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## A Nation on the Line

Padios, Jan M.

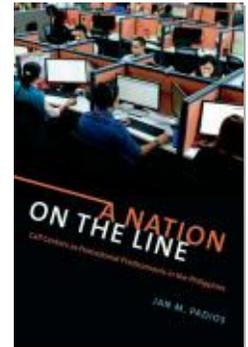
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Padios, M..

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2006 an unsettling event took place in my extended family. One of my young cousins in the Philippines, a nursing school graduate on the verge of obtaining her license and thus the chance to live and work in the United States, disappeared from home. As an adolescent, Jocelyn had been known for somewhat impetuous behavior; still, everyone worried. Weeks later, Jocelyn phoned her mother—a widow with three younger children—to let her know that she was safe, living on a neighboring island, and had gotten a job in a call center answering outsourced customer service calls for a U.S.-based cable company. The pay, she explained, was substantial. At ₱15,000 per month, she was earning more money than her peers who worked in fields like accounting or architecture, and although she was assigned overnight shifts, she had also made a lot of friends and could afford to rent a small apartment with three other women. Jocelyn also informed her mother that she would not be taking the nursing board exams as planned, because she did not want to migrate to the United States as many women in our family had done before her. In this way, my cousin's actions had emotional and financial repercussions of transnational proportions. Poor and without work, Jocelyn's mother had long relied on the remittances of her sisters-in-law living in America—the nurses whose path Jocelyn was expected to follow—and indeed Jocelyn's education and all her living expenses had been paid for with money these women sent back home with the expectation that, once working full time, Jocelyn on her own would provide for her mother and siblings. It was, as many in our family would say, her turn.

After the smoke from our little scandal cleared, I began to wonder about the job my cousin had taken as a call center agent. What did it entail? Why was she so drawn to it, despite our family's potential disapproval and her other options? And what did it mean that Jocelyn, who did not migrate to the United States for work, ended up employed by a U.S. corporation and serving Americans on the phone every night anyhow? A few months later, while spending the summer living in Metro Manila, I realized that Jocelyn's story was not at all unique. All around me, I saw young, college-educated, and English-fluent Filipinos eagerly lining up for jobs in the country's hottest new workplaces, where 1–800 numbers connect customer service and technical support agents like my cousin and her friends to homes and offices across America, as well as in England, Australia, and New Zealand. Tucked away in highly securitized office buildings and tethered to headsets and desktop computers, call center employees book airline reservations, troubleshoot wireless routers, or track insurance claims—all in the so-called neutral or light accents for which Filipinos are often known in the industry and beyond. Catering to customers in Western time zones, transnational call center work in the Philippines extends from dusk to dawn, cutting workers off from the normal rhythms of social life and fortifying not only their camaraderie but also the new night culture that surrounds them.

It did not take long for me to see that, in this former U.S. colony, call centers are a story with national and global proportions. Call center work takes place in office spaces, often quite large, where employees stationed at individual cubicles answer or make calls and queries on behalf of companies or corporations; such interactions can involve customer service, technical support, telemarketing, or debt collection. In the late 1990s, U.S.-based firms began outsourcing this work offshore to Asia, starting a competition among developing countries for jobs in global services. From a few hundred employees in 1997, the Philippine call center industry had expanded to 20,000 “seats” or positions by 2004 and then multiplied twelve times in a mere two years, reaching 240,000 employees by 2006. By 2011 the Philippines had surpassed India—a country with more than eight times the productive capacity—to become what a *New York Times* reporter referred to as “the call center capital of the world.”<sup>1</sup> As 2015 came to a close, the industry counted 1.1 million people in direct employment and \$22 billion in revenue—approximately 7.5 percent of the country's gross domes-

tic product (GDP) and just \$4 million short of the remittances from all 1.8 million overseas Filipino workers combined.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, what had started off as a few call centers in the economic development zones surrounding the former U.S. military bases known as Subic and Clark had transformed the urban landscape throughout the archipelago, marking the emergence of the industry as arguably the single most important social, cultural, and economic development in the country in the twenty-first century.

Along with this explosive growth and feverish enthusiasm have come seismic shifts in the symbolic economy surrounding the Philippines as well. The superlative success of the country in the global services market has come to support an overarching hope that the call center industry—or, more specifically, business process management, global in-house call centers, health information management, and knowledge process outsourcing—will advance Filipinos' march to modernity by steering the Philippines into the terrain of the knowledge economy.<sup>3</sup> Within this new national narrative, Philippine call centers are seen as counterpoints to the nation's decades-long employment crisis, its reliance on overseas workers, and the global perception of the Philippines as the economically feeble "sick man of Asia." Such optimism was further buoyed by what economic pundits described as the country's impressive economic performance during the administration of Benigno "Noy" S. Aquino III, from June 2010 to June 2016. For five of the former president's six years in office, the country saw real GDP growth averaging 6.1 percent a year; during Aquino's term, the country also earned investment-grade status for the first time in history, the Philippine Stock Exchange Index increased massively, and the nation paid off its debt to the International Monetary Fund.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with the U.S. financial crisis that began in 2007, these remarkable economic developments have fostered the image of an economically ascending Philippines that will not be left behind if, as many geopolitical watchdogs predict, the epicenter of the twenty-first-century global economy shifts toward Asia.

*A Nation on the Line* argues that the offshore call center is a touchstone of the Philippine nation-state's aspirations for greater status in the global economy and, more specifically, a reconfigured relationship with the United States. Entailing more than just a set of jobs related to mundane matters like printers and mobile phones, call centers have been framed as a way for industry leaders, state actors, and workers alike to affirm the Philippines' readiness to compete in the neoliberal marketplace while chal-

lenging the economic and cultural hegemony of the United States. Like many of its neighbors in East and Southeast Asia, the Philippines' economic star has been rising, ostensibly granting it an opportunity to reinvent or revise its historical image as a third-world country and rework its material and symbolic relations with other nations—what Kimberly Hoang, writing about Vietnam, describes as “a platform to articulate new national ideals that challenge common representations of poverty in the Global South and the latter's oppressed relation to the West.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I understand the Philippine call center industry as a canvas on which Filipinos attempt to project to themselves and the wider world an image of a new, technologically sophisticated, and globally competitive postcolonial country. Even more important, however, *A Nation on the Line* exposes the fault lines in this neoliberal terrain. The book demonstrates, for example, how this “sunrise industry” incites both national pride and deep anxiety about the nation's future and its colonial past; how call center agents, cast by the Philippine state as the nation's new heroes (*bagong bayani*), are simultaneously subject to intense scrutiny for their educational choices, consumption habits, and sexual practices; and how, despite its economic promise, the cultural and social value of call center work is anything but stable.<sup>6</sup>

The contours and contradictions of the Philippines' new national image come into even sharper relief when seen through the lenses of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. In the region and the world at large, the Philippines has long been marked as an easily exploitable source of feminized labor for nursing, domestic labor, or sex work. However, with their proximity to information technology (IT) and evocation of knowledge work, call centers enable state and industry actors to craft a counterimage of the country as a source of higher-order white-collar labor, or mental labor rather than labor in a bodily mode. Moreover, because the majority of offshore work originates from U.S. companies, industry enthusiasts see call centers as a sign of U.S. confidence in Filipinos' competence, professionalism, and dependability. In the triumphant language of the free market, Asia's sick man has not only been rehabilitated but is literally and figuratively called on to aid the United States and other powerful countries in a united partnership built on mutual trust and investment. The growth of call centers in the twenty-first century thus appears to signal the possibility that Filipinos could challenge—or perhaps even subvert—the racialized and feminized

global hierarchies of labor and value in which the country has long been at or near the bottom.

