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Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy

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Abstract

[Excerpt] What happens when you need to be yourself and like someone else at the same time? This is the central demand placed on transnational service workers, who form a large and growing part of the global economy. In response, workers perform an elaborate set of largely invisible activities, which I term authenticity work. Based on interviews with one hundred transnational call center workers in India this book describes their authenticity work as they refashion themselves into ideal Indian workers who can expertly provide synchronous, voice-to-voice customer service for clients in the West. The experiences of Indian call center workers sheds light on a wide range of service-related activities that cross national borders. Filipino nannies refashion themselves to clone faraway employers' visions of ideal caregivers. Health workers in Mexico servicing American medical tourists strive to package the quality of their services in terms of Western professional practice. The exchange of labor and capital occurs in the context of national histories and power inequities that make the negotiation of authenticity a central part of transnational service work.

Keywords

authenticity work, call centers, India, identity, service work

Comments

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Phone Clones

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Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy

Kiran Mirchandani

To the inspirational lives of my grandparents
Satrupi (Mira) Kripalani
1913–2009
and
Jethanand Karamchand Makhijani
1907–2003

Contents

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Abbreviations

Agent   frontline customer service worker taking calls
AHT   average handling time
BPO   business process outsourcing
C-Sat   a performance score given by customers
D-Sat   a performance score given by a dissatisfied customer
IT   information technology
ITES   information technology enabled services
MTI   Mother Tongue Influence
NASSCOM   National Association of Software and Services Companies
OJT   on-the-job training
Process   the type of work agents are engaged in (for example, pro-
             cessing insurance claims, solving computer problems,
             placing catalogue sales orders, addressing concerns with
             Internet connections, processing airline reservations, and
             so forth)
INR   rupees, the currency in India

Phone Clones

INTRODUCTION

The Authentic Clone

What happens when you need to be yourself and like someone else at the same time? This is the central demand placed on transnational service workers, who form a large and growing part of the global economy. In response, workers perform an elaborate set of largely invisible activities, which I term *authenticity work*. Based on interviews with one hundred transnational call center workers in India this book describes their authenticity work as they refashion themselves into ideal Indian workers who can expertly provide synchronous, voice-to-voice customer service for clients in the West. The experiences of Indian call center workers sheds light on a wide range of service-related activities that cross national borders. Filipino nannies refashion themselves to clone faraway employers' visions of ideal caregivers. Health workers in Mexico servicing American medical tourists strive to package the quality of their services in terms of Western professional practice. The exchange of labor and capital occurs in the context of national histories and power inequities that make the negotiation of authenticity a central part of transnational service work.

While the globalization of service work has steadily increased in recent years, there has been a dramatic shift in the nature of customer service in particular. No longer involving face-to-face interactions between customers and workers, telecommunications technologies facilitate the widespread provision of customer service that is temporally synchronous and spatially distant. Workers housed in cubicled call centers make voice-to-voice contact with customers, some of whom might live within walking distance while others are on the other side of the world. The global patterns in the offshoring of customer service work are structured not only by market forces but also by national histories. Significantly, workers living in countries that have been colonized are top contenders for offshored customer service jobs. Out of these countries, India has received the prized distinction of being the most desirable location for offshore service work.[1] Although other countries such as the Philippines, South Korea, and China have emerged as new hot spots for transnational customer service work,[2] the sector continues to grow rapidly in India, increasing by 14 percent in the 2011 financial year alone.[3] In total, the information technology and information technology enabled services (IT/ITES) sector now employs 2.5 million people in India, with service rather than software jobs as its fastest-growing segment.[4] Total revenue from the sector has grown from five billion U.S. dollars in 1997 to seventy-two billion in 2009.[5]

