies movement across borders is often linked to the sense of rootlessness while engaging with unfamiliar environments (Ahmed et al., 2003). It is argued that dealing with the foreign in migration requires either manipulation of one’s experiences through rational decision-making and increased self-resilience or acceptance of uncertainty and risks (Stark, 1991). In both scenarios, migrants are expected to ‘normalise’ the unknown events by bringing them into knowledge or accepting them on their terms (Williams and Baláž, 2012). However, such movement towards the relationship with the foreign relies on the power of the self to represent difference and denies “the radical alterity of the other” (Levinas, 1969: 36). In migration studies, it is often left unclear what happens to the alterity that resists being drawn into a relation and refuses attempts to bring it into knowledge.

Broader disciplinary discussions on “the geographies that wound” (Philo, 2005:441) also raise concerns about expressing the displacement of the self in encounters with the other. Exposure to the unspeakable and unrepresentable alterity creates an opening that does not fit into words. Instead of treating this passage as a lack in the individual experience to be reconciled in discourse, the recent studies on grief (Stevenson et al., 2016), violence (Shubin and Sowgat, 2019), trauma (Carter-White, 2018), chronic pain (Bissell, 2009) and afflictions (Andrews, 2019) consider these interruptions as intrinsically meaningful. In a similar vein, Philo (2017) calls for voicing the “wounds” without extracting affirmative meanings and attempting to resolve them in language. In conversation with Adorno (1973:365), he offers a poetic approach to “[t]he somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life [as] the stage of suffering” outside of self-interest and possibility of thematization. Poetry, as we will later discover with Blanchot (1986:90), refuses to decide, attach meanings to the silences as it offers “an expression of infinitude, an expression of vain death and of mere Nothing”. This approach runs parallel to Harrison’s (2007:594) analysis of pain and affliction in exposure to the

otherness that discloses and apprehends *nothing*. Drawing on Levinas (1969), Harrison refuses to recuperate this nothing through knowledge and advocates bearing witness to unreadability and silences beyond intentionality.

In a similar fashion, engagement with the ideas of Blanchot (1992) can help to attend to the worlds inaccessible to reason in migration. Attending to afflictions and traumas in migration requires holding open the space for the other and preserving the irreducible distance to the unknown. In Blanchot's (2003:78) terms, bearing witness to such ruptures is only possible through fragmentary writing that "allows intermittence itself to speak". To resist the power and the mastery of writing in the first person, Blanchot uses the figure of the neuter, neither nor the other, the redoubled plus-minus \pm sign marking the disaster of self-effacement and madness. Neutral writing indicates the movement beyond the self while passively receiving a strange companion, the other within. In a double movement, the neuter inscribes and effaces at the same time, delimits and transforms. The neuter, "a word too many" (Blanchot, 1992: 5) endlessly proliferates the names given to alterity yet, by making these names meaningless, it constantly dismantles the writing from within. It neither changes silence and separation into language, nor turns language into silence because of the impossible obligation to respond to suffering (Hill, 2005).

In migration studies, neutral writing responds to the nameless "silenced and erased" tragedies of slavery "narrated in third-person voice" that avoid the possibility of naming (Low, 1999:108). Since the neuter already writes the disaster (of knowledge, of self-destruction), it opens a possibility to inscribe the disasters of ruin in migration while also re-inscribing, releasing them from conventional meanings. This can be particularly relevant to the discussions about irregular, incomplete, indeterminable migrations, such as those set off by the Fukushima disaster in Japan. The poem by Arai Takako "Half a Pair of Shoes" displaced by the tsunami offers an example of neutral writing that speaks to the array of objects, memories and ghosts making themselves felt in the disaster and haunting the living (Angels, 2016, 35). In attending to nature moving in after death, this writing bears witness to the rupture caught between being and nothingness. Developing a critical agenda in migration studies requires an openness to such ruptures, afflictions, misfortunes without the thought of fully grasping them, providing precise definitions and narrative subjects. We must affirm affliction without neutralising its wounding and testify not to the presence or absence of an event of suffering but to difference in itself.

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