Weaving between and gathering details from multiple call centers, including one where I applied and trained for a customer service job, *A Nation on the Line* tracks how this new national narrative and image of the Philippines is socially and culturally constructed in the everyday spaces and operations of the industry. At the same time, the book reveals the fragility of these ideological structures, as critiques of U.S. hegemony are destabilized by the demand for call center workers to speak American English and cope with customer racism and xenophobia, and the belief in the promise of call center work is undercut by its feminized and racialized status as the most routine and rationalized of offshore services. Nowhere are these tensions and anxieties more apparent than in the everyday lives of call center workers themselves. From their office cubicles to the intimate spaces of their homes, workers struggle to affirm, revise, or otherwise make sense of the unfolding global scene in which they are cast—and see themselves—as key actors, literally and figuratively performing the nation for many around the world. More specifically, the book details the intense efforts of call center workers, along with industry leaders and the state, to redefine and relegitimize the meaning and value of Filipino labor, culture, and value. One of this book's primary claims, for example, is that the relational demands of call center work—the imperative that Filipino agents identify and communicate with U.S.-based customers and therefore America as a material location and imaginary space—draw on and intensify an affective capacity I refer to as *Filipino/American relatability*. Culturally constructed within the affective architecture of U.S. empire, Filipino/American relatability encompasses the ways Filipinos and the Philippines have maintained an affinity with Americans and America—from popular culture to the educational system—during and since colonization. I demonstrate that, with the embrace of the call center industry, Filipino/American relatability has been transformed into a type of social capital and cultural resource fueling the Philippines' neoliberal aspirations and supporting its new national narratives, and thus a primary way the nation-state reconfigures the meaning and value of Filipino labor and culture in the contemporary era—but often with contradictory consequences.

In these ways, the burgeoning call center industry and the shifting ideological currents that it helps set in motion create the conditions for a new

type of Filipino subject—one who performs proximity to America while simultaneously disavowing U.S. hegemony; who embodies productivity through work, consumption, and even intimate relationships; and who sees in the global economy a way forward for oneself, one's family, and the nation. Starting with a detailed look at call center labor processes and work cultures, and ending with an analysis of the queering of the Philippine call center industry, *A Nation on the Line* traces the outlines of these new subjectivities and the hope, precarity, and anxiety young Filipinos experience in and through call center work. Rather than attempt to resolve the tensions and anxieties it identifies, *A Nation on the Line* analyzes their construction—that is, how and why call centers constitute a social and cultural predicament in the contemporary Philippines and how workers negotiate these circumstances. As my opening story only begins to suggest, the book demonstrates how the Philippine nation-state's embrace of market-based priorities, projects, and narratives both relies on and reshapes the everyday lives and labor of Filipino call center workers, and thus shows how neoliberal globalization is reconfiguring identities, subjectivity, family, and nation. What I came to learn about these complex dynamics—and their deep roots in the history of U.S. empire, Philippine postcolonial struggles, and the postindustrial vicissitudes of labor and capital—constitutes the core of this transnational ethnography.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Philippines as a Site of Knowledge Production**

With the advancement and intensification of capitalism around the world over the past twenty-five to thirty years, the logic and lexicon of the free market have become powerful but problematic tools for nations, especially postcolonial countries and other countries in the global south, to renegotiate or revise their material and symbolic status within the global economy.<sup>8</sup> Understanding this revision process provides a significant opportunity to assess the political-economic and discursive articulations of neoliberal globalization and thus the ways that these processes are reproduced through but also contingent on historically specific conditions and places. In the Philippines, state actors, industry leaders, and workers alike adopt the dominant rhetoric of the knowledge economy in an effort to transform uneven relations of dependence on the United States and the cultural legacy of American colonialism into relations with the United

States based on partnership, investment, and human capital—the watchwords of the twenty-first century. In this way, the Philippines conforms to what Monica Heller describes as a post-Cold War geopolitics in which relations between former empires and colonies have been reconceptualized “as collaborative rather than hierarchical and as aimed at economic development and competition rather than servicing the nation or the imperial center.”<sup>9</sup> Within this neoliberal rubric, the legacies of empire—manifest, for example, in Filipino/American relatability—are reinterpreted as valuable resources or assets within the capitalist marketplace. Demonstrated most clearly in relation to the English language, such symbolic shifts are not isolated to the Philippines. As scholars have recently shown, while for centuries the value of English has been derived from its association with colonial power, in the twenty-first century English is increasingly seen as a commodity owned by its postcolonial speakers, just one of many linguistic assets “to be discretely enumerated and labeled like items of jewelry or parcels of real estate” and valued for its promise of market access.<sup>10</sup> In the Philippines, which saw the domestication of American English into Philippine English in the 1990s, a postcolonial nationalist ideology emerged that disavows U.S. cultural authority while simultaneously embracing the English language and the global economic arena whose doors it ostensibly unlocks. Within this new national narrative, Filipinos are not supplicant to the United States and global capital but rationally responding to the global market’s demand for workers with exceptional affective abilities. *A Nation on the Line* thus unpacks these nested ideologies of nationalism and neoliberalism, revealing how they create new social and cultural possibilities while exacerbating or obscuring older problems and predicaments.

As a constitutive feature of the Philippines’ neoliberal project and narratives, call centers offer an exemplary and pointed perspective on the nation’s larger efforts at repositioning and redefining Filipino labor, culture, and value in the contemporary era. Offshore call centers also offer a way to further understand how new arrangements of work and emerging work cultures in the global south change not only national narratives and aspirations but also the fabric of everyday life, modes of subjectivity, and facets of identity.<sup>11</sup> Like the textile mill of the nineteenth century or the automobile factory of the early twentieth, the call centers exemplifies the definitive features of its time: a fixation with language and information, 24/7 cycles of production that span the globe, and increasing labor precarity. Despite

the complexities of call center work, however, scholars have either celebrated call centers as a “passage beyond the drudgery of factory life” and into the interactive and expressive realm of the new economy, or painted a “dispiriting image of a subjugated workforce” engaged in rationalized and highly surveilled tasks that offer little to no autonomy or authentic expression.<sup>12</sup> *A Nation on the Line* takes a different tack. I examine how the emotional and relational demands of call center work make possible both dismal toil and joyful camaraderie, thus defining call centers as spaces where capital reaches deep into worker subjectivity while creating more channels for affirmative communication and relations between workers.<sup>13</sup> The book also considers how many of the characteristics of the late-capitalist or postindustrial workplace in the United States—including no-collar culture, Theory Y management, “presence bleed,” and the language of work-life balance—have made their way from American offices to call centers in Manila, Cebu, Bacolod, and many other Philippine cities.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, by paying close attention to the way that the meaning and experience of call center work extend beyond the call center proper and into the marketplace and home—linking it to the social reproduction of status, gender and sexual identity, and aspirations for the nation at large—the book traverses the conventional boundaries that separate the labor process or workplace from other aspects of workers’ lives.<sup>15</sup>