While the transnationalization of customer service work is relatively new, the mobility of capital without the mobility of labor has been the hallmark of global capitalist regimes. Manufacturing and assembly jobs have historically been conducted in poor countries benefiting multinational Western corporations without requiring the large-scale migration of labor to the West. Workers without immigration or mobility rights have supported industrial development in the West for over a century. However, rarely in the past have these workers been in voice-to-voice conversation with their faraway customers, and rarely has part of the product being exchanged been a responsive, caring, connected self itself. I argue that two sets of processes structure these new global service workers' jobs. First, a set of relations through which they are distanced from the West and seen as physically remote speakers of a strange version of English who pose a danger to Western economic and national sovereignty. Second, workers are "just like" their customers in the West with the familiarity and ability to connect with clients that are necessary for successful customer

service. In reconciling these two processes, workers enter into a complex interplay of colonial histories, class relations, and national interests, which are embedded within their authenticity work. This is the work of being oneself and simultaneously like someone faraway imagines one should be. Becoming a phone clone involves emulating, through voice, an ideal transnational call center worker who is both close to and distant from customers in the West.

This terrain of sameness and difference is exemplified in the June 2006 cover image of *Time* magazine that featured India's predominance in transnational customer service work.[6] The representative of "India Inc.," as the story is titled, is a light-skinned Indian woman, dressed in traditional clothing and wearing ornamental wedding jewelry under her headset. The woman is attractive, and looks straight into readers' eyes. Her confident demeanor defies the image of the passive Oriental other and signifies the new India to which the article refers. At the same time, she is dressed in traditional Indian clothing, complete with the highly eroticized nose ring. She signifies a worker who embraces Western development but does not forget her place in the social hierarchy.[7] This image captures an ideal that Indians employed as transnational service workers emulate. Just like the woman depicted in *Time,* they are strange, yet somewhat familiar to those in the West whom they serve.

In fact, Indian workers are not uniformly fair skinned, and they do not dress in Indian outfits to go to work. Indeed, they are encouraged to dress in Western clothing and be deferential and subservient rather than assertive as depicted in the *Time* image. The image, however, captures the West's ambivalence toward the non-West, which can be traced back to early colonial expansion. Anshuman Prasad and Pushkala Prasad point to the ways in which the non-West is simultaneously weak and threatening to the West. They note that "while colonialism was spurred by the moral imperative to 'improve' the non-West in the West's own image, paradoxically colonialism also evinced an intense desire to preserve the 'authenticity' of the non-West."[8]

The term *authenticity* has historically been associated with culture or art, although I argue that it provides useful insight into transnational service work. On one level, authenticity refers to something that is real and original rather than an imitation, such as a piece of art certified to be produced by an artist. At the same time, authenticity can be used to refer

to an accurate representation or copy.[9] For example, the Wilma Cafe in Toronto is marketed as providing "authentic Moroccan cuisine," which is food that is like that found in another faraway place. Significantly, as Theo Van Leeuwen summarizes, "something is authentic because it is declared authentic by an authority."[10] In this sense, the study of authenticity is a study of legitimacy because it both confers value onto that which is deemed authentic and legitimates the position of those who have the right to do the deeming. This is not to suggest that the hierarchy between the authenticated and the authenticator is fixed or clearly visible. Rather, authenticity is continually being constructed and contested. In a fascinating account of Western travelers engaged in eating unfamiliar foods, Jennie Germann Molz provides an example of the negotiated nature of authenticity. In describing their experiences of eating foods such as fried bugs and naming these culinary adventures as "dangerously strange," travelers reify "their own White, Western culture as the norm against which other cultures are defined as exotic and strange."[11] Authenticity, in this sense, serves to establish hierarchies and police boundaries. Transnational service workers negotiate these boundaries and hierarchies through their authenticity work, which involves enacting originality in terms of difference while at the same time reproducing sameness by being an accurate representation.

