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A Nation on the Line

Padios, Jan M.

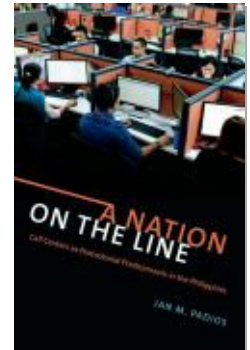
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LISTENING BETWEEN THE LINES

*Relational Labor, Productive Intimacy, and the
Affective Contradictions of Call Center Work*

June 2013. At ten minutes past eleven at night a small flashing icon near the top right corner of her computer screen told Diana Pilar—a twenty-three-year-old customer service representative for Premier Source’s account with Air Anima—that a new call had been routed to her line. Having earlier removed her headset so that she could speak with me more freely, Diana now replaced it so she could take the call. I, too, donned a headset so that I could listen in, a process usually reserved for managers and trainees, and appropriately referred to as *barging*. As I did so, I noticed that the brightly colored knitted muffs covering the earpieces of Diana’s headset were one of three personal items in the small blue cubicle where we were seated. The other items were a photograph of Diana’s two younger brothers and an advertisement for a Coach purse torn out of a fashion magazine. Just before the new call came in, Diana had been explaining to me that with her earnings she was able to cover the tuition and living expenses for her brother Terry, who was studying computer science in college and would soon be applying for jobs at several call centers, including Premier Source. When I asked about the advertisement, Diana smiled and said that it lent her inspiration for her mother’s upcoming Coach-themed birthday party, which Diana was organizing.

The new call—Diana’s ninth since her shift started two hours earlier (a rare slow night on the floor)—did not come directly from an Anima customer but from another call center agent working for Navigate, the online travel agency through which the customer had booked her Anima flight. The Anima customer, a woman from Texas, had called Navigate to inform them that the sixty dollars she had previously paid in baggage fees to Air

Anima had not been refunded or credited to her when she later changed her flight to a different time and day. The Navigate agent then explained to Diana that she was going to bring the customer onto the call. One click later, all three parties—the customer, the Navigate agent, and the Air Anima agent—were all virtually present, while I listened in the background.

On the right side of Diana's computer screen, a clock displayed the amount of time that had elapsed since the call's start; below it was an inbox containing an interoffice memo from Diana's team leader stating that the account's current average handling time for calls that shift had been six minutes but needed to be lower. From what I had already learned about how long even a simple exchange of information between agent and caller could take, I suspected that having not one but two people on the line would increase Diana's handling time on the call; indeed, Diana was left hanging while the Navigate agent and the customer exchanged more words. Finally, the Navigate agent—undoubtedly trying to manage her own handling time and service delivery—decided to return the sixty dollars to the customer but then informed her that her credit card would be charged the sixty-dollar baggage fee for the new, changed flight. The call reached an emotional tipping point as the caller shouted, "Fuck this, I'm canceling *everything!* I'm not giving anyone any more of my *fucking* money! I've been on the phone with you people for *four* hours! You are both complete idiots who should be fucking fired!" At that point, Diana calmly apologized to the customer but made clear that she could not assist her further and disengaged the call, just as her timer reached seven and a half minutes.

This window into Diana's work life reveals the kind of labor that customer and technical support call center agents in the Philippines do on a daily basis, as well as the way call center work fits within the larger context of workers' family lives, their consumer cultures, and transnational structures of power shaped by race, nation, and class. Diana's ability to support her family financially points to her earning power; her confidence and competency in communicating in English illustrate the cultural capital the job requires; and her exposure to and management of feelings—both her own and the customer's—demonstrate the intense emotional labor call center agents engage in as an inherent condition of the job. Moreover, Diana's ability to strategically maneuver through the demands of Air Anima, Premier Source's corporate client, and the immediate circumstances of the call, suggests the tedious mental labor the work entails. Afterward,

Diana shared her logic and savvy with me by explaining that because the customer's problem originated with a Navigate agent's failure to transfer the baggage fee payment to the new flight (a mistake she could detect from the database she accessed during calls) she didn't want to use her call time to explain the problem to either party. She maintained that it wasn't in her interest to do so: the sixty-dollar fee was going to be paid to Air Anima no matter what, so instead of making herself a target of the caller's anger and spending more time on the call, Diana terminated it, saving her time and energy. "It was their fault," Diana proclaimed. "I don't want to save their ass or be the one to tell the customer what went wrong." When I asked Diana how she felt about the customer's shouting and cursing, she replied, "Sometimes customers, they get like that. I just tell myself to not take it personal [*sic*] and keep doing my job, keep being professional. That's already automatic for me, when I get to the production floor."

Diana's situation also reveals some of the contradictory experiences of labor, culture, and value embedded in call center work, and thus the kinds of tensions this book identifies and situates within the Philippine nation-state's postcolonial struggles to gain a foothold in the postindustrial knowledge economy. Although she did it well, Diana's job handling customer service for Air Anima reflects call center work's highly rationalized nature, in which back-office and customer-facing work is divided into relatively repeatable and routine tasks. As the call further demonstrates, call center jobs also require intense performative and emotional labor in a highly surveilled environment driven by a quality control system that measures nearly all aspects of workers' activity. Call center agents make airline reservations, troubleshoot wireless Internet devices, and check credit card statements, all while nervously aware of the ticking clock, their customer's mood, their supervisor's demands (for faster call resolutions, more sales, more pleasant service, etc.), and their own exhaustion. Not apparent from my observation of Diana, however, was the larger work culture in which Philippine call center labor takes place. Although Diana spoke to me about the stress involved in dealing with customers and clients, she also described her working environment as highly enjoyable, citing the many friends she made at work and opportunities they have to, in her words, "decompress from all the pressures we face on the floor." Even her mother's birthday party, she said excitedly, would be attended by many of her friends from work, including her team leader.

This chapter focuses on the subjective demands of the customer service labor process—especially its appropriation of emotional, affective, and relational labor—while detailing how these intangible performances are measured and evaluated by management. I also demonstrate that the rationalized relational labor of call center work is linked to a work culture that fosters positive social relations among coworkers. These relationships take shape through both the formal corporate culture and official management practices, such as *coaching* and *developing people*, as well as the informal intimacies that emerge between coworkers. Philippine call centers, I argue, create and maintain an internal realm of social reproduction that allows for the regeneration of relationality as the raw material of call center work. This renewal process is all the more important in Philippine call centers, where the imperative to work overnight dislodges workers from the normal socially reproductive rhythms of social and familial life. By analyzing the labor process and work culture in the same frame, this chapter brings into sharp relief the striking contrast between the often damaging physical and psychological repercussions of call center work, and its capacity for fun and camaraderie between coworkers. Rather than dismiss the social and pleasurable aspects of corporate work culture as merely another mode of workplace control, or assume its potential for unbridled radical solidarity—the two primary ways that aspects of the humane workplace have been framed in the past—I try to understand why Philippine call centers have this contradictory characteristic and how workers experience it.¹ As I demonstrate below, such contradictions can be traced to the call center’s hypervalorization of productivity and reliance on human relationships, which, in the Philippine context, enables the subsumption of Filipino modes of sociability and relational practice by capital while also enhancing the value such modes have for individual workers.