By investigating life and labor at the other end of 1–800 lines, *A Nation on the Line* adds a new dimension to our current understanding of postindustrial processes by analyzing how they shape and are shaped by local cultures and identities, as well as national histories and ideologies.<sup>16</sup> The offshore outsourced call centers that have come to fill the Philippines’ urban landscape were made possible by advances in technology as well as the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism as an economic philosophy and set of business practices that compelled corporations to get lean by shifting so-called noncore business operations to cheaper locales, such as Ireland and, later, India and countries of Southeast Asia. Often already primed by structural adjustment policies that pried open their economies for foreign investors, by the end of the twentieth century a number of poor countries were offering up land, labor, and state support to offshore outsourcing companies. Despite the global context in which they emerged, the disciplinary lines drawn around the study of call centers have made it difficult to see the meaning of these postindustrial workplaces within a larger arena

of transnational power relations and postcolonial cultural politics. Where such scholarship has emerged, it has been bound geographically, historically, and culturally around India, even as it positions Indian call center workers as both national and diasporic subjects and thus reveals the cultural complexities of global service work.<sup>17</sup> Such scholarship also tends to focus on a particular range of policies, protocols, and experiences within call center work, especially the demand that Indian call center agents adopt Western accents, names, and locations as part of their service delivery, or the subjective liminality that results from Indian workers' negotiation between different temporal, geographic, and cultural zones. In contrast to this earlier work, *A Nation on the Line* is less focused on how call center workers' identities become hybridized or destabilized and more attentive to what call centers can tell us about a postcolonial nation and its citizens at a historically specific transnational juncture shaped by postcolonial relations of power. To these ends, the book seeks out the meaning and experience of call center work for Filipinos, who, unlike Indians, have been negotiating labor, culture, identity, and value vis-à-vis the United States for well over a century. By situating Philippine call centers within a broad context triangulated by the cultures of U.S. imperialism, postcolonial politics, and postindustrialism, *A Nation on the Line* analyzes how these unique workplaces are embedded in "colonial histories, class relations, and national interests," an approach other scholars have gestured to but not fully explored.<sup>18</sup>

By contextualizing the figure of the Filipino call center agent within the overlapping structures of transnational service work, Philippine postcolonialism, and the history of U.S. empire, *A Nation on the Line* forges an intervention within our larger understanding of how affect and affective labor are produced and deployed.<sup>19</sup> In tracing how Filipinos' subjective capacities are appropriated by the U.S. customer service industry, I develop the concept of relational labor, or the labor required to positively identify with, signal proximity to, and effectively communicate with others, particularly in ways that meet the demands of capital. I then move on to theorize Filipino/American relatability as an affective orientation and type of social capital that emerges from colonialist structures of power, including discourse about the English language as the basis of affective bonds between Americans and Filipinos and the ostensible benevolence of U.S. empire. The book understands Filipino relational labor as crucial to

scholarly discussions of how social capacities are grounded not in essentialist or a priori human states but historically specific power structures, and thus how efforts to analyze the proliferation of jobs that require care, intimacy, and relatability must be grounded in an understanding of the ways such capacities have been extracted from particular racialized and gendered subjects over time.<sup>20</sup> As Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore argue, the definition of human sociality as an innate capacity obscures how the ability to be social relies on the composition of a person's context and thus "ignores or presumes an answer to the question of why that capacity is deployed in the first place."<sup>21</sup> In this way, *A Nation on the Line* challenges the abstract language of ability and resource that underwrites the contemporary era's excitement about human capital and obsession with how to unleash it—language that inhibits critical inquiry into how relational or other types of intangible labor are always perceived and valued through hierarchies or ideologies of difference.

Finally, this project addresses itself to knowledge production within critical Filipino American and Philippine scholarship, taking up and building on the latter's predominant and often overlapping themes of U.S. empire and militarism in the Philippines; Filipino diaspora, labor, and labor migration; and the formation of national and transnational Filipino subjectivities and imaginaries.<sup>22</sup> This literature has not only recovered the Philippines and Filipinos from the silenced and hidden spaces of the past and present but also challenged structures of white supremacy, gender/sexual regimes of power, and the capitalist exploitation to which Filipino peoples have been subject throughout the nation's history of colonization and independence. Moreover, by focusing on key figures of Filipino labor, such as the Filipino nurse, sex worker, caregiver, seafarer, and factory worker, this scholarship has laid the groundwork for an understanding of the Philippines as a primary site for the production of workers and thus value around the world. *A Nation on the Line* places Filipino call center workers on a historical continuum with these other figures, tracing the way call center agents are imbricated within overlapping regimes of national, transnational, and global labor and capital, and asking what the call center worker can tell us about the constitutive role of race, gender, and sexuality in the operations of global capitalism and U.S. empire.<sup>23</sup>

However, while the book reveals how Filipino call center agents have much in common with other Filipino workers, it also makes clear the con-

ditions that set them apart. Unlike previous generations of agricultural workers, nurses, or domestic helpers, Filipinos willing to work graveyard shifts and learn the byzantine policies of American customer service do not have to physically leave the country for higher wages abroad. “Abroad” has been planted in their own backyards, allowing U.S. capital to reap the benefits of Filipinos’ labor without bodies crossing national borders. Indeed, Filipino call center workers’ simultaneous physical location within and imaginative orientation outside the Philippines, their inclusion in post-industrial corporate workspaces, and the particularities of their social and class identities offer unique insights into the contemporary Philippines and Filipino subject formation. As Alinaya Sybilla L. Fabros writes, Filipino call center agents engage in “undervalued and hidden forms of work to overcome the global distance that the call center platform traverses,” a type of social and symbolic work that entails “manufacturing proximity.”<sup>24</sup> The desire and capacity to achieve this proximity, I argue, are grounded in Filipino/American relatability, which I understand not as a superstructural outcome of competition in the global labor market or as a sign of false consciousness, but as part of the structure of feeling surrounding the United States in the Philippine postcolonial imaginary and thus part of the material conditions of possibility of the present. At the same time, as a structure that rests on notions of benevolence and affinity, Filipino/American relatability also upholds the exceptionalist narrative of mutual and reciprocal U.S.-Philippine relations.<sup>25</sup> In what follows, I uncover how these narratives of empire and nation circulate within the Philippine call center industry, reinforcing the notion that Filipinos are affectively gifted and thus are reproducing a form of Philippine, as well as U.S., exceptionalism.

*A Nation on the Line* traces how workers, industry leaders, and state actors leverage the call center industry as a way to revise the twentieth-century narrative of U.S.-Philippine relations that casts the Philippines as culturally and socially inferior to its former colonizer and thus as a source of easily exploitable, cheap labor. *A Nation on the Line* documents how a complex and contradictory set of ideas, experiences, and feelings about Filipino identity, the Philippine nation-state, and the United States plays out in the Philippine call center industry. While much of the call center training I witnessed instructed agents in what Winifred Poster has referred to as “national identity management”—including how to subordinate Filipino cul-

tural and linguistic traits that might be distracting to callers—employees forged an equally if not more powerful countercurriculum that insisted not only on the primacy and integrity of Filipino identity but also on the idea of a United States in decline.<sup>26</sup> Interrogating the many tensions and contradictions within these efforts, *A Nation on the Line* offers a critique of the way postcolonial nationalist ideologies become nested in the practice of neoliberalism. At stake in this investigation are nothing less than the nation, postcolonial or otherwise, as an imagined location and material entity; the narratives of progress, power, and freedom that press it forward; and the seductive image of capitalism and the market that binds it together. Uncovering the contradictions and problems inherent in each of these projects, *A Nation on the Line* reveals the need for new stories and trajectories by which Filipinos might live and prosper.

### **Backdrops and Origins**

#### *Sick Man, Mistress, Brother, Child: Narratives of the Twentieth Century*

Twentieth-century Philippine history forms the critical backdrop for my analysis of culture, labor, and value as predicaments for the Philippine nation-state in the twenty-first century. The year 1898 saw the end of over three hundred years of Spanish colonization of the Philippine Islands, as Filipino revolutionaries rose up against the Spanish crown and the Catholic priests who wielded its power in the archipelago. As the final act of a crumbling empire, Spain ceded ownership and control over the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Cuba to the United States, whose imperial designs already extended to the Caribbean and Latin America by the end of the nineteenth century. With the acquisition of the Philippines, the United States could maintain a strategic military outpost in Asia as well as gateways to new markets in the region, China being the most important of them. Yet the extension of U.S. sovereignty over the Philippines was met by violent resistance from Filipinos fighting to retain the independent republic established by General Emilio Aguinaldo in 1899, leading to the Philippine-American War. Officially ending in 1902—with ongoing battles continuing in the countryside until 1906—wartime gave way to the creation of an American colonial state whose goal was to modernize the Filipino people, integrate its economy into the growing global capital-

ist marketplace (of which the United States considered itself an emerging leader), and shape Filipino culture through the imposition of American democratic institutions, American education, and instruction in the English language. Endorsing the models of cultural racism emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, the American colonial state thus regarded Filipinos as an inferior people with the potential for development—that is, a race of children whose maturation it would be the burden of white Americans to set in motion.

