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LECTURE

Future tense

Capital, labor, and technology in a service industry

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The HAU-Morgan Lectures Initiative
A HAU and University of Rochester Collaboration



Since its beginning in 2000, the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry has grown to employ 700,000 young people in India. These workers spend their nights interacting by phone and online with customers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere. In this article, we focus on the affective dimensions of work in this industry. BPOs have led to contradictory outcomes such as upward mobility accompanied by precarity. Our research explores the complex interplay between work, personal aspirations, social futures, and transformations in global capitalism. Our informants' experiences with affective labor performed at a distance provide us with critical insights into capital, labor, and technology in our rapidly changing world. Movement characterizes the industry and its workers as they communicate across spatial, linguistic, and cultural distance, while simultaneously being enmeshed by regimes of racialized labor. We draw on long-term fieldwork to analyze the complexity and density of interactions between imagination, aspiration, technology, and work for upwardly mobile classes in the Global South.

Keywords: affective labor, futurity, mobility, BPOs, call centers, Bengaluru

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This article is about people our readers are likely to have encountered but never met. They are the people who call at dinner time to offer you a great deal on a vacation or the ones to whom customers might vent while trying to resolve problems with a new computer. These might be the intimate strangers who read lab reports overnight so that the results are in a physician's inbox first thing in the morning, or they could be hired by a publisher to help copyedit a book. We are referring to the army of young men and women who are part of a large industry responsible for the outsourcing of service work on a transnational scale. Our research has been with these workers in the outsourcing industry, commonly referred to as "agents," who live in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru and perform affective labor for customers in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. But what is it like to be an agent in the now-sprawling Business Process Outsourcing (or BPO) industry? What does it mean to perform affective labor for customers one has never seen and is unlikely to ever meet, including troubleshooting for them, attending to their needs, answering their questions, and putting up with their frustration? How does working in the BPO industry open up different pathways for navigating the globalized world and for imagining one's future in such a world?¹

The first call center in India was established by General Electric (GE) in 1999; by 2015, BPOs employed almost seven hundred thousand people and constituted a US \$26 billion industry (fig. 1). A business "process" is a certain set of tasks that a BPO has contracted to do for another company (e.g., Verizon or AT&T). The employees of any large BPO work on different processes. Usually, both the company doing the work in India and the corporation giving them the contract are multinationals. The difference between the two companies is that the contracting company is more likely to be based in the Global North, as are its primary customers. Thus, when customers of a company such as Travelocity pick up the phone to chat with a representative and are connected to an agent in India or the Philippines, they are dealing not with someone who works for Travelocity, but with someone who works for another company that has been contracted by Travelocity to work on that process.

We began our fieldwork in Bengaluru in January 2009 with the objective of studying the cultural consequences of BPOs from the perspectives of those who worked in this industry, chiefly the agents who occupied its lowest rungs. Because of India's geographical location, our informants worked when it was night there and daytime in nations where their clients lived. This means that they worked while their families slept, and, conversely, they rested when their families were going about their daily life. We were particularly concerned with how laboring in BPOs refracted agents' identities and social relations and how, in turn, the temporalities and daily rhythms of their lives and worlds inflected the workings of

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1. Our analysis of the futurities generated by Bengaluru's BPOs is in dialogue with the work of several scholars who have done pioneering research on call centers and BPOs in India, including Winifred Poster (2007), Reena Patel (2010), Shehzad Nadeem (2011), Kirin Mirchandani (2012), A. Aneesh (2015), and Kalindi Vora (2015). We are also indebted to the work on intimate labor by scholars such as Rhacel Parreñas (2001), Lieba Faier (2009), Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas (2010), Miliann Kang (2010), and Rhacel Parreñas, Hung Cam Thai, and Rachel Silvey (2016).



Figure 1: High-tech office. (Photo: Akhil Gupta.)

BPOs. Agents generally worked nine-hour shifts: 6:30 pm to 3:30 am; 9:30 pm to 6:30 am; or the graveyard shift, 12:30 am to 9:30 am. Altogether, they got one hour for breaks, split into two coffee breaks and one dinner break. Most BPO agents came from upwardly mobile low income families or (barely) lower-middle-class ones, and earned salaries higher than most of their family members could ever imagine. How did performing affective labor reconstitute the boundary between work and leisure? And, most importantly, how did working in the BPO industry alter our informants' imaginations of their futures and their role in crafting these futures?

Drawing upon long-term and diachronic fieldwork in BPOs in Bengaluru, we investigate how BPOs have spawned new ways of thinking about the future (Koselleck 2004; Appadurai 2013). Soon after we began our ethnographic fieldwork in 2009, we learned that the future was something with which all of our informants—ranging from BPO agents to CEOs—seemed obsessed. And, as ethnographers, we began to take the obsessions of our informants seriously. We propose that these obsessions about the future provide us with a critical lens through which to examine the relationship between affective labor, capitalism, and technology in the contemporary world. But, first, let us explain what we mean by affective labor and how this labor differs from other kinds of work.