The Panopticon at Pyramid Processing

February 2009. The street outside my apartment building was dark and deserted at half past midnight. As I settled into the back seat of one of Metro Manila’s ubiquitous white taxis, the driver lowered the sound of Billy Joel singing “Honesty” on the radio so I could direct him to our destination: Emerald Avenue. Just an eight-minute drive from where I lived in Makati—although it would easily eat up thirty minutes in regular day-

time traffic—Emerald Avenue is home to dozens of call center companies and therefore the nocturnal beating heart of the commercial and business district known as Ortigas. As we approached Pyramid Processing, where I had been observing the production floor and interviewing workers for a few weeks, the slumbering city suddenly awakened with activity: young people walking briskly into and out of office building lobbies, or standing together in circles while the smoke from their cigarettes wafted upward into the amber light of street lamps. A string of convenience stores and small restaurants were open and ready to serve, hot dogs turning on metal trays in the window and energy drinks chilling on refrigerated shelves. All around Metro Manila—especially in thriving commercial zones like Libis and Bonifacio Global City—late-night scenes like this one were unfolding, as call center workers carried on yet another night of transnational service work.

Upon arriving at Pyramid's offices, I made the requisite stop at the guards' desk to register my name and the company I was visiting in a thick but meticulously organized logbook whose every entry displayed the flawless handwriting that many Filipinos are schooled in using. On this day, I was scheduled to meet Antonio, a Pyramid Processing quality assurance (QA) manager, who had agreed to walk me through an employee performance evaluation process. Behind me, employees quickly flashed identification badges at the guards and then made their way to the bay of elevators ahead of us. Moments later I joined the fray and waited patiently as people disembarked on various floors of the fifteen-story building.

When I arrived at one of the three floors Pyramid occupies, I checked in quickly with another guard; it would be another year or two before the company automated its security system, eliminating the need for these quiet armed men. As was always the case at that time of night, the large production floor was buzzing with energy, and the temperature was near frigid. Of the one hundred or so cubicles spread out before me, about two-thirds were occupied, with the remaining empty cubicles awaiting a batch of rookie agents who would be starting on a new account in the next two weeks. Directly in front of me, trainees were undergoing their first night of fully supervised calls—a stage of training referred to as *nesting*—on an account for a national car rental service in the United States, and the sound of their nervous discussions with neighbors and trainers charged the space around them. Meanwhile, team leaders on the other accounts

paced along the rows, making themselves available when their agents had a question or when a call needed to be escalated because of a problem. With their restrained colors, plain office chairs, and desktop computers, agents' workstations seemed indistinguishable, yet above them hung colorful banners and other decorations, with a different theme or color scheme providing a visual outline of each account on the floor. Bright poster boards announced the mission and vision for various teams of agents, with imperatives and mottos like "Deliver Excellence!" and "Performance Is Power" that employees had written by hand in big block or bubbly letters. As I stepped to the side and looked for Antonio, a steady stream of agents began trickling onto the floor, their demeanors relaxed yet purposeful as they settled into an eight-hour shift.

Seconds later, I spotted Antonio standing at one of the workstations for managers, where he was talking to another employee about some papers he was holding, most likely a printout detailing how well the account was doing relative to the goals set by the corporate client during their last meeting. As soon as he finished the conversation, we walked to a small room near the back corner of the floor, where we would listen to a customer service call recorded from an Internet provider account and Antonio would train two junior QA managers to evaluate the call. This opportunity was significant because it promised a unique perspective on the two most talked-about things among my research participants: performing emotional and affective labor, and performing in general—that is, attempting to meet the various metrics established by management and corporate clients, including call handling time, first-call resolution, and customer satisfaction scores. Indeed, very few of my research participants could talk about their jobs without expressing great exasperation, and sometimes deep distress, over the panoptic surveillance to which they were subject and the tedium of responding calmly and empathically to callers' challenging questions or their demeaning comments. "The metrics," as workers ominously referred to them, could spell the difference between promotion and demotion and thus held great power over workers' everyday lives. "There would come a point," a Premier Source employee named Billie explained, "wherein you would go to sleep and dream about your scores."

The four of us—Antonio, the two junior QA managers (Damien and Megan), and I—squeezed together in the room where all the QA equipment was housed. After a minute or two, Antonio queued up a call by an

agent named Elson, who had been with the account for a little over a year. Although Elson's call itself was chosen at random, his particular team was being evaluated at the request of the client company, a small provider of Internet service in New Zealand called Keen. In Keen's most recent meeting with Pyramid's account managers, they had shown concern over poor results on its customer service survey and wanted Pyramid to develop a plan to improve these scores. In telling us this information, Antonio also added that he had heard a rumor about Pyramid "shaking things up with their third-party providers"—meaning their call centers in the Philippines and elsewhere—as they were attempting to grow their base of broadband customers. Antonio wanted Pyramid to be on the right side of this shake-up, receiving more of Keen's business and not less, and therefore was eager to get the company the report it had requested.

Antonio handed me a clipboard and a copy of Pyramid's customer service evaluation tool, the Comprehensive Quality Assessment (CQA) survey, so I could follow along with their discussion. For the particular account Elson was working on, the CQA contained thirty-six questions about an agent's performance. Divided into subcategories, the questions ranged from how the agent handled the caller's private information, to how well they identified the problem the caller was having, to whether or not the agent paced the call according to "the customer's style and technical level of knowledge." Each question was given a numerical value, such as twenty or fifty points; however, twenty-one of the thirty-six questions only allowed agents to receive the full point value, zero points, or an "auto-fail"—meaning an automatic failure for a given subcategory of evaluation should the agent not perform correctly. Thus for much of the survey, there was little to no room for error if the agent wished to "pass the scorecard."

The playback began. On the line was a woman who wanted to know why her e-mail account was deactivated. From the start of the call, the woman seemed both tired and irritable, perhaps because of the young child crying in the background. She grew even more annoyed, however, after Elson asked her to verify her e-mail address for security purposes, a step so crucial to the corporate client that QA managers will auto-fail agents if it is done incorrectly. In attempting to remember her e-mail address, the caller gave one that was similar but not identical to the one the company had on file for her. The discrepancy caused the agent to ask another series

of questions to verify the caller's identity, to which the caller responded, "Look, that e-mail address is most likely mine. I don't use this company's web browser that often, so it's highly understandable that I made a slight mistake in remembering the e-mail address for the account. Why don't you just use common sense?"