These ideas on authenticity provide a rich terrain on which to examine the experiences of transnational service workers. Their work is a site where hierarchies are established and boundaries are policed through notions of authenticity. Thus far, much of the discussion of authenticity in relation to customer service work has focused on the rather simplistic notion of being "true to self." Management gurus B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, for example, write about the need for organizations to provide customers with an "authentic experience" in the context of the experience economy. They identify "the management of the customer perception of authenticity" as the "new business imperative."[12] This new business imperative requires the provision of service that does not come across as scripted, fake, and insincere. By being themselves, workers can convince customers that they know and care about their real needs. However, when service providers and customers occupy different spatial, cultural, historical, and material landscapes, workers are not asked to be themselves but rather to emulate an ideal as imagined by their employers and customers.

In highlighting workers' efforts to become authentic clones simultaneously enacting sameness and difference, I do not wish to suggest that their work involves merging their "real Indian" selves with a predefined Western "other." Indeed, workers do not, by and large, see their adoption of Western accents and cultures as a loss of Indian identity. Rather, they note that Western customers and clients demand that they sound a particular way, so interactions are "culturally seamless."[13] Accordingly, I explore the experiences of customer service agents in the context of multiple and continual *constructions* of distinctions between India and the West that are made by customers, workers, managers, trainers, policy makers, and the press. Part of the work of being a transnational customer service agent is making sense of, participating in, and negotiating these constructions on a daily basis.

The Distant Server

Capital expansion involves not only the use of existing labor pools but also the creation of workers with defined characteristics and outlooks. Carol Upadhya notes that "the deployment or creation of cultural identities in the service of capital is a dialectic process in which pre-existing cultural communities, gendered identities or racially marked groups are transformed into labor forces that perform particular roles in the production process, which in turn mark these social identities with the stamp of capital."[14] This book explores the ways in which the work experiences and identities of customer service agents in India are shaped by and in turn shape the interactions between Indian workers and Western customers over the phone. The identities of customer service workers in India are continually being formed and reformed through their experiences of their jobs. Their encounters with Western clients serve as sites where ongoing processes of connection and differentiation between India and the West are enacted. Sara Ahmed argues that "through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as 'a stranger.'" Encounters do not simply occur in the present—rather, "each encounter reopens past encounters."[15] It is in the context of India's colonial past that Indians are seen not only as strangers but also as deeply threatening to the sanctity of

Western jobs. Through their daily encounters with Westerners over the phone, Indians are placed outside the dominant nation, often through violent and racist expressions of exclusion on the part of customers. They are called "thieves" for taking jobs away from the West, evoking discourses of stranger danger while simultaneously facilitating the work of Western nation-building.[16]

The construction of Indians as distant occurs therefore, not accidently, in conjunction with the strong public backlash against outsourcing. During the early phases of the large-scale outsourcing of customer service work in the early 2000s, organizations aggressively trained workers to mask their physical location in India. Workers started their shifts by familiarizing themselves with news, traffic, and weather information in their make-believe homes and were also asked to use these to deceive customers about their true location in India. Since around 2005, however, these attempts have been replaced by the open acknowledgment that customer service work is done by Indians who are faraway—distant not only in terms of their physical location but also permanently different in their ways of communicating. This difference assures the security of Western sovereignty since these deficiencies severely curtail excessive capital or labor flight out of the West. In this sense, difference is simultaneously a "site of subject formation" and a social relation, where interactions are determined by histories and practices that "produce the conditions for the construction of group identities."[17] Through their telephone encounters with clients in the West, Indian customer service agents emerge as a distinct group of Indians—highly educated, entrepreneurial, and trainable while at the same time subservient, awkward, and deficient.