Affective labor in the BPO industry

The transnational service industry of which BPOs are one component depends on the performance of affective labor. We wish to state, at the outset, that our formulation of affective labor does not imply that other forms of labor (including manual labor) do not involve affect. While we part company with Michael Hardt's (1999) conceptualization of the distinction between material and immaterial labor, we find his explication of affective labor compelling (compare with Nick Dyer-Witford

[2001] and Sylvia Yanagisako [2012]).² Hardt defines affective labor as work that produces “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (1999: 96). The most important part of our informants’ jobs was to connect with their customers with empathy and care—and, indeed, their job performance was evaluated largely on the basis of being able to achieve high customer satisfaction scores (CSATs). BPOs have enabled affective labor to be performed at a distance owing to certain technologies of communication. These technologies include high-speed telephone lines, the worldwide web, and satellite communication technology; more recently, the movement of consumers to new technology platforms like mobile phones and tablets has lent greater importance to apps, chatting, and artificial intelligence.

While most affective labor is based on bodily copresence, the BPOs we studied were predicated on separating spatial proximity from affective intimacy. Using only the sense of hearing, the contact between agents and customers was a stripped-down version of face-to-face interaction. Yet the agents’ labor was neither less corporeal nor diminished in its affectivity, nor was it less material. Despite the fact that agents’ interaction with customers was entirely via a headset, their whole bodies were galvanized into action: for example, their trainers emphasized that they should smile while speaking, encouraged them to wear deodorant that their customers would never smell, and insisted on a dress code at work that none of their customers could see.

How is the affective labor of BPO agents different from that of other workers the transnational service economy, for example, flight attendants, nurses, and nannies? For one, it differs from the emotional labor of these workers in that it is not based on face-to-face interaction.³ BPO agents’ jobs are particularly challenging because they have to manage emotions at a distance based on verbal interactions with their customers, many of whom live in cultural contexts vastly different from theirs. Affective labor in BPOs also involves intense transformations in processes of embodiment: to cite just two examples, the training of agents entails relearning speech patterns, and the necessity of night work alters their circadian rhythms. Additionally, their labor is affective in that it entails a profound reconfiguration of how workers inhabit their worlds; indeed, their processes of “worlding” and “world-making” (Das 2006; Stewart 2007). Furthermore, BPO work involves processes of virtual and imaginative travel (cf. Aneesh 2015; Mankekar 2015): almost none of the workers we interviewed had traveled to the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia, but they still had to affectively connect with customers living in these locations. Their labor depended on their ability to empathize with, and translate, the lives of others in order to better serve them. To a large extent, their labor profoundly shaped their *capacities* to be affected by and to affect the worlds in which they moved (Spinoza [1677] 1985).

2. For some of the foundational theories of immaterial and cognitive labor, see Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), Franco Berardi (2005), and Franco Berardi and Michael Goddard (2007).
3. We allude, of course, to the pathbreaking work of Arlie Hochschild (1983) on the emotional labor of flight attendants. See also Ariel Ducey (2007) on the training of health-care workers in the performance of affective labor.



In short, our informants' affective labor entailed care work, but it was care work carried out at a distance and was therefore different from nursing, teaching, or working as a flight attendant; it was predicated on not just linguistic connectivity but also cultural and experiential translation across vast differences. We conceive of this labor as affective rather than as emotional or cognitive (indeed, our conception of affect undermines the purported dichotomy between emotion and cognition) because it involved the entire being of BPO agents (Massumi 2002; Clough 2007; Mankekar 2015).

Moving targets: Endemic change and the BPO industry

One of the most striking (and, at first, disconcerting) characteristics of the BPO industry was that, over the course of six years of fieldwork, it kept changing its name. When the industry began in late 1999, these businesses were named "call centers." However, by the time we began intensive fieldwork in 2009, this had been replaced by the term BPO (Business Process Outsourcing). BPOs encompassed both call center labor and other back-office work. Around the same time, Knowledge Process Outsourcing became ascendant: this entailed, for instance, reading pathology reports and MRI scans for hospitals, preparing briefs for attorneys, and assisting certified public accountants. In the last few years, the abbreviation BPM (for Business Process Management) has become most commonly used, and customer-facing businesses are sometimes referred to as contact centers.