From the occupation's start, the American colonists cast their control over the Philippines as exceptional in the way it braided authority with affection, and friendship with force. Writing from the executive mansion in 1898, President William McKinley instructed military commanders in the islands "to announce and proclaim in the most public manner that we come not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends, to protect the natives in their homes, in their employments, and in their personal and religious rights."<sup>27</sup> By grafting American institutions and culture onto Filipino life, the United States attempted to make the Philippines into its image, a project that Americans believed would lead to "confidence, respect, and affection" between Americans and Filipinos as two distinct "races."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the Americans endeavored to transform the Filipinos into colonial subjects who could *relate* positively to American people, institutions, and ways of life—that is, subjects who would see in themselves and their futures the outlines and fulfillment of American ideals and therefore would understand and identify with, rather than be alienated by, the social forces and cultural practices in which they were increasingly enveloped. Such relatability was also tied to communication. By instructing Filipinos in and through the English language, the American colonists created subjects whose ability to understand and speak the language of colonial power allowed that power to be exercised through shared, albeit drastically unequal, subjectivity.<sup>29</sup> Such efforts reflected the colonizers' desire to always be addressed in and on their literal and figurative terms and to achieve harmonious proximity with colonial subjects through a shared language. According to the Thomasites, American teachers dispatched from the United States to Manila on the ss *Thomas* in 1901, the United States had "found herself confronted by a great problem dealing with a people who neither know nor understand the underlying principles of our civilization, yet who, for our mutual happiness and liberty, must be brought into ac-

cord with us. Between them and us is a chasm which must be bridged by a common knowledge and sympathy; fellowship must be made possible.”<sup>30</sup> Infamously referred to by Americans as their “little brown brothers,” Filipinos were subject to a form of racism that presumed an affective, even familial, attachment between colonized and colonizer. In the paternalistic, exceptionalist framework of U.S. colonization, Filipinos and Americans were members of the same family.

U.S. colonization of the Philippines has long been understood as a project of American simulation. However, the colonial endeavor rested on the more fundamental idea that Filipinos were indeed *capable* of observing, understanding, adopting, and relating to American ways of life. In other words, to convince themselves and the world of their exceptional and benevolent rule, Americans were bound to the idea that their subjects had the capacity to be like their rulers in the first place—even if, as racialized colonial subjects, Filipinos would always find themselves coming up short in the rulers’ estimation.<sup>31</sup> Filipino/American relatability—the capacity of Filipinos/the Philippines to become like Americans/America—thus became the cultural cornerstone of U.S. exceptionalism; without its promise, the ideology of American benevolence would be logically incomplete. In this way, the American colonial era allowed for the cultivation of Filipino/American relatability as an affective orientation that successive generations of Filipinos would come to understand as an exceptional aspect of Filipino subjectivity. From this affective economy emerged the belief in a special relationship between the United States and the Philippines—what Dylan Rodríguez refers to as a vernacular narrative of “historical congruence.”<sup>32</sup> Within this narrative, World War II figures as a “genesis moment of political union and nationalist coalescence” between the United States as an allied power and the Philippines, which fought alongside it.<sup>33</sup>

The narrative of special or exceptional U.S.-Philippine relations in turn provided crucial cultural support for U.S. control of the Philippine economy in the later decades of the twentieth century. Following a period of post-World War II prosperity connected to the nationalization of industries and the growth of home markets, by the end of the 1960s the Philippines was on a course toward the economic crises, increased poverty, and indebtedness that gained it the moniker “the sick man of Asia.” Upon his extralegal assumption of the presidency in 1969, Ferdinand Marcos turned to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for loans to cover

the nation's extant debts. Together, Marcos, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund began to transform the Philippines into an export-oriented economy catering to U.S. and other foreign manufacturers in search of low-wage workers—especially women—for light manufacturing and assembly work. As in countries all over the developing world, these early neoliberal machinations sank the Philippines into a protracted debt crisis and created massive poverty. As a result, the nation's greatest export became Filipino citizens themselves. Filipinos went abroad in large numbers starting in the 1970s to work as nurses, domestic helpers, and contract laborers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Middle East, which was a process facilitated heavily by the brokering power of the Philippine state.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the Philippines also saw the rise of a prostitution economy, spurred by the ongoing presence of U.S. armed forces in the islands following independence as well as the transnational migration of Filipinas as sex industry entertainers or mail-order brides.<sup>35</sup>

By the time of the People Power Revolution of 1986, the popular uprising that deposed Marcos and brought Corazon Aquino into power, the nation's external debt was just north of \$26 billion.<sup>36</sup> Although a number of enterprises were privatized under Aquino's administration, the neoliberal reforms that further entangled the Philippines in the global economy, including the globalization of services, began with the Ramos administration in the mid-1990s. With its sights set on the Philippines becoming Asia's knowledge center, Ramos's staff of advisers—who had been trained in neoliberal economic and political philosophy in the United States—deregulated, liberalized, and privatized large sectors of the national economy, starting with the telecommunications industry.<sup>37</sup> From there, they strengthened the nation's information communications infrastructure, especially access to the Internet, through administrative orders and projects such as IT21—policies designed to advance the Philippines' integration into the knowledge economy and thus boost the national economy into the twenty-first century.<sup>38</sup> Yet the appeal of neoliberalism for the Philippine nation-state was not simply about economics but also cultural politics. Upgrading the Philippines through technology and knowledge was also framed as a way to make the Philippines a prime place of investment in more highly valued cognitive labor rather than the mere extraction of labor from Filipino bodies. Again, the metaphors of gender, sexuality, and

ability through which these shifting geopolitical relations became legible cannot be underscored enough. For much of the twentieth century, the Philippines was the object of literal and figurative penetration by the United States, for which Filipinos produced pleasure in the form of surplus value extracted from them through bodily or manual labor.<sup>39</sup> With the economic reforms of the late 1990s, however, the Philippine state embarked on a plan that, as Robyn Rodriguez has described, signaled the nation's "invest[ment] in recuperating its feminized status through policy interventions that conform to hegemonic white, masculinized global conventions," including an embrace of neoliberal programs focused on technology and knowledge.<sup>40</sup> In these imaginaries, gender and sexuality are not "mere metaphors" for the operations of capital. Rather, they enable those operations by giving meaning to and thus further compelling the material relations on which capital accumulation relies.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century, the Philippine state had thus begun to assume greater authority with regard to overseas workers by framing labor migration as a development strategy, defining the privileges and responsibilities of labor migrants, and strengthening its overall powers as a labor brokerage state.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the state's intense promotion and pursuit of IT at home allowed for a shift toward the race- and gender-neutral terms of the knowledge economy. Within this symbolic landscape, foreign investment loses the stigma of nonconsensual penetration and feminized dependence because the Philippine state assumes a masculine posture by brokering—that is to say, controlling and disciplining—transnational feminized labor while enhancing the possibilities of breadwinning from home. The hegemonic rhetoric of the market thus offers ways for the Philippine nation-state to assert autonomy because of, and not despite, the continuous flow of U.S. and other foreign capital into its economy—a revision process that is articulated in and through the development of offshore call centers.