Elson remained quiet despite the caller's slight to his intelligence and simply repeated that he had to ask the security questions to verify the woman's identity. After this step was complete, Elson surveyed the caller's account using the Keen database (a process that was visually recorded and thus subject to scrutiny by QA managers) and realized that the woman's e-mail service had been rendered inactive because, as he informed her, "of a problem with her bill" that she could resolve only by speaking directly with someone in the company's billing department. The caller expressed irritation over this inconvenience, which only redoubled when Elson informed her that the billing department was closed at the time. Elson, however, mistakenly offered to connect the woman to the billing department—a foible perhaps caused by exhaustion (this call occurred near the end of his shift, around six in the morning) or a desire to end the call—to which the caller responded in a voice of irate and condescending disbelief, "This is idiotic. Didn't you just say they were closed?!" Again, Elson did not verbally acknowledge the woman's response. Instead, he told her that she would have to call back during the billing department's hours of operation and closed the call.

"Okay," Antonio said as he turned to the CQA survey, "the agent clearly conducted the opening spiel and the security checks correctly—so full points there. Now, what about 'Customer Experience'? Did the agent 'Provide the caller with clear and easy-to-follow instructions'?" I looked up at Damien and Megan, whose eyes are nervously pinned to their clipboards. After a few seconds Damien suggested that Elson be given full credit for the question because, as he saw it, the agent knew that it was a billing issue and told the woman to call back the next day when the billing department would be open. Antonio then challenged Elson's perception of the call by saying, "Yes, but does *the customer* know the reasons she has to call back and speak to the billing department? The agent had that information right in front of him [on the computer screen], but he didn't tell the caller what the problem was exactly. He just told her to call back. That means she doesn't know what's going to happen when she does. I would give Elson

‘Needs to Improve.’” Damien and Megan nodded in silent agreement. Elson would not be given any credit for that portion of the call.

During the QA scoring session, it quickly became clear to me that the agent’s score on “customer experience” was determined by an interpretation of the customer’s subjective state in relation to what the agent communicated. When reviewing the call, for example, Antonio listened for how the agent related to the customer and then determined the customer’s state based on that information. Thus, even though the customer did not actually complain or otherwise inquire about her bill while on the phone with Elson, he was given a “Needs to Improve” score on the question. By asking what the customer could possibly know about her bill based on Elson’s communication, Antonio demonstrated that, unlike Damien, he was listening for not only what the agent said but also how what he said affected the customer. Later, Antonio clarified this way of evaluating agents by saying that some of the metrics have nothing to do with an agent’s knowledge of a product or a process but his or her ability to “think like a customer”—something he did not believe Elson succeeded at during the call. Moreover, from a QA point of view, one of the most problematic aspects of Elson’s performance was his lack of a verbalized empathic response when the customer expressed irritation or frustration. Rather than saying something along the lines of “I understand your frustration with this process” or “Yes, I did say the billing department was closed, I understand how that can be confusing,” Elson simply remained silent. Because he did not demonstrate that he was relating to the customer during a moment of tension, Elson was given “No/zero” on the question of whether the agent used empathy to manage irate customers. Furthermore, he was given “No/zero” on the question related to his professionalism and enthusiasm because, according to Antonio (and here Damien and Megan agreed right away), there was too much “dead air,” that is, silence on the part of the agent during the call, and because Elson’s apparent interest in the caller’s problem never seemed to rise above the level of sober indifference.

The intersubjective demands of call center work can thus tell us much about the appropriation of human affect and emotion by and for capital—that is, the emotional economy in which call center labor produces value. The scoring session made abundantly clear that subjective capacities—what QA managers at Pyramid Processing refer to as the “human element”—constitute a call center agent’s most valuable tools for producing customer

satisfaction. All across the industry, agents are trained and evaluated for two human elements in particular—rapport and empathy—both of which Elson ostensibly failed to mobilize during the call. To achieve rapport, agents attempt to establish a harmonious interaction with callers in which the two parties exchange information with ease. In addition to setting the tone for the personal identification process, rapport is also part of transparency, wherein agents let customers know why they are asking questions, what steps they are taking to address customers' problem, and, most important, what callers stand to gain from these procedures. Rapport is not simply about seeming pleasant or making customers comfortable, however. More fundamentally, it promotes the idea that agents are there to help customers rather than to defend the corporate client or blame customers for the problems they are calling about. As suggested by the call that opened this chapter, agents can also learn to restrain rapport when the blame or failure can be shifted elsewhere. Meanwhile, in the emotional taxonomy of call center work, empathy means understanding the expectations and frustrations that a person experiences with a product or service, including the customer service delivery process itself. To help foster empathy, agents are told to be active listeners by letting customers speak, probing for details about callers' problems, paraphrasing what customers say, and understanding the customer's tone of voice. Agents are trained to display empathy by using phrases like "I understand" and acknowledging a customer's position as someone who, for example, desperately needs to resolve a billing issue. Empathy requires what Arlie Hochschild calls "deep acting," or the use of the trained imagination to actually feel the feelings one is displaying—or, at least, to narrow the gap between what one feels and what one displays.² By not displaying empathy with the caller, Elson failed to properly acknowledge the customer's frustration.

Empathy and rapport are therefore understood as important emotional tools that influence how callers feel and behave, in turn mediating how callers relate to the company in question. Call center work thus clearly requires affective labor, or the labor employed in shaping someone's mood or state of mind. More specifically, however, call center work requires relational labor, which includes agents' effort to relate to customers in a way that manages their overall relationship to the client companies or businesses in question; in this way, agents are charged with reinforcing callers' submission to the forces of capital.³ This concept of relational labor points

to more than just the agent's need to identify and communicate with the caller; it also highlights the pressure on the call center agent to identify with not one but two companies—the call center and the corporate client. This need to shift perspectives between callers, companies, coworkers, and even technological systems is a defining feature of outsourced call center work and was clearly on display in the call that opened this chapter. During my time as a participant and observer at various call centers, I was struck not only by how workers speak but also how they orient themselves, both psychologically and physically, in various different directions. By *orient* I mean something more than the fact that agents must pay attention to many things and multitask; I mean that agents must learn to identify with the intentions of others, including “the corporate ‘other.’”⁴ Moreover, by appropriating and then directing an agent's affective state into a specific relationship with a caller, the call center labor process literally values some affects and emotions over others. Elson may very well have registered the customer's irritation and chosen a disaffected response as a way of coping with the caller's subsequent rude and insulting comments—what Martin Manalansan describes as “a kind of managed alienation and a tempered hostility to the regimes of power and nurturance”—but such a response did not earn him a positive score on the CQA.⁵ Indeed my research participants made abundantly clear that negative feelings were always boiling beneath the surface of their trained performances. As one Pyramid Processing employee told me, “you have to have the highest level of EQ [emotional quotient] to be here. You have to manage what [the customers] are going through, and you have to manage yourself. When I go to work, I always bear in mind that I have my locker where I can keep my excess baggage. And I count to ten before I get irate. To cool myself down.”