After our first year of intensive fieldwork, when we returned to Bengaluru every summer, we would confront a transformed landscape: of course, the city was changing at breakneck speed, but the BPO industry was reconstituting itself ceaselessly. The changing names of the industry were not simply changes in nomenclature: they were symptomatic of the constantly mutating and transformative nature of capitalism itself and its divergent temporalities of duration, movement, pause, and emplacement. Rather than getting frustrated and overwhelmed by the task of studying a moving target, we decided to train our ethnographic eye precisely on the movement inherent in the industry. And so mobility became one of the optics with which we attempted to understand the industry, the desires, motivations, trials, and tribulations of those who worked in it, and the ways in which these forms of mobility (and, concomitantly, emplacement) were central to the production of heterogeneous futures, or to what we have termed "discourses of futurity."

While the future as a theme was a discovery of fieldwork, its importance as an analytical frame was a more gradual realization. In social theory, we are used to thinking of the many ways that the past affects the present, and ethnohistorical research has a well-established pedigree in anthropology. However, we tend to be less accustomed to thinking of how imagined and anticipated futures impact the present.⁴ Our forthcoming book *Future tense* (Mankekar and Gupta 2017) is about

4. Reinhart Koselleck (2004) has put forward a provocative hypothesis linking the past, the present, and the future. In the past, people and states made plans, policies, and programs on which they acted and, as the result of those actions, intended or unintended futures came to pass. Those futures constitute our present. Every present, he suggests,

the myriad ways that the future matters, not just to our informants, but to our analytical frames and disciplinary commitments as well. *Future tense* is intended to evoke the twinning of aspiration and insecurity for our informants, the hope for a better future in a world that was unpredictable and uncertain. There was no single or singular way in which our informants thought about the future. The future was imagined in divergent ways: these *futures* were based on disjunctive temporalities spawned by intertwined processes of rapid transformation and stagnation, aspiration and anxiety, upward social mobility and precarity. The processes undergirding India's "New Economy" were part of a larger story about the proliferation of disjunctive temporalities that characterize the contemporary conjuncture of global capitalism.

BPOs as icons of futurity

In the midst what seemed to be incessant change, the architecture, material environments, and interior spaces of BPOs promised a very distinct future to all those who worked there. Resplendent in glass, chrome, and steel, these buildings with darkened windows enabled those working inside to look out but filtered out the sun, dust, and the curious gazes of people on the outside. These modernist buildings promised a future that seemed to circumvent the chaos of the city outside, with its teeming crowds, traffic congestion, broken roads, and crumbling infrastructure (fig. 2). While a large part of the city suffered power cuts, water shortages, and blackouts, the buildings housing BPOs had ceaseless power supply, boasted fountains nestled among beautifully manicured lawns and lush foliage, and had uninterrupted air conditioning.

Entry into the interiors of BPOs, and to the futures they promised, was tightly regulated: admission was not merely exclusive but was, intrinsically, exclusionary. Many BPOs in Bengaluru are located in "tech parks" or "campuses." These spaces were heavily guarded so that only those invited could enter (fig. 3). At the entrance of the technology park, regular employees were admitted after their badge had been carefully scrutinized, while visitors had to register in the lobby, where, at the front desk, their name, contact number, business card, and the person they wished to meet were meticulously recorded. The front desk then verified that the employee was expecting the visitor. Visitors were given an ID card on a lanyard with their name and the date of the visit. Before being allowed to enter, the visitor was frisked

has this structure: the present is always the future of some past. The job of history, he suggests, is to excavate the futures of those pasts, so that we can better understand how plans and programs for the future came to be realized by looking at the present. Ideas, imaginations, and anticipations of the future structure our actions in the present no less than do the ghosts of the past. The future is as consequential for the world today as is the past, particularly because we live in a world full of technological utopias, from self-driven cars to the colonization of Mars. Yet, in contrast to the institutionalization of the study of the past, we have very few resources devoted to the systematic study of the future. (For a thought-provoking problematization of secularist narratives of labor and time, see Chakrabarty 1997.)



Figure 2: A “tech park” in Bengaluru. (Photo: Wikipedia.)

by a security guard with a metal detector, who retained visitors’ smartphones, laptops, cameras, and pen drives for safekeeping. It was not just visitors whose movements were subject to strict restrictions: regular employees within a BPO were also similarly constrained. The security locks on employees’ cards allowed them to enter the room where they worked and other common spaces such as the cafeteria, the library, the recreation room, and so on, but not other workspaces in the building. Thus, for example, an employee who was working on a process for United Airlines had no access to the room where agents for Verizon were located. Most BPOs handled confidential information, and their contractual obligations to client companies stipulated a high degree of security.

A large process had as many as five hundred people sitting in an enormous hall outfitted with cubicles in an open-plan office. Many companies made a point of stationing their managers, and often even their seniormost managers, in an open cubicle like everyone else. Carla Freeman (2000) has analyzed, in powerful detail, the modes of surveillance that exist within open offices in informatics companies in Barbados; in like fashion, despite the open-office design of most BPOs, the movement of employees was closely monitored and regulated. For instance, as noted above, agents could only take a total of an hour off for meals and coffee during the course of a nine-hour shift. Their time was carefully surveilled: they needed permission to go to the bathroom; the time they spent at their respective monitors was archived; and closed-circuit cameras tracked their movement within their offices.