### *Gender, Race, and the Invention of "1-800"*

Since the tumultuous waves of U.S. corporate downsizing and restructuring of the 1990s, customer service outsourcing has held an especially loathsome place in the American imagination. As the shareholder revolution and corporate raiding destabilized the U.S. labor market at the end of the twentieth century, American workers disproportionately targeted their

rage about the loss of “their” jobs at the people on the other end of customer service lines. However, despite the heightened attention they received at the end of the twentieth century, call centers have been a fixture of the American service economy since the early 1980s. The term *call center* is in fact a generic name for a workplace where employees handle a wide range of outsourced business processes, such as medical billing or accounts receivable. In industry parlance, customer service or technical support call centers constitute just one component of business process outsourcing (BPO) or business process management firms, which provide back-office voice and data support to mostly North American, European, and Anglo-Pacific companies. While some U.S. companies still maintain their own in-house call centers, or contract with BPO firms located within the United States, late twentieth-century deregulation compelled many companies to contract with third-party outsourcing firms—often also North American or European companies—which set up offices in developing countries to fill these service positions at a much lower cost.<sup>43</sup> In a highly uneven arrangement both emblematic of global spatial-economic restructuring since the 1970s and reproductive of north-south colonial relations, offshore BPO firms benefit from low labor costs, the absence and/or repression of union activity, and nearly tax-free use of the land and infrastructure.

Today’s call center is the product of two different but integrally related functions: telephone operations and customer service. Historically, both have relied heavily on female workforces. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, telephone service *was* customer service, and the hello girls at the other end of the line—chosen for their adherence to Victorian bourgeois ideals of female civility, gentility, and servitude—assured its quality and efficiency, while also preventing male customers from expressing anger when the phone service overall was faulty.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, as the sphere of customer service grew after the Great Depression, it went from a type of work dominated by male shop clerks to one that employed women in greater and greater numbers.<sup>45</sup> By the 1950s, customer service jobs in the United States, especially in suburbs, were predominantly occupied by women who worked part-time for minimum wage, with no union representation and limited opportunities for career advancement.<sup>46</sup> From their early days, telephone and customer service were understood not only as jobs held by women but as positions specifically *for* women, and customers and employers alike came to associate these areas with the social pleas-

antry and caring nature they assumed women naturally possessed and exhibited. Moreover, the feminization of telephone and customer service—and their racialization as well—is integrally tied to how labor processes have been increasingly differentiated and automated, in turn requiring fewer and fewer skills of workers.<sup>47</sup> As Venus Green has demonstrated, until the 1960s most telephone operators in the United States were white, but as the work process was broken down into simpler processes (and integration made possible), the workforce became increasingly populated by African American women.<sup>48</sup>

Also by the 1950s, telephony and customer service had further merged as department store clerks began taking customers' orders and queries by phone. However, not until the consumer movement of the late 1960s and 1970s did companies begin to address consumers' questions and concerns in the highly systematized manner that would eventually launch the customer service systems we know today. This, too, relied on developments in telephony. In the 1960s, touch-tone phones allowed customers not only to call a company but to push a button to reach a particular department, while the creation of the Wide Area Telephone Service lines made possible the first 1-800 numbers. By 1981 General Electric had opened its "GE Answer Center," one of the earliest customer service call centers and an ostensible testament to the company's newfound belief in the loyalty that customer service could inspire in consumers.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, during the 1980s concepts such as customer satisfaction and customer loyalty became full-fledged corporate ideals pondered by men in boardrooms but increasingly left to women working behind counters and telephones to secure for the company.

The feminization and racialization of customer service continued with the emergence of telemarketing companies, one of the main forerunners of large customer service call centers. As a form of part-time sales work that required only a telephone and could be done from home, telemarketing quickly became an industry that employed women in large numbers.<sup>50</sup> By the late 1980s, major retailers reported that 50 to 80 percent of their workforces were composed of women and/or black or Hispanic workers.<sup>51</sup> By the late 1990s, customer service call centers in the United States made up a multi-billion-dollar business that employed "low-cost workers such as students, spouses of full-timers, military personnel, and new labor force entrants," full- or part-time, for average weekly earnings of around \$400.<sup>52</sup>

The latter points to another facet of the feminization of call center work: its reliance on and production of worker precarity, or an insecure relation to wages and sources of employment that parallels women's experience in the workforce more broadly.<sup>53</sup> Such instability is further underwritten by the contractual and contingent relationship between outsourced call centers and their corporate clients.

As call centers expanded across America, so too did their technological infrastructure. With advances in computer telephony integration and customer relationship management tools, in-house call centers (customer service centers that were part of a company's operations) quickly became a thing of the past.<sup>54</sup> As early as 1978, third-party BPO firms were offering corporate clients their services in back-office functions like customer care, payroll, and sales.<sup>55</sup> The geography of customer service changed completely, however, with the advent of Internet-based communication network technology and the deregulation of telecommunications industries in countries like Indonesia, India, and the Philippines—developments that followed earlier outsourcing to Ireland and Scotland. These regulatory and technological changes made it possible for firms to move call center operations overseas and thus to pay workers in the developing world a mere fraction of what U.S.-based workers would be paid for the same work.<sup>56</sup> Thus, while the offshore outsourcing of customer service marked a watershed in the history of both customer service and telecommunications—yet another convergence of the histories of these already intertwined services—it also signaled another moment in which race, and now nation, became factors in the structure and value of customer service call center work. The gradual deskilling and feminization of customer service work thus cannot be separated from the shifting of these jobs offshore to developing countries: only because the work has been increasingly fragmented and automated can firms justify paying workers in the Philippines a fraction of the wages paid to workers in the United States. In this way, the transnational offshore customer service call center fits within a trajectory through which customer service workers have been deskilled, feminized, and racialized, producing the uneven structure of global customer service. At the same time, this abstract deskilling process is not enough to explain why call centers have emerged in the particular sites they have. While capitalists use technology to rationalize labor processes, deskill workers, and justify lower wages, they also use differences—in race, gender, nationality, or

citizenship—to manage the workforce and select particular workers, such as those with an already existing affinity for U.S. culture and with so-called neutral accents.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the breakdown of call center work, coupled with the need for relational labor performed for a U.S. customer base, led many U.S. corporations to the Philippines at a time when national policies and aspirations were increasingly focused on the knowledge economy.

*The Philippines, the Asian Century,  
and the Economy of Knowledge*

Coined in the 1990s, the term *knowledge economy* points to the expansion of production processes that utilize and create knowledge, ideas, and information.<sup>58</sup> Yet the knowledge economy is not simply about a shift toward more immaterial, informational, communicative, or symbolic forms of labor. As Smitha Radhakrishnan argues, “knowledge” has become a powerful discourse of national development meant to signal a developing country’s readiness for competition in a global world.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, as Aihwa Ong demonstrates, with the outflow of knowledge-driven jobs from the West to Asia that started in the late twentieth century, knowledge is “no longer the monopoly of middle classes in advanced capitalist countries.”<sup>60</sup> The Philippine nation-state’s turn toward the knowledge economy starting with the Ramos administration was thus part of a greater embrace of a new development model throughout the global south—one based on global services and manufacturing—as well as a way to affirm the postcolonial country’s ascendancy within the world economy. As Walden Bello and colleagues note, the globalization of the Philippine economy has meant the disarticulation of the traditional sectors of the economy (agriculture, industry, and services) from one another, and the reintegration of the latter two sectors with global production and markets. By the early twentieth century, Filipino workers had therefore assumed three positions in the global division of labor: one on the assembly lines for electronic chips for export; another in the transnational flow of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labor; and a third in the offshore sites of business processing activities from developed countries.<sup>61</sup>