The Economy of Familiarity

The social relations of difference are experienced, for customer service workers, in the context of a seemingly contradictory economy of familiarity. Workers' jobs are essentially to serve, which involves the deeply familial work of caring and empathy. Work processes, training, and routines within customer service work are justified in terms of the need for customers to experience workers as familiar. During telephonic encounters, Western customers should feel that their needs have been recognized, they

have been cared for, and they can trust the stranger on the phone with confidential information. The success of the Indian call center industry depends fundamentally on Western customers seeing Indian workers as people who are close—close enough to help manage their credit card expenses, understand the best insurance plan in the context of their lives, fix their computers, and identify the most suitable telephone plan for their lifestyles. Customer service agents' work of becoming familiar with their customers involves living on Western time, embracing Western cultures, engaging in accent training to be understood, and practicing to remove the language deficiency, which is termed as their mother tongue influence (MTI). As A. Aneesh has summarized, for Indian customer service workers, "cultural simulation—is the very basis of authentic performance" since call center workers are supposed to sound like their customers in order to make them feel comfortable.[18]

These practices suggest that there remains a fundamental difference between commodities that are material products and voice-to-voice or face-to-face services. Marxist analysis on the fetishism of commodities shows how the labor that goes into the production of goods is mystified so that goods are seen as independent of the labor through which they are produced. In voice-to-voice service work, the product is exchanged via an encounter between two materially situated, socially located individuals—and workers' labor is part of the commodity being exchanged. Desirable workers are not only the cheapest and most productive, as in subcontracted manufacturing or assembly jobs, but also those who are familiar to Western customers. Elaborate recruitment procedures, detailed monitoring processes, and the spatial organization of workspaces serve to produce Indian customer service agents as Western clones—people who talk, think, and act in ways that are familiar to those in the West.

Such cultural cloning involves the reproduction of sameness and facilitates the entrenchment of normative social hierarchies.[19] The stated need for workers to be as much like their customers as possible is used to justify immense organizational control over all spheres of workers' lives. Companies determine the activities their employees should engage in during their leisure time, the ways in which they should speak, the names they should be known by, and the nature of their personal beliefs. Philomena Essed and David Goldberg note that "cultural cloning is predicated on the taken-for-granted desirability of certain types, the often unconscious tendency to

comply with normative standards, the easiness with the familiar and the subsequent rejection of those who are perceived as deviant."[20] Through grueling recruitment rounds and training sessions, deviant or inappropriate workers—those who cannot be made identifiable, knowable, and familiar to Westerners—are weeded out. Others are trained to speak in a "neutral" accent. Yet, they are never seen to be "real" speakers of English and this logic of deficiency structures their language training. By virtue of their ethnicity as well as the corrupting influence of local languages, all Indians are deemed to require remedial training to be understood by Westerners.

Providing service requires workers to become both familiar and deferential at all costs, including in the face of overt racism. Customer service is seen to involve not only being someone with whom the customer can identify but also accepting customer racism as the failure to achieve the required closeness. Workers are trained to respond to racism with empathy and caring rather than anger or detachment. Several assumptions are made through which racism in transnational customer service work is masked—customer service work is seen to require a close connection, which is only possible if workers and customers are similar, if workers are cultural clones and therefore easy to identify with. Racism is the effect of workers' failure to become familiar with their customers in the context of the supposedly legitimate national interest of the West to protect jobs and prevent outsourcing.

Authenticity Work

When customer service agents make telephonic contact with Western clients, they immediately begin a process of proclaiming their legitimacy. This effort-filled set of activities, termed *authenticity work,* involves training, learning, and the continual creation of one's identity. Indian customer service agents do authenticity work by simultaneously constructing themselves as foreign workers who do not threaten Western jobs, as legitimate colonial subjects who revere the West, as real Indians who form an offshore model workforce providing the cheap immobile labor needed in the West, as flexible workers who are trainable and global, and as workers who are faraway yet familiar enough to provide good services to their customers.