Nevertheless, the interior spaces of BPOs materialized their comparatively flat organizational structure. This was of tremendous significance for the young men and women who flocked to these jobs primarily because they promised a more egalitarian future. Some of the future orientation of BPOs had to do with the youth of most workers: except for the top rungs of management, all employees were under



Figure 3: Entrance to technology park. (Photo: Akhil Gupta.)

twenty-five years of age. In the companies with which we worked in Bengaluru, the gender ratio was close to half and half.⁵ But beyond the demographics of those who worked there, it was the organizational structure of BPOs, and the manner in which it was materialized in the interior spaces of the firms, that indexed a new orientation to the future. This was particularly meaningful to those of our informants who came from low-income or low-caste backgrounds or from minority communities. When asked why they wanted to work in BPOs, several of our informants recounted their first visit to a tech park or a BPO and spoke of how impressed they were with the architecture and the interior spaces. As Vasanthi, a low-caste woman who came from a low-income family, recalled, in a voice filled with wonder and awe, “When I walked in, I thought this is the future. This is where I belong.”⁶

5. BPOs in North India employed a greater proportion of men as compared to BPOs in Bengaluru.
6. Thus, despite the close surveillance to which they were subjected, most of our informants felt that they worked in spaces that were considerably more egalitarian than those of their family members and friends. The fact that their team leaders and managers also occupied open offices meant that they could, in principle, approach them whenever they needed to (although few actually dared to talk to senior managers). There were clearly specified paths to promotion: in many companies, agents with a good record were promoted to Team Leader within two years; if they remained productive, they could go on to become supervisors; and, if they were really diligent (and lucky), they could become managers or join the HR division of the company. The very algorithms that tracked and archived their productivity also provided data that could,

Mobility and the production of futures

Notwithstanding the restrictions placed on the physical movement of employees within BPOs, this industry is predicated on various forms of mobility—whether it is the ability of workers to move across the city (or, in many cases, the country) to work, their pathways up the slippery ladder of class, or the ability to imaginatively travel in order to connect with customers with empathy and understanding. We hence conceive of the term mobility in its mutual imbrication with communication to encompass physical migration and movement, social mobility across class, and mobility across linguistic, cultural, and experiential distances.

The mobility of our informants was deeply inflected by hegemonic discourses of gender, race, class, and, last but not least, national location. For those who had migrated from other parts of India, particularly for women, physical mobility came at a high cost because they had to cope with the suspicions and hostility of landlords and neighbors in their new city. As geographers like Doreen Massey (1994) have pointed out, the mobility and immobility of women foregrounds how spaces are fundamentally gendered. Although physical mobility was a prerequisite to working in BPOs, gender deeply impacted workers' capacity to navigate space and time. Traveling across the city to do night work was particularly difficult for young women, who had to deal with the surveillance exercised on them by suspicious neighbors and family members. Thus, patriarchal discourses of gender and sexual purity constrained their mobility in myriad ways (Patel 2010; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015; Vora 2015).⁷ Occasionally, some of our women informants, despite being afraid of going out at night, would use the excuse of going to work as a means to visit pubs after their shift. Working in BPOs enabled these women to venture into spaces that were enticing despite being potentially dangerous.⁸

Physical and social mobility were deeply intertwined and had a direct bearing on our informants' discourses of futurity. Many of them aligned their own social mobility with the purportedly upward mobility of the Indian nation and, hence, participated in discourses of "India Rising" that were ubiquitous when we were doing our fieldwork. In 2009, the government in power was loudly proclaiming that

potentially, be used for objectively assessing their job performance. Thus, while there is no question that office politics, favoritism, and personal biases played a role in the assessment of our informants' labor, they maintained an *expectation* of meritocracy that contrasted with the environments in which their friends and relatives worked: we met enough managers who had worked their way up despite lacking connections or cultural capital for this expectation of meritocracy to take hold.

7. See Allison's (2009) pioneering analysis of how gender, sexuality, and labor undergird the performance of night work in Japanese hostess clubs.
8. However, it is crucial to avoid the trap of liberal notions of choice and freedom and not interpret these women's leisure activities as a sign of their "emancipation" or "progress" or to assume that working in BPOs transformed them into sovereign or autonomous subjects. In fact, as we argue in our forthcoming book (Mankekar and Gupta 2017), these very leisure activities refracted their constitution as laboring subjects. (On the relationship between labor and leisure for workers in the informatics industry in Barbados, see Freeman 2000.)