The Social Reproduction of Relational Labor

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which call center work that involves direct verbal communication with customers drains agents of morale and motivation. Night after night, week after week—and, for some, year after year—agents are literally at the beck and call of customers and clients, their every word and click of the mouse the objects of disciplinary surveillance, measurement, and control. Despite—or, as I argue, because of—

these conditions, call center work offers employees abundant opportunities for emotional solidarity and social bonding. This dynamic is rooted in the affective and relational demands of call center work and the work culture to which it gives rise.

After the QA scoring session, Antonio and the others broke for lunch. I took my leave, too, because I had arranged to meet some agents from Integral, a neighboring call center, at a nearby outdoor food market that catered to the many call center employees in the area. Introduced to this group by a friend, I had been invited to hang out with them during breaks and after work; five people in the group had even formed a rock-and-roll cover band cleverly named Calvin and the Talent—“talent” being an industry word used to refer to call center employees—and I had seen them perform a few times. Calvin was their warm and friendly band manager, the son of a Filipina and an American serviceman, who often joined them during breaks. Calvin didn’t work in a call center, but he hardly ever missed an opportunity to socialize with his friends.

When I arrived at the market, I found Erica, Macky, and Stephen sitting together, still waiting for the others to arrive. Erica, who had gone to high school in Australia and had studied communications at one of the city’s most prestigious colleges, had been working at Integral for six years as a language and cultural trainer. Stephen had worked in a local resort just outside the city before getting a call center job; he had studied to be a pilot, but since the on-the-job training took several months and would actually cost him money, he did not pursue it. Then there was Macky, the youngest of the group; he and Stephen were two of the band members. Macky had worked in one call center before Integral. Normally quite talkative, that evening he looked distant and glum.

“He had a lot of bad calls at the beginning of his shift,” Erica explained. Knowing that Macky answered no fewer than 150 calls a day—he took orders on a contact lens account for a major pharmaceutical company—I was worried about how many was “a lot.”

“It wasn’t that many,” Macky interjected, as if he had read my thoughts. “It was just a couple that really, really pissed me off. One was seven minutes long. Normally, I can take, like, ten orders in that time, but this lady—this one lady, everyone on the account knows her—she kept asking me for a big order size, and I kept telling her it’s not possible, she has to get a special

approval for that. She keeps . . . she kept arguing with me. I really wanted to disconnect that call.” Stephen asked if he had escalated the call to his team leader.

“I had to,” Macky sighed. “My TL [team leader] was okay about it. We laughed afterward, but still. I won’t be laughing if I resign.”

Stephen put his hand on Macky’s shoulder and said, “Huwag mag-resign, okay? [Don’t resign, okay?] We’ll have a jam session later, and you’ll feel better.” Just the reminder of the band’s existence seemed to relax Macky a little bit, at which point he and Stephen got up to buy something to eat while I stayed with Erica.

As Macky’s description of his feelings suggests, workers’ resistance to their psychologically harrowing conditions is constant. Indeed, the agents I interviewed gave me rousing examples of their defiance at work, including finding ways to disconnect calls without being penalized, and managing to spend their downtime between calls in the cafeteria with friends rather than at their workstations. While not insignificant, these surreptitious modes of insubordination make up only a small part of a larger tableau of struggle and solidarity unfolding nightly among call center workers. As the caring exchange between Stephen and Macky implies, agents often manage the stress of their working conditions by turning to one another for emotional support and psychological decompression. In fact, many of my research participants spent significantly more time speaking of positive interactions with their coworkers than negative interactions with callers, leading me to see the importance of the relational efforts transpiring among them, both at work and outside of it. Harold, another member of the Integral crowd and a staff person in the company’s recruitment department, described it this way: “With us, we sometimes end up working fourteen, maybe fifteen hours in a row, and we will still get a couple of bottles [of beer] after, because it becomes a stress reliever. I would even sacrifice sleep to go out and talk about work. That’s important. So, I guess . . . you are bonded by stress.” The practice of morning happy hours has become so ubiquitous that Tagalog speakers have even coined a new word to describe it: *inumagan*, which combines the words *inuman* (to drink) and *umaga* (morning).

Call center agents’ workplace relationships point directly to the ways that capital subsumes subjectivity through relational labor, and thus the reason that call centers are at once dismal and fun environments. *Sub-*

sumption names the process that transforms particular and concrete labor (e.g., a person's efforts to assist another person with a problem) into abstract labor, or labor for exchange (e.g., the selling of these efforts to a call center company, which in turn sells this labor to a corporate client). In bringing together workers willing to sell their labor, disciplining that labor through routine scripts and management policy, and directing it through technological and information systems, call centers exemplify "real subsumption," in which social relations and labor are purposefully organized according to the dictates of capital.⁶ While there is debate about the extent to which emotions, affect, and subjectivity can ever be completely subsumed or absorbed by capital, it is significant that the call center labor process involves human capacities and forms of social life, or what Kalandi Vora calls "vital energy."⁷ By converting these subjective resources into labor power for exchange, call center work depletes and diminishes their supply, hence the language of "feeling drained" or being "burned out" used to describe the effects of a night's work. Furthermore, because of the specific subjective resources used in call center work—care, kindness, empathy—and the way they are constantly tested by callers and measured by management, call center employees actually lose the willingness and even ability to meet these challenges over time and thus burn out and resign. In this way, a call center's figurative proximity to a factory becomes more pronounced, in that the manual labor required in the latter actually depletes the very capacities that workers need to complete the job. Like workers on a repetitive and disciplinary assembly line, call center agents do not simply get bored with or exhausted by mounting emotional challenges. They may experience an emotional breakdown altogether. The most extreme versions of these breakdowns lead to workers needing what one employee described as "looney leave"—an extended break to calm the nerves, if not seek professional psychological assistance—or, as I often witnessed during my fieldwork, a visit to the hospital to treat the physical manifestations of stress, such as high blood pressure or gastrointestinal distress.

The most everyday example of resource depletion in call center work is, however, demotivation. If motivation describes an affective state in which someone is willing to act toward a particular end (after all, one can desire something without being motivated to do anything about that desire), then a lack of motivation means not wanting to do something—not wanting to be friendly to a customer, handle calls efficiently, or even show up to

work. Workers often spoke to me about the challenges of staying motivated in such a highly critical and demoralizing environment. It was not uncommon, for example, for employees to express gratitude for their jobs and a few beats later declare their desire to resign because of the constant stress they experience. Imagining oneself exercising the power of refusal is a common way that agents cope with work's intensity; it is exhilarating and empowering to imagine just hanging up the phone, telling off an operations manager, or simply not coming to work. Yet these feelings can and do amount to more than just mental escapes: attrition due to worker burnout is a real problem that managers are always desperate to prevent because, as everyone in the business knows, it is more expensive to train new workers than to retain existing ones. Workers' engagement in affirmative relationships is therefore crucial for keeping up productivity and combating attrition and, as such, are built into the corporate culture and official roster of management practices through lighthearted employee events, one-on-one coaching, and team-building exercises. Since the emergence of Theory Y management, many American managers have become convinced that fostering positive relationships between coworkers, and between employees and the company itself, goes a long way to retaining labor and maximizing its productivity.⁸