Securing a firm place in the knowledge economy has, however, proven vexing for the Philippines, in part because most call center jobs have not required the knowledge, creative power, or technical acumen for which the Philippines aspires to be known. Indeed, the very conception of call

center work and the BPO industry as a whole emerged in direct contrast to high-skilled knowledge work. When outsourcing began in the United States, it was often framed by CEOs and managers as a way for companies to focus on their core operations, such as research and development. Core functions were thus categorically defined as requiring the efforts and attention of the most skilled and thus most valuable workers, while the auxiliary, noncore, back-office functions—such as customer service, technical support, data entry, and payroll—could be shunted off to other companies or, increasingly, other parts of the world. According to the hegemonic definition of *knowledge* that emerged with the rise of the knowledge economy, BPO jobs were not necessarily knowledge-based jobs; rather, they were considered part of the vast array of service work that supported business functions that might or might not be geared toward knowledge. Defined by a facility with theory, technological skills, and credentialed expertise, knowledge work was thus increasingly distinguished from “routine information-processing activities in low-discretion environments,” which in some definitions explicitly includes call centers.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, according to Paul Blyton and Jean Jenkins, the term *knowledge work* has obscured the full range of physical activity and mental processes that might count as knowledge, including experience and learned routines among workers at lower levels of organizations or within the service industry.<sup>63</sup> As a result, the knowledge required to undertake routine tasks, for example, has become illegible as knowledge work and therefore invisible within the global economy.

As a result, the rationalization of service work over the past thirty years has meant that call center work may, as Monica Heller has described it, “represent opportunity and access to globalization and white-collar jobs or at least economic opportunities that do not require massive labor migration” but at the cost of “the racialization and feminization used in the service of exploitation.”<sup>64</sup> For scholars like Czarina Saloma-Akpedonu who have analyzed this complex context in the Philippines, the kind of national “self-imaginings” in which the country can and will attain high status in global IT and knowledge industries therefore requires “the suspension of disbelief.”<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, advocates of the Philippine call center industry wring their hands over how to leverage the country’s success in the service industry into an opportunity for jobs that directly serve knowledge-based companies and thus might be properly defined as knowledge related, such

as jobs in knowledge process outsourcing or health information management, which serves the ever-valued field of medicine. In this way, the aspirations and rhetoric around IT in general and call centers in particular in the Philippines contribute to the separation of and hierarchy between knowledge and service work. At the same time, call center industry advocates are careful (though not always, as I shall demonstrate) not to devalue customer service and technical support work, often idealizing Filipinos as naturally suited for affective, emotional, and relational labor and all but officially branding the country as a nation of service representatives. The result is a situation in which call center work is the source of both undeniable excitement and also anxiety about whether the Philippines will ever move beyond it to fulfill the aspirations generated by and constitutive of the knowledge economy.

Finally, any discussion of the knowledge-economy paradigm must acknowledge that although it has set the direction for various social and cultural goals at the national and even global levels, it is in fact an elite project that, as Radhakrishnan demonstrates, “tends to foster and enhance the development of an educated professional class.”<sup>66</sup> The quest for knowledge-economy jobs thus leads to new ways of reinforcing old exclusions of class status and cultural capital, new functions for the industry to determine standards for measuring human capital, and new incentives for the national educational system to conform to the knowledge economy’s standards. In other words, as the goals and the aspirations of the nation change in order to chase value up the chain, the value of labor and the identities derived from work are significantly reconfigured, even as they are propped up by entrenched social structures and blended in with enduring social imaginaries. *A Nation on the Line* tracks these processes within the everyday lives of Filipino call center agents, who are at the forefront of the country’s postcolonial struggle and thus face its contradictions and complexities head-on.

### **Ethnography as Relational Labor**

In one of my earliest experiences conducting research for this book, I found myself chatting online and over e-mail with Mia Mendez, a twenty-seven-year-old Filipina who had started an insightful and humorous blog about working in the Philippine offshore call center industry. The blog was

based on Mia's several years of experience as a customer service representative and debt collections agent for a major European bank. As she and I communicated back and forth (mostly with me asking questions about her work and the industry at large, and she providing answers), I was struck by a familiar feeling experienced, I imagine, by most ethnographers: overwhelming gratitude that someone—a person halfway around the world whom I had never met, at that—would take time to offer detailed replies to my queries. Soon after our e-mail exchange began, however, I became somewhat concerned about just *how* quickly Mia responded to my e-mails and insisted that she need not rush to get back to me. In what months later (after we met in person) I came to see as her characteristically sharp manner, Mia not only responded to my latest round of questions without delay but also added, "I know you said 'no rush,' but being in the service industry for so long, I consider you as my customer. So I can't help it if I want to reply right away"—a statement to which she appended a smiley-face emoticon.

Mia's treatment of our interaction as a type of service delivery speaks to a number of significant aspects of ethnographic research broadly and my research in particular. First, as I was conducting an ethnography of service workers who have been trained to approach personal interaction and information exchange with courtesy and professionalism, the lines between the process of my ethnographic fieldwork and its content were often blurred. Like Mia, many of my research participants at some point or another seemed to project onto the interview process and researcher-informant relationship the very modes of communication and self-presentation that they were trained to deploy in call center work. For example, through a brief series of e-mails with Julian, a call center agent whom I met on Facebook, I sensed the register and tone of his message change when he self-corrected his initial assumption that I was a student and not a professor with a Ph.D. At first, Julian was apologetic about his error (which I assured him caused no offense on my part); then his language became more formal as he seemed to assume an official role as a representative of the call center industry and stated his interest in "being of service" to me. Indeed, in several fieldwork moments, especially those in which I was studying up by focusing on industry executives and government representatives, my attention and presence were treated as opportunities to sell me on the Philippines as a location for top-notch outsourcing, even though I attempted to

clarify my role as a researcher and even shared the writing I was producing as a result.<sup>67</sup> This is not to suggest that research participants were never able to relate to me outside of these frameworks, only that their ways of knowing and speaking—in this case, though service delivery or marketing models—shaped various aspects of our interactions.

Second, Mia's explicit articulation of the manner in which she related to me at that moment caused me to reflect on the social structures and politics of location underlying even these earliest exchanges. Since anthropology's reflexive turn in the 1980s, ethnographers have been hyper-focused on the conditions of ethnography's production, including those moments when the process of ethnographic inquiry itself seems to provide the very content of research.<sup>68</sup> In other words, attending to the context-specific epistemological, ideological, and institutional foundations on which the researcher-subject relation rests is a crucial part of decolonizing ethnographic practice.<sup>69</sup> In my research, the necessity of practicing a decolonized perspective was perhaps most urgent when it came to the very language in which my informants and I communicated. As a U.S.-born Filipina with parents whose ideological positions and cultural investments diminished their desire to teach me their native language of Hiligaynon (Ilonggo)—preferences that undoubtedly reflect a racialized, colonialist hierarchy of values surrounding the English language and the marginalization of many immigrants in the United States—I cannot communicate more than rudimentary information in any Filipino language, let alone conduct multiple hours' worth of interviews. My informants, however, by virtue of this hierarchy and its reproduction in the very work that they do and that I set out to study, all spoke fluent English. In turn, these conditions lay the groundwork for my overall critique of colonial histories and postcolonial politics that enable the hegemonic valorization of the English language. The active generation of such critique, rather than passive recognition and confession of my privilege and positionality, to me represents the significance of reflective ethnographic practice.