India had “arrived” and was now poised “to take its place in the sun.” Apart from having opportunities for personal growth and social mobility, it was the *feeling* that they were participating in the larger story of “India Rising” that was frequently articulated by our informants. As Rajath, a young man who had just started working in a BPO, insisted: “BPOs have made India take its rightful place in the world. Now nobody can push us around.” Many of our informants claimed that, by working in BPOs, they were performing a crucial role in a drama much larger than their own upward mobility or that of their families. They felt strongly that their individual destinies were inseparable from the destiny of India.

They saw their futures in terms of possibility, of crafting for themselves and their families a more comfortable life. It is unclear to us if this sense of optimism was “cruel” (Berlant 2011), but it was evident that their lives were immeasurably more hopeful than either those of their parents or those of the unemployed or underemployed Indian youth working in the informal economy, where conditions were considerably more abject, desperate, and precarious.⁹ The trope of growth was ubiquitous in how our informants imagined and narrated their futures and that of India: theirs was a narrative that was hitched to the immanent possibilities of the present.¹⁰

However, these forms of mobility were accompanied by regimes of emplacement based on the convergence of race and national location. If our informants felt that they were participants in creating a place for India on the world stage because of their incorporation into the global economy, their positions in this very economy were, ironically, always-already racialized. Our informants’ interpellation as racialized subjects underscores the complex articulations of race and national location undergirding the proliferation of transnational subcontracting in the service economy. The “products” of their affective labor consisted primarily of attention, empathy, and the resolution of problems that were consumed, as it were, in wealthier client nations. Yet while the products of their labor “traveled” to these client nations, they themselves were emplaced by racist and xenophobic immigration policies that, quite literally, kept them in place.

Although the companies they worked for were controlled and managed by Indians, and despite the fact that Indian companies themselves hired people in locations as diverse as Central America, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom, doing care work for people in the Global North exposed BPO workers to racist and xenophobic abuse. This is not to say that they did not have to endure abuse from their Indian bosses. However, the difference was that the negative comments directed at them by people in the United States and the United Kingdom were often colored by racist, colonialist, and orientalist stereotypes. When we asked agents about such abuse, they usually tried to downplay racism by emphasizing that only a minority of customers became angry, and that they had learnt how to cope with it so that it did not bother them as much as when they first began working.

9. Only 10 percent of India’s labor force of more than 470 million people is in the formal sector (Kumar 2017).

10. On the neoliberal underpinnings of these narratives, see Mankekar (2015). Compare with Freeman (2014).



Nevertheless, the irrevocable Otherness of the racialized bodies of BPO agents is part of a longer and deeper history of the representation of Asians in some client nations and underscores the importance of investigating, through a transnational optic, how the relationship between labor, national location, and the racialization of Asians is being variably reconstituted and rearticulated. In what follows, we briefly sketch the contours of a theoretical framework that both builds upon and extends analyses of race in women of color feminism and critical ethnic studies to trace the interpellation of BPO agents in Bengaluru as racialized laboring subjects. In particular, Asian American studies scholarship on migration offers indispensable analytical tools with which to understand the intersection of transnational labor regimes, patterns of global migration and immigration, and hegemonic discourses of race (see, e.g., P. Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng 1994; Lowe 1996, 2001; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Chuh and Shimakawa 2001; Hune 2001).

We wish to underscore that perspectives on race, labor, and (im)migration in Asian American studies cannot simply be transposed onto our analysis of Bengaluru's BPOs: like all theoretical frameworks, Asian American studies frameworks represent historically specific epistemological and political formations. Furthermore, unlike most of the laboring subjects examined in Asian American studies, our informants did not migrate to the United States or to other client nations. Even so, their positioning as raced, laboring bodies was shaped by discourses about Asians and "Asian-ness." To what extent are these different histories and genealogies connected, and what are their disconnections? It is worth recalling that Asian alterity has been central to the production of Western modernity (Lowe 2001: 271; see also Palumbo-Liu 1999). While it is beyond the scope of our research to interrogate how Asians and Asian labor are represented in all the client nations that Bengaluru's BPOs served, Asian American perspectives on the complex relationship between labor, race, and purported "Asian-ness" have been tremendously generative for our understanding of the racialization of our informants. In another context, Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa (2001: 12) have advocated that we attend to how racialized bodies are perceived in terms of their positions within national, transnational, and (post)colonial terrains. Furthermore, orientalist discourses of alterity in which the East and West were constructed in binaristic and hierarchical opposition, such that the East was placed in an inferior position to the West, deeply shaped some of the encounters between our informants and their overseas customers. As we elaborate in our book, this was particularly true of some of our women informants, who were assumed to be docile and sexually alluring (and available) by some of their overseas male customers.