Yet these techniques of managerial control are not simply an American export to the Philippines. Unlike in the United States, where call center workers can enter and exit the workday in a rhythm that more or less matches those around them, Filipino agents' overnight schedules cut workers off from affective attachments to family and friends that under normal circumstances would provide them with the emotional energy needed to face yet another day at the office. Indeed, descriptions of being disconnected from one's normal social and familial life were a constant refrain among call center agents, as were stories of how call center work ruined their romantic relationships with non-call center workers.⁹ "You never see your boyfriend or girlfriend," one agent explained to me. "After a while," he went on, "the relationship just . . . dies. It's really hard for the other person to understand what you are going through, with the hours and the stress. It becomes easier to break up than to stay together." Such frequent references to their social and familial disconnection, coupled with my understanding of the emotional and relational demands of their work, thus exposed yet another important tension at the heart of Philippine call centers. Call

center work requires constant social reproduction of subjective capacities. However, not being allowed to take part in these reproductive processes in a normative way means that workers and the workplace need to set these processes in motion internally.¹⁰ By reproducing the very social capacities of call center agents on which the capitalist accumulation process depends, employee relations and corporate culture thus function as the call center's own internal realm of social reproduction.¹¹

My understanding of these socially reproductive workplace practices was honed through my research at Global Invest, an in-house call center for a major European bank of the same name, and my interviews with workers at Call Control. I was invited to see Global Invest by Bryan Aclan, one of the company's assistant managers and a coworker of Mia Mendez, one of my main research participants. Having been educated for some years in Canada, Bryan had returned to the Philippines right before entering college at the University of the Philippines Dilliman. After graduation, he started off as an entry-level agent at Global Invest but then quickly rose through the ranks when he applied for and received an assistant manager position. A consummate booster of the call center industry, Bryan had clear aspirations to continue moving up the Global Invest corporate ladder as swiftly as possible. Bryan's two younger brothers also worked at the company and had similar goals.

As we passed through the gates of the meticulously manicured office park where Global Invest is located, Bryan explained that the company "has a strong corporate culture" to which new hires were introduced very early on through such activities as all-expenses-paid overnight trips to local resorts. Such attributes gave Global Invest what Bryan described as a "country club" feel. However, walking through the brightly painted corridors lined with lockers and bulletin boards, I was struck less by the air of well-heeled society and more by the feeling of being on a college campus. One of our first stops on the tour was the cafeteria, where among the fast-food stations and cushioned booths were computer terminals for surfing the web, a foosball table, and a Magic Sing karaoke station, all of which smacked of a university student center. Another part of the building held an auditorium where award ceremonies and employee-appreciation events such as fashion shows took place, and along the hallways hung the kind of community-building message boards that plaster the walls of college dormitories. However, instead of pictures of student leaders or upcoming

campus activities, Global Invest's boards boasted news of the company's corporate sustainability projects, pictures of its "most productive employees of the quarter," and images of the management staff accompanied by some tidbits from their personal lives—the latter a reminder of the center's commitment to relaxed managerial hierarchies. Aside from these perks, Global Invest also had the call center basics: shuttle service for employees, twenty-four-hour places to purchase food, and sleeping quarters.¹²

Bryan and I stopped periodically during this tour to discuss Global Invest's approach to employee relations, which I knew was not unique to the company (although as an in-house call center, Global Invest did spend more money to uphold its corporate culture). When I asked him why the company offered all of these services, Bryan explained that "working in a call center is very stressful, but companies realize that if they don't have [these kinds of bonds between employees], they won't have a hold on their people. I guess that's one thing that motivates people—being happy with your coworkers. Because if they're not happy, they don't treat the customers right, and if the customer is not treated right, the client will pretty much get worried that all hell will break loose." In a nod to the recent financial crash in the United States, Bryan then added that "fun makes people happy, and people can do anything if they're happy. Regardless of how negative the environment is—there's a financial crisis, the economic future is vague—as long as they enjoy their work, they're willing to go the extra mile to sustain the company." By drawing a direct line from the emotional state of a call center agent to the customer, and then to the corporate client and call center as a whole, Bryan made clear how the power of capital operates at the level of subjective experience and through the regulation of workplace relationships to "take hold" of people. In this context, we might understand Bryan's insistence on the need to be happy *with* your coworkers to not only or even primarily mean "to be made happy *by*" one's office-mates but to experience happiness and stress relief in a collective manner, *alongside* them. In this way, a call center agent's constantly decreasing motivation, as the manifestation of resistance to workplace stresses and demands, signals how ostensibly compassionate innovations in management theory seek to quell workers' internal conflict with capital and therefore function as forms of counterrevolution that normalize workplace distress.

By creating social areas outside of customer-agent relations, such as company-wide athletic competitions or company-sponsored dress-up days,

elements of social reproduction are brought into workplaces, in effect organizing social relations to better facilitate their appropriation by capital. At times, this socially reproductive function expresses itself in a literal way with events like Global Invest's "family fun" days, which consist of a daylong series of entertainment and games geared toward employees and their families, through which the company addresses the affective losses incurred as a result of workers' harrowing schedules, while also reinforcing that the company itself is like a family. As Bryan clearly articulated to me, "this is the time that the company can show gratitude to the families of its employees, who have sacrificed so much, so much time with their loved ones, to go to work." Overall, however, the collegiate feel of companies like Global Invest goes a long way in capitalizing on the easy camaraderie among young workers thrown together in a highly intense setting where they are evaluated constantly. Because so many Filipino call center agents are recent college graduates, their work-based cooperation can be grounded in attachments to what Filipinos call a "batch," or the class with which one proceeds through and graduates from high school or college. People I interviewed sometimes articulated this link between call center work and the college experience explicitly, as when Mary Rose, a Global Invest employee, explained that "in college you're used to pulling all-nighters, so the transition to call centers is not that hard."

Productive Intimacy

A call center worker's ability to experience intense personal distress alongside moments of social diversion stems from not only the need to reproduce affective resources but also the call center's reliance on human relationships and its hypervalorization of productivity. One of the most remarkable and yet least discussed characteristics of call center work is the sheer volume of work that call center employees do. The hours are long—especially for anyone in a managerial position—and the tasks are seemingly endless: not only must customers' orders be filled, their bank accounts opened, or their cable boxes reset, but mid- and upper-level management must constantly consult one another, write and read statistical reports, or train and coach other employees. Representatives of client companies, always coming and going, must be assured of results and cost-effectiveness while also wined and dined. If call center workers' minds

are anything like their computer screens—multiple open windows and various chats occurring at once—then the activity they are involved in, especially the communication with others, is constant. Two Call Control operations managers I interviewed, Paulo and Charlene, had each worked in the industry for about eight years; by the end of their tenure, they were pulling twelve- to fourteen-hour workdays, with Paulo having to spend many of those hours with clients from the United States.