Being Filipina and American, my identity also complicates the definition of *native* that has dominated the practice of ethnography. Like previous scholars, I question a worldview that sees an isomorphic convergence of people, place, and culture, as histories of imperialism and migration complicate any easy categorization of where someone is from and what culture they call their own. On one hand, having been born in the United

States and lived in the country my entire life, I am not at all native to the Philippines. On the other, because of my status and experience as a Filipina American who had spent the better part of my twenties connecting with my family in the Philippines and conducting my research, my participants seemed to consider me more native than they would a non-Filipino researcher from the United States. Rather than compelling me to stabilize my relation to nativity, these variable perspectives and the vicissitudes of history that they evoke allow me to see that the spectrum of nativity is a cultural construction that dangerously links place of birth to belonging, and identity to a static idea of place and culture. As the daughter of two Filipino immigrants who came to the United States with the force of nearly seventy-five years of U.S. colonization behind them, I have come to understand my belonging or being native to the United States as always already contingent on a racialized and imperial process that both separates me from and also tethers me to the Philippines.

From my early interactions with Mia, I also came to see that ethnographic research, like call center work, requires relational labor. In the next section, I describe the more logistical forms of this labor as I conducted it between 2007 and 2013. What I want to highlight here, however, is how I understand that labor in relation to the politics of ethnographic knowledge production and the practice of reflexivity as I have been discussing them. Throughout my fieldwork, and even more so during certain moments of writing this book, I perpetually asked myself: What is my relationship to what I am observing? What epistemological frameworks might already be guiding my understanding of my fieldwork? In other words, how, through academic training, Western ideological systems, or political inclinations, had I already come to “know” my subjects? As someone inclined to see capitalism as an inherently exploitative system in which difference and power shape ideas about labor, skill, and value, I often instinctively placed call center work in these terms, too. However, I sometimes found that my adherence to this dispiriting understanding of the global service industry was also an obstacle to my research and analysis. When people and places become legible primarily through subordination, it is difficult to see them as anything more than the end point of an exploitative process, rather than active mediators of their hopes and values. The goal of this book is therefore not to compile an endless compendium of ways that people are subjected to power beyond their control or to fulfill a desire to find informants

who are suffering and thus sympathetic, but to offer an account of how people make meaning with both the tools they are given and those they shape out of the substance of their lives.

Another danger of bringing unexamined methodologies and frameworks to ethnographic research—if not other methods as well—is that such inquiries come to feel like ways to master the “real” conditions that research subjects live within. In this way, engagement in the field may entail modes of representation in which the very questions researchers ask reflect a closed, presumptuous, or otherwise problematic worldview. Writing about the challenge of understanding how immigrant women in low-wage domestic work could maintain hope for the future in the face of the social structures that seem to oppress them, Susanna Rosenbaum concludes that the question “How can they remain hopeful?” is a conundrum of the scholar’s own making, one that places marginalized research subjects “in an unchanging present” that fails to consider their conceptions of success and value.<sup>70</sup> Following the lead of scholars committed to decolonized ethnography and feminist pedagogy, I reject the notion of scholarly mastery because it presumes that a scholar’s job is to stand above rather than alongside her informants’ reality, and because claims to mastery—always and already doomed to failure—contribute to the oppression and delegitimization of minority subjects in the academy, by the state, and beyond.<sup>71</sup> What counts as ethnographic knowledge within this book emerged from the logics, feelings, and aspirations that guided my participants’ thoughts as we discussed them and from actions in which I often participated—not mere confirmation of what I already thought I knew.

Last, the relational work of ethnography also entails an awareness of and vulnerability to the ways my research participants tried to understand me as I tried to understand them—what John Jackson calls “ethnographic sincerity.”<sup>72</sup> As many ethnographers know, informants and participants inevitably place researchers in their world vision, projecting onto them various ideas and criticisms, as well as hopes and demands. Throughout my fieldwork I was asked to opine on management problems, given many suggestions as to what my research should be about, and assumed to be a positive voice for the industry; my marital status, biological clock, and racial identity have also been objects of curiosity by research participants as well. As I discuss in chapter 3, as a Filipina American I was often interpellated into imaginaries and ideologies of U.S.-Philippine relations, an expe-

rience that ultimately underscored the larger dynamics this book explores. Such reflection on and insights about my engagement in ethnography further revealed the instability of objects and subjects, as well as researcher and research, while also enhancing my understanding of culture as not a static and bound collection of objects and constructs but a lived and open-ended set of practices.<sup>73</sup>

### **Ethnography as Transnational Labor**

After spending portions of the summers of 2005 and 2006 conducting historical and other preliminary research in the Philippines, I began the research for this book in 2007. Since ethnography is grounded in the researcher's relationships with key individuals and/or sites, I started my project by expressing my research interests to people I already knew to be involved in the call center industry, such as Mia, whom I approached online. From these initial interactions, I came to know dozens of people working in various different call centers, in both Manila—the capital of the Philippines—and Bacolod, a midsized city in the central Philippines.<sup>74</sup>

The capstone of my fieldwork was my research at Vox Elite, a major global call center with locations in Manila and around the world. Started several decades ago, Vox Elite handles conventional call center functions—including customer service, technical support, and sales—and employs upward of 200,000 people in several hundred call centers worldwide. At Vox Elite I was able to participate in and observe the hiring and training process of potential and new employees.<sup>75</sup> Although call centers are notoriously securitized spaces, and Vox Elite is no exception, my access to the company's inner operations was made significantly easier by the personal interest that its vice president of human resources—a middle-aged Filipino man named Joel Partido—took in my research. Joel met with me several times, for several hours at a stretch, even though Vox Elite was busy with a large-scale merger with a major U.S. computer company at the time. However, by the time I was preparing for follow-up research with Vox Elite in 2013, security protocols at the company had changed such that I was no longer allowed access to the center. As the operations manager whom I spoke to over the phone from New York City explained (and as some of my research participants confirmed), heightened security was pervasive across the industry more broadly, but Vox Elite was also being particu-

larly cautious because, according to the operations manager, it “had been burned” by researchers in the recent past. Taking this to mean that criticism of the industry and Vox Elite had reached a level that the company wished to avoid, I explained that the research I had conducted and wished to continue was not focused on the particulars of the company or its corporate clients but rather aspects of the work that speak to workers’ experiences of their jobs. Still, my requests were repeatedly declined, but not before the operations manager in question expressed that, had things been different, he would have liked to bring me in and get my take on why the company had struggled to fill upper-level management positions with Filipinos! Alas, since my relationship with Vox Elite was severely hampered, I focused my energies in 2013 on interviews with call center employees at a different but similar large call center company I refer to as Premier Source.

My sense of the meaning of call center work and the way it fits into workers’ everyday lives came from interviews and participant observation of employees themselves. I spent ample time with research participants in social settings such as shopping malls and restaurants, as well as more intimate settings like their homes. Although many of my questions and observations were guided by my interest in workers’ culture and communication training, the practices and traits that are valued in the call center labor processes, and the social identities of the agents themselves, I mostly strove to understand the issues and concerns that were most meaningful to them, both inside and outside the call center. Given the length of time over which this research occurred, I was also able to sense changes in participants’ views about call center work. Later interviews revealed more and more young people who were interested in call center work as a longer-term career choice, although the usual ambivalence about abandoning more conventional professional paths persisted. One of the most noteworthy changes between 2008 and 2013 was in workers’ consciousness of the recreational sexual practices of many call center workers, the link between call centers and transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (especially HIV), and the stigma attached to the industry and its employees as a result—subjects I address in this book’s final chapter.

In addition to engaging call center employees, I also studied up by interviewing or otherwise interacting with industry executives and representatives of the Philippine government, and by attending government- and industry-sponsored events, one of which took place in the United States.

Such research revealed the ideological links between the Philippine state and the call center industry, allowing me to build on similar work that insists on the relevance of the state in globalization.<sup>76</sup> To understand how the call center industry and its workers exist within a political arena with various allies, I also studied “across”—that is, followed nascent developments in organized labor, and the work of nongovernmental organizations which focus their efforts on call center workers. For this portion of my research, I interviewed activists of different stripes, from those taking a more industry-friendly approach to protecting workers’ rights to one connected to radical and underground labor organizing groups.