The outsourcing of jobs to Asia has long provoked anti-Asian racism in the United States (the most infamous instantiation of this backlash was the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982).¹¹ Asian American studies scholars have pointed to the contradiction between capital's predatory drive for profit and the nationalist

11. For a brilliant analysis of Vincent Chin's murder, see Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña (1989). Indeed, anti-Asian racism extends beyond the offshore outsourcing of jobs in the late twentieth century and can be traced back to the xenophobic backlash against the arrival of Asians as laborers in the late nineteenth century (Takaki 1989; for an account of the backlash against South Asian workers, see Leonard 1992).

imperative to protect economic, cultural, and racial supremacy (see, e.g., Lowe 1996, 2001; A. Ong 1999, 2006). We join with them on their advocacy of diverging from nation-bound (and nationalist) frameworks to theorize the racial and gendered positionalities of workers across transnational contexts. Our goal, moreover, is to examine the *recasting* of the relationship between capitalist expansion and race. The backlash against the outsourcing of BPO jobs to countries like India and the Philippines also partakes of a longer genealogy of racialized discourses about the relationship between labor, high technology, and Asia and Asians (Mankekar and Gupta 2016; see also Lee and Wong 2013). Located as they are within a global political economy that is striated by race as much as it is by gender and national location, BPO agents in Bengaluru were racialized by virtue of working in this industry.

Asian American labor scholars such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1985, 1992) have focused on the transition from servitude to service work in the United States. Glenn's argument about how women of color are represented as "naturally suited" for the labor of social reproduction has been particularly generative for our analysis of racialized service work in Bengaluru's BPOs. Of particular relevance to us is her nuanced analysis of the centrality of the perceptions and representations of skill and competence to how women of color from diverse communities are "tracked" and regarded as "naturally suitable" for service work for which they are chronically underpaid. Rhacel Parreñas has similarly analyzed how gendered and racialized discourses about skill and competence have shaped the positionalities of Filipina women who migrate to the United States and Europe as domestic workers. Their wages are considerably lower than what local women might be paid: uneven development and interlocking discourses of race, culture, and gender interpellate these women as "servants of globalization" (Parreñas 2001; see also Ceniza Choy 2003).

The offshore outsourcing of labor thus demonstrates the inadequacy of nation-bound paradigms of labor and race. Let us not forget that the labor of our informants was profitable primarily because it was *rendered* "cheap" or "inexpensive" as these laborers were incarcerated in place by immigration laws in powerful nation-states (Appadurai 1988). Even the most successful of BPO agents were paid a fraction of what they would have earned for comparable labor had they been in a position to migrate to the nations where their customers were based. The depressed value of their labor was produced by distinct forms of immobility and emplacement. Furthermore, it is worth recalling that the expansion of outsourcing to countries like India was a direct result of restrictions on the admittance of certain (racialized) foreign laborers to many advanced capitalist countries. In the United States, for example, software companies began to outsource to India when restrictions were placed on their abilities to offer H-1B visas to Indian engineers. The offshore outsourcing of software opened the door to the outsourcing of customer service and back-office work to countries like India and the Philippines.

Yet these laboring bodies had to stay put because of their race, class, and nationality. These processes of emplacement led to a sense of entrapment or feeling stuck, which, in turn, deeply shaped their sense of futurity. However, unlike members of the precariat in India and other parts of the world (the unemployed, the underemployed, the undocumented, and others living in conditions of abjection), our informants did not feel hopeless. Rather than a shutting down of possibility,



their discourses of futurity were shaped by continual becoming, potentiality, and emergence (Deleuze 1997). They frequently contrasted their lot with that of their parents or other relatives, who, they claimed, had been stuck in dead-end jobs with no possibilities for growth or upward mobility. But this was all the more reason why the stakes were so high for them: this was why feeling stuck was so threatening. Feeling stuck meant that they were in danger of not growing, and the lack of growth signified stagnation, if not a downward slide down the ladder of professional mobility.

In sum, our informants' capacities to be mobile were circumscribed by their location in a global service industry that is sharply stratified by race and nation. Their mobility went hand in hand with processes of emplacement: the sense of feeling stuck in an industry all too closely attuned to the vicissitudes of global capitalism; the claustrophobia induced by the multiple modes of surveillance to which they were subjected in the workplace and in their neighborhoods; and the political economies of race and class that resulted in the fact that, while the products of their labor crossed national borders, they had to stay put in their cubicles in India. At the same time, our informants' performance of affective labor depended on their ability to cross linguistic, cultural, and experiential borders. We turn next to these border crossings.

Connectivity and futurity

BPOs foreground new articulations of race within the transnational service economy. Rather than being positioned through logics of visible Otherness, call centers and BPOs suggest how some racialized bodies remain irrevocably Other even as they are rendered invisible. As Raka Shome (2006: 108) has argued, while race has typically been conceived of as the "visible and interruptive presence of the racial body," call centers produce a crisis of this logic of racialization by enacting a shift from the regime of visibility to one of aurality. The Otherness of these racialized workers is indexed through voice, accent, and speech rather than appearance. Uneven development, structural inequalities between nations, and national location have converged with race to rearticulate racial inequality and difference in a globally interconnected economy.