Based on one hundred interviews with workers at call centers in New Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune, this book explores the authenticity work that forms an integral part of transnational service jobs. Telephone-based customer service centers are part of the ITES (information technology enabled services) industry in India, which is also referred to as the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector. Companies in the ITES/BPO sector include voice-to-voice services as well as back office (email), data entry, and accounting services. Estimates indicate that India holds between 35 percent and 45 percent of the global market in offshore service work. There are currently seven hundred thousand call center workers in India, a sevenfold increase since 2001.[21]

Over the past decade, there has been considerable media coverage on transnational call centers in India. Many reports celebrate the new growth in subcontracting with euphoric enthusiasm and claim, as in an article in the *Statesman,* that it proves that the "Age of India Cometh."[22] Outsourced jobs are said to be fostering a blooming middle class, with benefits trickling down to those who serve the emerging infrastructure and consumer needs. In other reports transnational call center workers are characterized as "cyber-coolies" working in sweatshop conditions.[23] Speaking to workers it becomes clear that these dichotomous perspectives fail to fully capture the experiences of Indian customer service workers.[24] Workers are far from satisfied with and grateful for their so-called comfortable jobs and frequently talk about the stressful and tedious nature of their work. Yet, they do not want the subcontracting trend to end and appreciate their stable incomes and well-organized workspaces. They strive for enriched, interesting work and engage in active processes of decision making in determining how to behave on the telephone, construct themselves, interact with one another, and interpret organizational rules.

Overview of the Book

Two dominant relations structure Indian customer service workers' jobs—(1) the notion that they are fundamentally different from Westerners and (2) the idea that they are their cultural clones and therefore able to establish transnational relationships of familiarity and ease. The chapters in this book highlight the ways in which Indian customer

service agents experience these contradictory relations through their training, work processes, and daily interactions with their customers, and the authenticity work which is required as a result. Chapter 1 provides the backdrop for the analysis of workers' experiences and situates the recent growth of India's technology-related service industry within the broader trends of the transnationalization of service work. I argue that the globalization of service work provides unique opportunities to understand the microprocesses of global economic capitalism.[25] In this chapter, I also highlight the methodological approach of studying the global by analyzing the lived experiences of workers. Feminist analysts have focused on the need to move away from grand theories, which characterize globalization as a "meta-myth", a "rape script," or a "narrative of eviction."[26] Instead, we need to focus on the ways in which processes known as global are formed by, and, in turn, form the everyday local lives of individuals. Highlighting the continually contested and heterogeneous nature of global capitalism reveals the microprocesses through which transnational corporate alliances are forged and facilitated. Carla Freeman argues that "not only do global processes enact themselves on local ground but local processes and small scale actors might be seen as *the very fabric of globalization.*"[27] The "fabric" of this book is in-depth interviews with frontline customer service agents in New Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune, conducted between 2002 and 2009. Through these accounts, women and men share their work experiences and describe the ways in which they craft themselves into transnational service workers.

The next segment of the book (Chapters 2 and 3) explores the processes through which Indian customer service agents are constructed as "different" from Westerners. The Indian call center worker is recognized as a "stranger" in the "encounter" between worker and customer; "such encounters allow the stranger to appear, to take form, by recuperating all that is unknowable into a figure that we imagine we might face here, now, in the street."[28] Indian customer service workers are embodied through their voices, and they are known as those who speak a strange and corrupted form of English. Although the availability of a large pool of English-speaking workers is widely cited as one of the main advantages of outsourcing to India, workers are subjected to elaborate training and monitoring processes that are deemed necessary for them to be understood. Becoming a customer service worker involves "sounding right"; this has been termed

"aesthetic labor"[29] and is explored in Chapter 2. To understand and be understood by Western customers, workers receive extensive training on "Voice and Accent" and are asked to adjust their pronunciation, grammar, rate of speech, and emphasis. One worker describes the training she received: "What they do is they give you, like, small things like a couple of words, a few words that U.S. people speak in a different way. So instead of we saying 'talking,' they say 't'auking.' So there is a difference. So they kind of teach us these small kind of... they give small tips. This is how you talk. So that the American should understand you."

Aesthetic work occurs in the context of power and hierarchies that are structured not only by organizational processes and individual traits of workers but also by the broader contexts of colonial histories and inequities between nations. In Indian call centers, language serves as a stratification device through which class as well as regional hierarchies between workers are enacted. Even though all Indians are constructed as nonnative speakers of English, certain workers (those who are urban, convent-educated, and familiar with Western culture) are deemed to have Mother Tongue Influences (MTIs) that can be "neutralized." These "least different" (or implicitly least deficient) workers are seen to be most appropriate for this industry while the others are unceremoniously shut out.