Call centers are thus quintessential places of postindustrial production not only because they create value through intangible and ephemeral forms of labor but also because they compel the intensification of and increase in work that characterizes contemporary capitalism. When research participants explained to me that call centers are really unique places—“different than the traditional office” is how several people put it—they were speaking in part to the pace and volume of the work. Yet the more I talked to and observed employees, the more I saw that call centers are not just about productivity but productivism—an orientation toward work in particular and life in general that sees in purposeful, goal-directed activity the highest ethical value and the measure of a person’s or life’s worth. As Kathi Weeks argues, productivism has become more prevalent in post-industrial society, as work has come to govern our lives.¹³ Furthermore, because work has become what Weeks describes as “an avenue for personal development and meaning,” productivity is increasingly tied to the very substance of our identities and our subjectivities.¹⁴ By compelling us to work more, and to derive personal pleasure from that work, the ideology of productivism is a technique of biopower available to capital for increasing and intensifying accumulation. When activated in a workplace that relies on and fosters close relationships among coworkers, productivism creates the conditions for productive intimacy to take hold. Productive intimacy is the form that close relationships take when they are made productive for capital; when used as a form of corporate biopower, productive intimacy allows capital to govern workers from within their relationships, putting their affective attachments to use in the creation of exchange value and surplus value.¹⁵ Productive intimacy signals the way that call centers blur the boundaries between production and social reproduction, relationships of equality and relationships of control, and work and workers.

Furthermore, productive intimacy involves learning to make one’s attachments and relationships productive for capital, thus marking the pin-

nacle of value for relational labor. My interviews with employees of Call Control in Bacolod were crucial in allowing me to understand how productive intimacy works through teams and the labor of coaching. Comprising anywhere from five to fifteen people who are supervised by a team leader, teams of rank-and-file agents are one of the most important techniques for building affective attachments among workers; although agents are evaluated on an individual level, the team as a whole is responsible for meeting the client's metrics, thereby solidifying their bonds. In other words, through their affective attachments—which are constantly reinforced through team-building activities such as taking day trips to a nearby resort or decorating the team's stations with a particular theme—agents become invested in the cohesiveness of their team, which benefits workers individually while also compelling their continued productivity and cooperation with the demands of the workplace.¹⁶ Everyday teamwork thus becomes the primary method for achieving productive intimacy, especially through coaching sessions between a team leader and an agent. Such sessions involve one-on-one interaction in which the two review the agent's recent performance (in general or on a particular call), discuss problems the agent had or encountered, and strategize solutions to these problems.

My best sense of coaching work came from Ronnie, a senior team leader at Call Control. Sitting across from him at the fast-food restaurant Jollibee, I asked Ronnie what methods he would use to coach and motivate me if I were one of his agents. Ronnie replied, "First I have to find out the real reason that you are not motivated. Is it the metrics? Are you having a hard time? Are you not being helped? You also have to go back to the reason you are here in the first place. When you applied for the job, did you think about having fun, or the salary, providing for your kids? If you tell me that you really want to wake up excited to go to work, then I have to give you options. What do you think I can do, or we can do, to make you feel excited? Do we have to do team-building [activities] and have some fun? Things like that."

Noticing that Ronnie started from the premise that an agent he is coaching would *lack* motivation, I followed up by asking, "What's a common reason for agents to be unmotivated?"

"Most of the time it's really the pressure of a certain account, of balancing and passing all their metrics. Some agents really do crack under pressure. So I ask them, 'What do you need? What can we do?'"

“It sounds like you ask your agents a lot of questions,” I said.

“Yes, most of the time, I let the agents speak more than I do. Most of the time, I am listening. I almost never give suggestions; I am always giving options. Because that way you get them to think. These people are college graduates; they have bachelor’s degrees. They are not stupid. Sometimes they know the answers but are just denying it or not aware of it unless you give them options. So you get them to think, which makes them accountable. Then they start finding their faults and start working on it [by] themselves. You empower them. When they become empowered, they become motivated, they perform.”

Ronnie’s responses to my questions contain a treasure trove of modern management gems. Practices like listening, gauging frustration levels, mustering excitement, and encouraging self-discovery all keep faith with Theory Y and its principle of worker autonomy and empowerment as a means for greater happiness and thus productivity. His descriptions of this work also make clear how personal identification with his agents operates as a form of control. Describing himself as a “middleman” between the company and its rank-and-file agents, Ronnie explained that he makes sure

to really talk to my agents, establish my investment in them, make sure that they are one with me and my goals . . . work on them. But I just get angry if the metrics from the previous day are bad, or if I received e-mails and reports of escalation. I guess I am only human. I need to let it out. But I guess letting it out will [make the agents] feel that I also care for the metrics—it’s not all about them, it’s not all about the people, it’s all also about the metrics. Because I am a team leader, basically I am a middleman.

Crystallizing the principle of real subsumption—in which social relations are configured in a way that creates subjects for capital’s needs—Ronnie then proclaimed, “I need to take care of [my agents] as people, but I also need to take of the business, because without the business, there’s no people.”

At one point during our interview, Ronnie and I were joined by Pamela, one of the agents Ronnie had supervised at Call Control. As a way of learning more about how Ronnie interacted with agents, I asked Pamela what had made Ronnie such a great team leader.

“What made him so good? Because, if you have a request, he is willing to do things for you. He is willing to go beyond what he needs to do, even if he has to bribe someone!” Pamela replied with a laugh. “So, as his agent, you would be ashamed not to perform well. It’s like a give-and-take relationship between him and his agents.”

Ronnie’s and Pamela’s descriptions of their relationship demonstrate how the intimate interactions between team leaders and agents are compelled by the imperative to produce value for the firm, in turn blurring the boundaries between the objects of labor and the objects of attachment: coaching, as Ronnie describes it, requires working on people, while the metrics and the business are things to care about. Moreover, by “get[ting] them to think,” Ronnie compels his agents to work in line with company goals, illustrating how capital “takes workers’ subjectivity into consideration only in order to codify it in line with the requirements of production.”¹⁷

The need for coworkers to relate to one another and for managers to relate to their subordinates was a recurring topic in my interviews. Sitting with me at a Starbucks, a Call Control operations manager named Janice expressed this in terms of an antiauthoritarian ethos. “I think at Call Control, we are not trained like, ‘I am the manager; therefore, I am the boss.’ No, you have to know how to make that relationship work. You have to know your people.” When I later asked Janice whether she felt that working at Call Control for eight years had changed her personality in any way, she responded by explaining that she had learned to better relate to and communicate with coworkers. “Especially when I became a manager,” she said, “I learned that I have to really adapt to the different types of people and [that my words should be] more sensitive, more compassionate, more appealing to their senses. You have to take into consideration their ego, their pride.” Indeed, with all the relational work that call centers seem to require, it is no surprise that even the lowest-level managers refer to their work as akin to relationship-based professions. During an interview with Edgar, another operations manager at the company, and Genevieve, a Call Control sales coach, I asked them to tell me about their most memorable experiences from coaching. In response, Genevieve described not a single interaction or coaching session but the entire experience of dealing with agents who are either having trouble selling to customers and/or believe they don’t know how to sell. “I’m not only a coach,” Genevieve explains,

“but sometimes, too, I am a psychologist. Because you really need to understand the root cause as to why the agents aren’t selling. Sometimes they say, ‘I am afraid to receive a rejection, because I hate rejection.’ So that’s a psychological issue of the agent, and I have to deal with that.” Edgar echoed this idea: “We’re psychologists, we’re counselors, we’re a lot of people. . . . We’re spiritual advisers.” Even the way Ronnie speaks to agents is fundamentally relational: although he asks what agents need, he follows up with the question of what *we* can do, as if the solution to an individual agent’s problem necessitates a collective effort by the agent and manager.