These articulations of race and transnational capitalism are particularly significant because the BPO industry has, from its inception, been predicated on the belief that a combination of "trainable" labor and technology will bridge physical and cultural distances between agents and their customers. Customer service work, of course, depends upon connecting linguistically and, more importantly, affectively. Indian workers are trained to speak the language of their customers with the expectation that once they learn "correct" English, adopt the appropriate accent, and assume relevant speech patterns, they can seamlessly communicate with their customers. The affective labor of agents is hence predicated not simply on the transmission of information, as technocratic accounts of the BPO industry would have us believe, but also on processes of cultural and experiential border crossing.

It goes without saying that linguistic, cultural, and experiential border crossings are inextricable. The growth of BPOs and, in particular, call centers in India

was made possible largely by the presence of a large English-speaking workforce. As we discovered through our participant observation in countless recruitment interviews, finding workers who were fluent in English was not easy: despite the fact that many job candidates attended special classes that claimed to train them in “call center English,” an overwhelming majority could barely speak the language. Second, even those who spoke English did so with such strong regional accents as to be incomprehensible not just to overseas customers but also to those living in other parts of India. The biggest challenge facing recruiters and trainers was the persistence of regional accents, what in the industry is termed Mother Tongue Influence or MTI. “Indianisms” (Indian expressions in English) were also hard to shed. Trainers attempted to teach new recruits to speak Global English, by which they meant an English that was shorn of any influence of regional languages, dialects, or lexical stresses (see also Nadeem 2011; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015). In the world of BPOs, a hegemonic version of Global English was the language of futurity. It was deemed indispensable to participating in the global economy, while versions of English shaped, for instance, by regional accents or MTI were disqualified (Aneesh 2015). In these contexts, communication involved processes of interpretation that were contingent on inequality and power.

Although Global English was deemed a means to travel across vast cultural and experiential distances, agents’ interactions with clients extended to affective engagement. In the recruitment sessions that we attended, concerns about hiring workers who were “trainable” dominated all discussions of the criteria for their selection. The most important questions recruiters asked themselves related to the ability of potential agents to connect, affectively as much as linguistically, with overseas customers. Apart from worrying about the MTI on their speech and whether or not they would be able to adopt a neutral accent, their primary concerns were: Could the potential recruit be trained to be attuned to the needs of customers from a different culture and respond appropriately in their interactions? Could young people in India be schooled to communicate with customers who lived in worlds at great remove from them? Agents’ affective labor was predicated on their ability to traverse experiential and cultural borders. Thus it was not simply our informants’ accents that were neutralized: processes of cultural neutralization were also central to their performance of affective labor. Trainers did their best to provide “cultural training” to new recruits. They instructed agents to watch Hollywood films and, depending on the country in which the process was located, to watch television shows like *Friends*, *Neighbours*, or *Keeping up Appearances* (see also Poster 2007: 272).

However, some of our informants found themselves in situations where they could not connect with their clients: no amount of language or “cultural training” could help because there was such a vast gap between their own life worlds and those of their clients. Pragmatic failure implies the inability to understand “what is meant by what is said” (Austin 1962; Thomas 1984). The likelihood of pragmatic failure, which involves one’s social experiences and system of beliefs as much as one’s knowledge of language, became a major obstacle to our informants’ ability to move across cultural and experiential chasms.

For example, in one process, agents could help their clients better if they were allowed to take control of the client’s computer remotely in order to fix the problem. A young man did exactly that for a female client. Unbeknownst to her, however, he



turned on the computer's camera so he could look at her. She was happy that he managed to fix the problem but she was unaware that he could see her. Nothing more might have come of this incident had she not called back a few months later and reached the same agent. Once again, he turned on her computer's camera and could not help observing, "Madam, you seem to have put on some weight." He did not intend that to be an offensive comment but lacked the cultural competence to anticipate how it would be interpreted. When she complained to the company that she was dealing with about this infringement of her privacy, the agent almost got fired. Thus, while the affective labor of BPO agents depended on their ability to communicate affects of care and intimacy and extended beyond linguistic forms of connectivity, the work and world of our informants was filled with moments of misunderstandings and opacity as they confronted customers at a geographical, cultural, and experiential remove from them.

When this happened, our informants felt put in their place. Situated as they were in a contemporary Indian political-economic context marked by rampant youth unemployment and underemployment, these processes of mobility and emplacement had profound consequences for our informants' constructions of futurity. Mobility was coimplicated with the process of emplacement, which, sometimes, signified stagnation. When emplacement was the result of immobility, it generated a sense of entrapment: it represented a threat to our informants' financial and emotional well-being because it endangered their hopes for the future. If precarity is the state of the evisceration of hope in the future (Berlant 2011; Allison 2013), our informants were positioned on the brink of this condition. To a large extent, then, mobility and emplacement were central to their anxious and tense anticipations of their futures.