*A Nation on the Line* keeps faith with American studies scholars’ insistence that cultures of everyday life and the production of identity and difference are so multifaceted that they demand innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to studying them. In addition to multi-sited ethnographic research, the project thus also makes use of primary and secondary historical sources and a rich archive of media representations, television news spots, YouTube videos, comic books, magazines, and company ephemera. I also conducted original and secondary research on topics relevant to my questions about how call center work is linked to consumer culture, sexual culture, and service work culture in the Philippines. Finally, tacking back and forth between Manila and Bacolod offered me a unique comparative perspective on the Philippine call center industry, since Manila—a cosmopolitan urban environment considered saturated with call center work by the mid-2000s—differs culturally and politically from Bacolod, where social conservatism holds sway and call centers were a relatively unknown entity until around 2007. By 2013, however, industry and government leaders had officially designated Bacolod a “Next Wave City,” signaling its readiness to expand its BPO offerings.

### **Book Outline**

The chapters that follow examine the tensions, contradictions, and anxieties facing Filipino call center workers in everyday life, tracing these predicaments to the problems of labor, culture, and value facing the Philippines as a postcolonial nation-state in the twenty-first century. Following the interdisciplinary and transnational trajectories of my methodology, each chapter situates the Philippine call center industry within a different frame

of reference, starting with postindustrial work cultures in chapter 1 and moving on in the subsequent chapters to the knowledge economy, post-colonial cultural politics of identity and language, the changing character of the middle class, and shifts in reproductive rights and sexual politics. While each framework reveals a different set of meanings of call center work for my research participants, together they reinforce my overarching argument about how the call center industry is a site of contestation over the status of the Philippine nation-state and the value of Filipino labor, a struggle that can and should be understood in racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized terms.

Chapter 1 examines the call center labor process and work culture and the ways in which the call center, as a postindustrial workplace, blurs the boundaries between production and social reproduction, as well as work and worker. I examine the affective contradictions of call center work—that is, how the work comes to feel emotionally and physically damaging and draining, while also socially pleasurable, personally fulfilling, and fun. I then trace this contradiction directly back to the labor process itself. The chapter also introduces two concepts: relational labor, or the labor of identification, proximity, and communication; and productive intimacy, which is the form close relationships between coworkers take when made productive for capital. Finally, chapter 1 demonstrates how my research participants interpret the demands of call center work through norms of Filipino relationality, such as *pagkatao* (personality/humanity) and *kapwa* (unity of self with others), allowing them to feel that the work is “very Filipino” despite its Western origin.

Having examined the intricacies of call center work proper, I then move on to analyze its broader class and cultural contradictions in chapter 2. I examine the contestation over the skill and value of call center work, linking these debates to the fear that the work reproduces, rather than transcends, the racialized and feminized labor for which the Philippines has long been known and thus is an obstacle, rather than a pathway, to entry into the knowledge economy. I also carefully detail how the unstable class status of call center work in the Philippine context is shaped transnationally, through the global social relations that make call center work a precarious job associated with racialized and feminized servitude. Chapter 2 then discusses the contradictory cultural logic of call center work by looking at colonial recall—the ways in which the industry raises the specter

of U.S. colonialism—and Filipino/American relatability. I close-read moments within my fieldwork in which elite industry actors attempt to make sense of the colonial power dynamics that shape call center work, resulting in a contradictory politics that aligns with global capital while contesting the power of the United States. I pay particular attention to how this contradictory dynamic manifests within the shifting politics and meanings of the English language and Filipino identity. Most important, however, chapter 2 demonstrates how workers, industry leaders, and state actors mediate and negotiate the uncertainties of call center work through an appeal to market logic, thus emerging as active participants in the making of the nation-state and its neoliberal narrative.

Chapter 3 draws on my participant observation of the call center hiring and training process at Vox Elite. Building on the first two chapters, it takes an in-depth look at how class contradictions, racialized and gendered service, and colonial recall shape the structure and experience of call center work from the minute a person begins filling out a job application. Unlike previous ethnographic accounts of call center hiring or training, I extend my analysis beyond the question of how national identity is managed or how call centers reproduce colonial relations of control. In addition to understanding these important facets of call centers, I also critically examine how the presence of white male American corporate trainers, and of myself as a Filipina American, shaped the training experience for Vox Elite employees, in part by implicitly inviting the latter to affirm the symbolic integrity of Filipino identity or to challenge U.S. economic dominance. This chapter presents call center training as the site where the postindustrial struggles of the American middle class—represented in the aggrieved whiteness of white male American trainers—converge with the aspirations and growing confidence of Filipino workers, thus complicating the terrain on which Filipino/American relatability plays out.

Chapters 4 and 5 look more closely at the predicaments of labor, culture, and value as they revolve specifically around cultures of consumption and sexual politics. Picking up on questions of class contradiction discussed in chapters 2 and 3, chapter 4 looks closely at the cultures of consumption and credit in which Filipino call center workers are increasingly entangled, in ways both pleasurable and precarious for workers. I critically interrogate the perception of call center work as a gateway to a middle-class lifestyle, as well as the moral reproach leveled at their conspicuous consumption.

Building on discussions of productive subjects in chapter 1, chapter 4 also examines how cultures of consumption and finance reinforce a productivity ethic and thus the cultural construction of call center workers as what I call “productive youth”—young workers whose very sense of self is measured and determined by their ability to produce multiple forms of value. Finally, chapter 5 examines how contestations over the social and cultural value of call center work are complicated by the association of the workforce with gender and sexual deviance, as well as sexually transmitted disease. The chapter first describes how Philippine call centers have been culturally constructed as nonnormative and specifically queer sites, tracing this construction to a wide range of factors, including liberal hiring and promotion policies, the sexualization of global media assemblages, shifting sexual cultures among Filipino youth, and the industry’s valorization of relational labor, which creates occupational opportunities for *bakla* and transwomen as performative individuals.<sup>77</sup> I then consider the discourse of deviance surrounding the recent rise in the number of call center workers testing positive for HIV, a trend reported in media outlets starting in 2010. Like the concerns about educational achievement or class mobility examined in previous chapters, I understand the concerns over workers’ sexuality and sexual practices as articulations of fear and uncertainty about the social value of call center work to the nation. In the book’s conclusion, I draw on some of the last moments of my fieldwork and reflect back on earlier moments to highlight insights related to a number of the book’s questions and themes, including the power of national narratives to shape everyday life, and the pitfalls of the knowledge economy.

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*A Nation on the Line* traces the connections that make up the business of customer service outsourcing to the Philippines, following the flow of capital, corporate culture, and customer demands from the United States toward its former colony, and Filipino workers’ affective labor as it recrosses those same boundaries. Yet the book is a transnational account not simply because it tracks movements of capital and labor across national borders, but because it stresses the ways that transnational political economy and culture transform the meaning and identity of the Philippines as a nation-state. As over two decades of transnational scholarship in American studies and Asian American studies have made clear, the

term *transnational* applies not only to the empirical—that which actually crosses national borders—but first and foremost to a standpoint of critique of the nation-state as an entity socially and culturally constructed in relation to other nations, whose material and ideological borders are established or displaced through imperial and military action, and whose imagined community includes or excludes various peoples based on geopolitical priorities.<sup>78</sup> By directing its focus to the Philippines' struggles to stabilize its status within the global economy and the ways new national narratives emerge as a result, *A Nation on the Line* uncovers how the Philippine nation-state is always in question—and in ways that involve the United States, although not always predictably. Neither solely an account of U.S. corporate power and empire in the Philippines nor a static portrait of the Philippines in the postcolonial era, *A Nation on the Line* merges the horizons of Asia and America, strengthening a key thread in an ongoing conversation about what transnationalism as a method does, and how one might go about doing it.