The universal requirement of voice and accent training serves to entrench the notion that unlike Western customers, Indians are automatically deficient in their use of English. Chapter 3 describes another way in which Indian customer service workers are distanced—in terms of their physical location. Interviews conducted before 2005 reveal that workers were consistently asked to mask their physical location in India. After 2005, however, workers' attempts to hide their locations were largely acknowledged as ineffective, and many agents were asked by their supervisors to openly reveal to their customers that work had been subcontracted to India. Consequently, managing the backlash from customers became part of workers' jobs, and this involves often violent encounters with irate customers who express nationalist protectionism. A trainer recounts Indian agents' dismay at the shift in policy from locational masking to locational transparency because they are now "scared of telling customers they're in India because they think that customers will get wild at them and blast at them." In telephonic encounters, Indians are treated like strangers, outsiders, and thieves.

These "thieves," however, are deemed essential for the success of Western corporations, which have an enormous need for low-cost labor. Business media, trade promotion organizations, and the Indian elite have colluded to construct India as providing the model workforce for IT and ITES outsourcing. In fact, the educational qualifications of Indian customer service workers include bachelor's and master's degrees as well as specialized higher education in engineering or business. Indians may be different from Westerners, but they can be *made* the same through targeted recruitment, careful monitoring, and spatial organization of their work. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore strategies through which Indian call center workers are made familiar to their Western customers.

Chapter 4 focuses on the labor processes through which Western work norms are enacted. One woman describes her understanding of the characteristics necessary for success in the call center industry by noting that "you're supposed to be sophisticated, stylish, modern, fashionable, sexy, hot. [You] need to have that talent and skill to impress your trainer, to impress your QC [quality controller], to become at a higher post. Because without doing that you're not going to get anywhere." Becoming this ideal transnational service worker involves a constant process of enacting, revisioning, and resisting distinctions between the West and India, modern and backward, progressive and traditional. This negotiation occurs in the context of three organizational strategies that serve to encourage workers to clone customer accents, attitudes, lifestyles, and outlooks so that they can achieve the connection and closeness required to be successful customer service agents. First, highly competitive recruitment strategies are used to weed out inappropriate workers, and only those who come across as entrepreneurial, trainable, and knowledgeable about Western popular culture are hired. Second, physical workplaces are constructed as Western spaces—which are very different from the local environment. Tall, new, shining, heavily guarded buildings jar against the surrounding crumbling structures and slums. Workers often speak of Indian social spaces as disorderly and unclean in contrast to their highly organized Western workplaces. Third, workers are subjected to monitoring, scripting, and control that are promoted as necessary for them to achieve Western standards of "professionalism." Professionalism involves exacting standards; as one woman reports, "if you don't perform, you're chucked out...it's like that. They follow that six sigma[30] thing very, very strictly. Six sigma is,

like, point 999 percentage of error should be there in your quality." Meeting these exacting standards does not, however, mean simply reading accurately from a preset script. One worker highlights the importance placed on the "human touch":

> We have a very stereotype process. We have to follow it. I mean, when you ask me a question, we have a complete website in front of us. And once you ask the question, I have to immediately find the option that your question is related to...[But] I cannot read that out because that is what I have to do. It tells me what I have to do. There are four things I have to do together. I have to listen to you, I have to refer [to the screen], I have to do that thing [what the screen says] and make sure that the dead air between us does not exit ten seconds. I have to keep talking to you. It's a human touch. But during that, if we miss out on anything, then that's a fatal error. And fatal error, straight zero on a call. Now that zero hampers your incentives like anything.

Customer service agents' authenticity work involves providing the "human touch" in the context of a highly structured labor process. Workers also develop creative ways of responding to performance measures by constructing similarity in class terms—they are just like their customers in the West, only much more educated.