Controversial futures

In his election campaign in 2008, Barack Obama used the term "Bangalored" as a shorthand for the loss of American jobs to offshoring. By the time we started our research in 2009, call centers had generated a great deal of resentment in the United States because of this. Similar sentiments were found in other nation-states in the Global North. Fearing a backlash, companies started hiding the fact that they were in fact offshoring jobs to India and to other locations in the Global South, and agents were instructed to adopt "American" or "British" names and accents. This, in turn, led to even more anger on the part of consumers in these countries who felt that the agents were trying to deceive them by assuming American or British identities (Aneesh 2015).

Uncertainties and conflicts about the future, we suggest, lie at the heart of controversies around the offshoring of call centers and BPOs, a process that began in 1999. However, there are several reasons why such public anger should give us pause. First, offshoring had been going on for a long time, especially in manufacturing. Secondly, call center work in the Global North was widely associated with low-paying, dead-end jobs without a future. We would hence argue that the controversies surrounding call centers, and now BPOs, are as much about the future as the present. What was feared was what the offshoring of call center jobs *signified*: that pink-collar or white-collar jobs that were previously considered impervious to

offshoring were suddenly vulnerable. In the United States, for example, a (white) middle class that had only known intergenerational mobility in one direction—toward greater prosperity—was now faced with declining prospects (A. Ong 2006). What was at stake in the offshoring of BPO jobs was the future more than the present because those jobs were not particularly sought after by workers in the Global North: the *trajectory* implied by the offshore migration of these jobs was what gave them significance.

Within India, the fears expressed about these jobs reiterated the anxious concerns about the future articulated by those comfortably positioned in the middle class. Call center jobs were derided in the media for being nothing more than a form of neocolonialism, and agents were labeled “cyber coolies.” Such a position articulated several fears about the future simultaneously. First, there was the fear that colonial relations would reappear so that the ghost of the past came beckoning as the shiny new future. The other, simultaneous, fear was of lower-income people entering the middle class, or of a *nouveau riche* without cultural capital knocking at the doors of a middle-class existence. Thirdly, there was the legitimate fear that these were dead-end jobs “without a future.” The concern was that in the future the industry would either migrate or that it would leave behind a group of people who had no real skills other than the ability to speak accented English. One of our earliest interviews was with two young owners of a call center who debated the kinds of futures in store for their employees, many of whom were from rural areas in northeast India. While one of these owners claimed that working in call centers had placed their employees on a path to upward class mobility, his partner vehemently contested this. “What future do they have in store for them?” he asked. “When they get older and can’t work in the call center anymore, they will go back to their farms and what will they do? Become farmers with American accents!?”

There were other futures at stake as well, futures that needed to be avoided rather than achieved. One industry leader articulated this sentiment by asking us a rhetorical question: Why does India not have as many radicalized youth as Pakistan? His answer was that many educated but unemployed youth who would otherwise have been available for radical recruitment were now working in BPOs. In his view, the future of the nation-state was safeguarded by the rise of this industry. Despite this sanguine assessment, the fact remained that the offshoring of call centers and BPOs proved deeply unsettling not just in the United States but also within India. BPOs were an integral part of a period of rapid economic development in India that began in the mid-1980s and has continued up to the present. Economic growth has been accompanied by enormous cultural and social transformations that entail historically unprecedented class mobility, rampant consumerism, changing family dynamics, increasing spatial mobility within the nation and the diaspora, and new systems of communication that include both mass and digital media (Mankekar 2015). The young people who worked in BPOs were often at the cutting edge of cultural transformations, experimenting with new lifestyles, identities, and relationships. There was a great deal of political and cultural anxiety about the future conjured by these transformations, and this sometimes resulted in acts of physical violence and cultural wars. For instance, on New Year’s Eve in 2016, women in Bengaluru were publicly molested by a gang of marauders because they represented a particular kind of future that was seen as failing to uphold “Indian” values



(Chaitanya Swamy 2017; Safi 2017).¹² BPOs entered an unsettled cultural landscape and helped drive it in new directions such that the future, while tantalizing, was also one that produced insecurity, anxiety, and conflict.

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12. Early in our fieldwork, supporters of the Hindu nationalist Sri Ram Sene beat women up at a pub in the nearby city of Mangaluru for representing the “Westernization” of Indian culture; this incident aroused tremendous outrage and led to the rise of an on-line resistance campaign against right-wing moral policing by a group of women who called their movement the “Pink Chaddi [panty] campaign.”

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