Although the relational labor among coworkers contributes to a sense of intimacy among them, it, like the relational labor conducted with callers, must be harnessed, rationalized, and evaluated as well. This was made clear after Ronnie explained that, to my surprise, he had twice failed the review process for promotion to senior team leader. When I asked Ronnie why it took him three attempts to get the promotion, he explained that he “was having a hard time answering the question ‘Why are you such a good team leader?’” and that the reasons he gave were “not enough for the senior management.” I asked him to elaborate. “The reasons I gave,” he went on, “were about people management, about making sure that people are motivated, that I talk to them every day, basically to make sure they are taken care of. Basically that’s what I *really* do. But they wanted to know more. Because if you become a manager, it’s about the data analysis, about what percentage of what you’ve done affected your agents’ performance.” Ronnie then went on to explain that Call Control’s senior management expected him not only to properly motivate his agents but also to demonstrate an empirical correlation between the number of times he coached them per week and their overall increase in performance, so that he and others might reproduce his methods. Thus, while management was convinced that Ronnie was excellent at his job, his initial inability to both quantify his management method and communicate it to others stalled his upward trajectory in the company. He eventually received the promotion after creating an action plan that demonstrated links between his contact with agents and their ability to achieve the desired call metrics.

Coaching is just one element in management’s larger effort to “develop people,” another sanguine-sounding mantra that I heard throughout my fieldwork. While developing people often simply meant training them for new work (Paolo was “developed” by being sent to the United States to

participate in instructional seminars for a big client), it also meant finding ways that an employee's particular skill set could best be used by a team or the company. By evoking personal discovery, *development* also carried with it the positive affect of coaching or "getting to know your people"; indeed, many employees understood it as a way that a company shows that it cares for employees, and thus it strengthens employees' affective attachment to or identification with the workplace. Another research participant, Mike, attempted to describe this state of mind by expressing how the best people for Pyramid Processing are the ones whose intrinsic motivation is completely in line with the demands of the work. When Mike talked about going out with his coworkers after work, he described not just the stress relief he experienced but a sense of surprise at how fulfilling it was to get together and "not complain about the boss" but talk about the structural problems with the company, such as problems with particular accounts. Mike further explained that call centers need people "who are going to be happy even if you ask them to work on the weekends or on rest days [days off]. These are not just people who speak good English and have a lot of experience working in a call center but people who will perform well and at the same time will really, really be happy. People who are driven to work, who really enjoy the work." Mike then went on to describe his coworkers at Pyramid: "We have a couple of supervisors here—I've seen them—they sometimes help out with the hiring and interviews, and I [came] to find out that they pulled double shifts to do so. And one manager here, she applied for vacation for three days, just so she could help out with the interviews in recruitment, which is not even her department."

Even more striking about Mike's description of his working environment was his description of intrinsically motivated performers as still "rare" in 2009. Continuing to describe the exceptional manager, he explained, "For example, if an agent doesn't end up getting the pay they were supposed to get, she [the manager] will really be harassing payroll on their behalf. In most companies here [in the Philippines], you won't see that kind of person." While this part of our conversation highlighted Mike's growing acculturation to and admiration of a productivist work ethic, something he mentioned later revealed his awareness of how this ethic might be shaping a new generation of workers. "Call center work," he declared, "it changes you, it changes your outlook on things. Before, when I was in high school, I had more time on my hands, and I did a lot less. But after working in

this industry, I learned to do more and manage my time better. Time becomes like gold. So maybe this discipline should be advertised in the media and in school, to promote call center jobs. This is what parents want for their children, right?” In his enthusiasm about call center work, Mike thus began to imagine a new kind of Filipino, one whose inherent motivation for work and compliance with capital could help discipline a country long thought of by many of its citizens as an unruly place where capitalist accumulation and democratic culture are undermined by a lack of order and political corruption. Yet discipline did not seem to be the only thing on Mike’s mind. In his eyes, call centers were the opposite of corrupt, as they produced individuals who actively enhanced the advantages of those around them, rather than take advantage for themselves.

Filipino Consciousness and Relational Labor

By way of concluding this chapter, I examine the way my research participants understood relational labor through specifically Filipino relational modes of consciousness. Tracing how Filipino call center agents made sense of call center work through already existing cultural constructs not only reveals how global labor processes intersect with localized identities and ways of life but also prepares us to see how relatability in general, and Filipino/American relatability in particular, are activated and harnessed in transnational call center work. While this chapter grounds the remainder of the book in a description and analysis of call center work and work culture, it is important to understand these processes as inextricably tied to and categorically shaped by my participants’ understanding of Filipino subjectivity and cultural practice, rather than as simply a set of processes brought in from outside the Philippines and transplanted there unchanged. In contrast to frameworks that represent Filipino collectivist culture as clashing with Western management styles, I offer a more nuanced account of how a Filipino emotional economy constituted by unity, reciprocity, and an acceptance of unequal power relations finds new expression in a form of postindustrial and transnational work.¹⁸

Just as call center agents often spoke more about relationships with coworkers than their dealings with customers, they also, surprisingly, spoke more about how call center labor appealed to Filipino sensibilities rather than conflicted with them. It was very common, for example, for workers

to point out that call center labor and work culture, with its intense emphasis on relatability, emotion, and mutuality, are more aligned with Filipino cultural norms than are traditional workplaces in the Philippines. Employees referred to their working environments as very “personal” and therefore more comfortable to maneuver in. Lara, for example, was a Premier Source team leader who had previously worked in sales for a transnational corporation in the food processing industry. Although coaching and teamwork were important in her previous job, Lara explained that “it’s not personal the way it is in BPOs. Because of the process of coaching, it’s really personal. Your manager really knows you, not just your performance. And if you know the agent personally, it makes it easier. You know how to push for performance when you know what’s keeping the agent from doing well. You know how to approach the person when coaching him.” Lara went on to say that approaching people in a more personal way “was very Filipino,” thus suggesting, paradoxically, that these American/Western environments were in fact more Filipino than other, older workplaces.