Chapter 5 focuses on workers' emotion work of deference and caring, which are central to their jobs.[31] This work involves the enactment of femininity for both male and female employees. Workers serve and care for clients in the West by reproducing hierarchies present in many traditionally feminized service occupations such as nursing and domestic work. Emotion work involves learning to not take the rude behavior of customers personally, maintaining self-worth in the face of abusive customers, and handling rejection. Customer service workers are taught strategies to deal with abusive customers during pre-job and on-the-job training (OJT). Dealing with abuse is recast as a job-related skill, and one customer service worker notes that "communication skill is very important, you know, listening skills is a must. Because if I'm not understanding you, how will I say something to you...you have to react yourself like a very matured person. You cannot sit and cry for each and every thing. If you're abused by a customer, you don't have to sit and cry. You have to react [as] a very understandable person." In line with neoliberal racism,[32] the expression of anger is seen as a customer right while the management of this anger is a

worker responsibility. Workers' authenticity work involves understanding, caring for, and connecting with customers who often construct them as thieves and targets of abuse.

A final way in which cultural cloning is facilitated is through time. Chapter 6 focuses on the ways in which workers are required to occupy the same temporal space as their customers. With the time difference of between five and thirteen hours separating Australia, Canada, Britain, or the United States from India, call centers operate primarily during the night. Barbara Adam notes that such an arrangement signifies "colonization with time"[33] where Western clock time is used as the global standard. Indeed, India is promoted as an ideal location for the outsourcing of call center work from the West because the difference in time zones allows companies to provide customer service around the clock. This globalization of clock time makes it seem as though time supersedes localized and embedded material realities. This is far from true for most call center workers, who stress the negative health and social impacts of the schism between their global workplaces and local lives. One call center worker describes her temporal dislocation, saying that during the day, "people are awake, they are mingling...and I am busy sleeping. So I am completely cut out of the world....[At the office] you cannot speak your heart. When you are at home, you have to sleep...So you cannot speak your heart out to them also...sleeping, sleeping, sleeping...You're half-dead." For both women and men, family responsibilities are not assumed to even exist in the context of their night shifts. While their work follows none of the schedules of local industries, schools, and markets, organizational responsibility for households extends only to the transportation of workers between their homes and workplaces. In the meantime, workers manage a host of social and care arrangements to mediate their absences in their local physical settings while dealing with the health implications of waking and sleeping in line with those situated in a distant time zone.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I further develop the notion of authenticity work based on the analysis above, and argue that this important concept provides unique insight into thus far hidden dimensions of the microprocesses of economic globalization. Highlighting this invisible yet crucial work sheds light on the skill and knowledge required of workers in the context of neoliberal economic globalization, as well as on the need for enhanced regulatory protection of worker rights. While customer

service work is often designed, presented, and remunerated as repetitive and routinized work, this characterization masks the multitude of multifaceted bridging activities underlying successful customer service in a transnational context. The central aim of this book is to spotlight this authenticity work that, I argue, is the bedrock of the transnational service economy.

Transnational Customer Service

A New Touchstone of Globalization

The globalization of customer service work provides a unique opportunity to explore contemporary transnational economic processes. Unlike many other forms of service work where workers and customers interact face-to-face, call center agents are embodied through voice. There are three dynamics that occur in the voice-embodied interactions between Western customers and Indian agents. First, workers enter into a complex set of class politics in relation to their employers, customers, and coworkers. Second, part of their work involves servicing citizenship and negotiating the borders of nations. Third, call center workers engage simultaneously in production and social reproduction through their emotional and aesthetic labor carried through their voices. As a result of the convergence of these dynamics, transnational customer service work serves as a new touchstone of globalization and provides an opportunity to understand contemporary social configurations of race, gender, nationalism, and class.

There has been a dramatic growth in the economic significance of service work globally. The sector has been described as the "great employment