Indeed, there were many moments in my interviews and research in which it became clear that call center workers interpret their workplace culture through a specifically Filipino consciousness. At one point during my interview with Ronnie, the Call Control team leader, and Pamela, his former agent, we were discussing how Ronnie’s willingness to, as Pamela put it, “go the extra mile” for his agents made them feel obliged to maximize their performance on the job. To confirm what Pamela was saying, I asked, “So you feel accountable to him as his agent?” But before Pamela could answer, Ronnie added, “Although I don’t really remind them that they have *utang [na loob]*. What I tell people is that they *don’t* have to pay back.”

Pamela nodded in agreement and continued, “And what’s good about Ronnie is that if he’s mad at you, he’s mad at you just at that time. After he gets it all out, he’s good with you.” Turning to Ronnie with a smile, Pamela asked, “Remember that time you made me cry because I didn’t handle that call properly? You came back after an hour, and we were already laughing about something totally different.”

“I think that’s the pattern that people under me notice,” Ronnie remarked. “What they say is, during the first half of the shift, I’m ‘untouchable,’ because I am looking at and deal[ing] with the metrics. I look at all the things I have to do, I tell my agents the things they need to improve on,

and that they need to prove to me that they can do it. But in the second half [of the shift], I change moods.”

“Yeah, it’s like he’s okay again,” Pamela added.

Ronnie continued, “Because I want agents to end their day on a good note. The first part of the day, even though I started it by being angry, I’m going to make sure things turn around. I’m going to make *bawi* (a retraction). And whether *they* make *bawi* or not, I make sure they will go home and go to sleep with a good feeling.”

In this conversation Ronnie described some of the relational skills for which he is known among Call Control employees, in particular his personal investment in his agents and his interest in keeping their emotional fuel tanks filled up so they have enough affective energy for the next day of work. What is striking is Ronnie’s invocation of Filipino terms to describe some aspects of the relationships he has with agents, suggesting that he understands workplace dynamics through Filipino social and cultural constructs and that the latter shape his approach to management. Like Ronnie, many of my research participants turned to Filipino terms to describe ways of approaching coworkers and the job itself. One agent explained that call center work made her more attuned to how service workers in general “handle their jobs,” which she attributed to their *pagkatao*, or “how they interact with people.” Many more described the relational and personal nature of call center management as “very Filipino” in that the harmonious relationships that coworkers seek with one another are an expression of *kapwa*, or the “unity of self with others,” as well as *pakikiisa*, which emphasizes collective equality and emotional collaboration.

Exploring my informants’ use of these terms helps to shed light on two ways that Filipino modes of relatability are put to use in call centers as postindustrial workplaces. *Utang na loob*—sometimes referred to as a “debt of gratitude”—names a social exchange that strengthens bonds between the giver and taker even as it implies that the latter is indebted to the former. *Utang na loob* thus operates by linking the *loob*, or “inside” of a person, to another; the concept is thus deeply relational, intimate, and personal and speaks to what Fenella Cannell has described as a distinctly Filipino emotional economy that seeks to transform hierarchical relations rather than simply reproduce them.¹⁹ Ronnie evinces this transformative mode when he uses the phrase *make bawi* to describe how he recovers the affective losses caused by his draconian demands on agents’ abilities. Al-

though the retraction of the critical statement is important, perhaps the operative word is *making*, for making *bawi* points as much to the person's act of redeeming the negative situation for the sake of the relationship between two parties as it does to the erasure of the original offense. In this way, making *bawi* is an attempt to achieve harmony with the recipient of one's harsh words or criticism. When Ronnie speaks of *utang na loob* and making *bawi* as ways of relating that he must manage, measure, or contain, he implicitly refers to the kind of power negotiations Cannell describes in her work. In other words, despite being in a managerial position that requires him to treat agents as subordinates (both to himself and to the dictates of capital), Ronnie also works to transform his own feelings about his agents and their performance in order to equalize the power dynamic as much as possible. In these ways, Filipino call center workers interpret the call center's demands for relational labor in a way that reinforces Filipino relational practices and modes of identification.

At times, Filipino cultural constructs are elevated to the ethos of a company as a whole, even across lines of cultural and national difference. In a profile of an Indian CEO of a Philippine company, SPiGlobal, the author writes, "Parekh's belief in the Filipino people comes across as he uses a local value as one of SPi's own: *malasakit*. Loosely translated as compassion and care for others, *malasakit* has become an SPi core value that is behind the company's every move and action. *Malasakit* together with the values of meritocracy and being apolitical are the core values at work in all SPi locations across the globe."²⁰ In this example, the Filipino concept of *malasakit* becomes the basis of an entire organization's humanist ethos and thus an example of how capital, as Timothy Mitchell describes it, draws "parasitically" on cultural resources.²¹ In this situation neither the feeling of *malasakit* nor the drive for productivity exists independently. Rather, as co-constituted and mutually reinforced, they demonstrate how a familiar system of interpretation—that is, an aspect of Filipino culture—is mobilized to make sense of the powerful social relations of capital and labor in which workers are intertwined. As a result, the capital-labor relation gets grafted onto and then reinforced by these cultural systems. While I was observing operations at Premier Source, for example, the assistant site director Araceli Ramos explained to me that workplace dynamics at the company were like those of a family, in which the American site director, Jerry, was like everyone's father. Describing her motivation to work while

on vacation (“when on vacation, you work, you want to work”), Araceli explained that it was because of her feeling of *malasakit*, or “protective concern” for the company as if it were a family.²²

By pointing to the centrality of Filipino cultural constructs within call center work, I do not mean to reproduce the reductive notion of Filipino core values that render cultural and social modes as objective and static. Rather, I see in these constructs what Sarita See describes as “a particular economy of values based upon reciprocity (ethical, political, cultural, philosophical, and material),” which gains new meaning in the context of transnational and postindustrial service work, often in ways that produce surplus value, worker consent to long hours, and a reinforcement of corporate culture while also making call center work a site of fulfilling personal relations and commitments—the affective contradictions of call center work that this chapter set out to explore.²³ On one hand, Araceli’s use of *malasakit* demonstrates how call centers require a type of productivity that relies on affective relations that, because they are personal and relational, are experienced as real and, because they feel real, can be described in the same way as other real affective relations. Indeed, Araceli spent a great deal of our interview describing the congenial, trustful relationship she has with her supervisor, Jerry. Echoing other research participants, Araceli reminded me that “Filipinos are very relationship oriented” and that “it’s more important to be happy with who you’re working with than other factors about the job.” On the other hand, Araceli’s use of *mala-sakit* demonstrates how understanding things in a Filipino vein naturalizes the incessant productivity and full submersion in work that call centers seem to compel. Of course, no part of this process is natural or automatic, although it often appears that way.²⁴ Subjective capacities and practices such as *kapwa*, *utang na loob*, and *bawi* are not simply there for the taking; rather, they are shaped into raw materials for capital by the call center labor process and work culture. As Araceli would later tell me, she sometimes finds having to “make *lambing* with some coworkers”—that is, to show them fondness or affection—an utterly exhausting process.