



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## A Nation on the Line

Padios, Jan M.

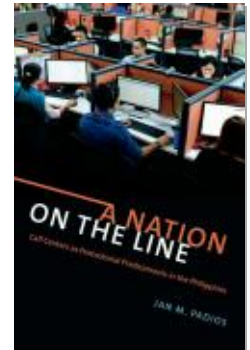
Published by Duke University Press

Padios, M..

A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines.

Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64075>

## CONTESTING SKILL AND VALUE

### *Race, Gender, and Filipino/American Relatability in the Neoliberal Nation-State*

A common refrain among many call center employees I interviewed in the Philippines, especially those who had joined the industry in its early years, was that they had only a vague impression of what the work entailed, even at the time they applied for the job. Primarily attracted to the substantial compensation the industry offered, these young college graduates often knew little about call center work beyond its very basic descriptors like “answering phones,” “speaking English,” and “working at night.” As I came to learn, the ambiguity about call center work stemmed in part from its novelty in the Philippines, where local customer service lacked many of the standards developed over the past fifty years in the United States—including the use of toll-free 1-800 numbers—but it was also significantly rooted in the call center’s uncertain connection to the corporate world. Because of their location in high-rise office buildings in business districts, as well as their association with technology and English, call centers were initially regarded by many Filipinos as a type of conventional office work, or what one former employee described as a “Makati-type job.” Yet despite the white-collar exterior, the kind of skills required of call center employees and the range of professional advancement available to them were often unclear. A call center agent could be employed by a global powerhouse like Citibank but not in the recognizable positions of financial analyst, account manager, or even teller. Or one could work for a tech giant like IBM but not design or develop systems or hardware.

Instead, as all agents quickly learned, their tasks are highly specific and limited, pertaining to only one product or service at a time (such as trou-

bleshooting cable boxes or handling insurance claims), and thus part of a larger spectrum of labor that is routine, precarious, low-wage, and feminized. What's more, in servicing customers in the United States and other advanced industrial countries, rank-and-file agents found themselves having to negotiate racial and national difference by conforming to the standards for accent and English imposed by management and finding ways to cope with customer racism and xenophobia. To confuse matters even further, call center agents earned more in entry-level positions than in comparable or even higher roles in more normative professions: a first-time customer service agent in a Philippine call center might earn anywhere from ₱10,000 to ₱15,000 per month while the monthly salaries of entry-level architects and accountants were less than half that, hovering around ₱3,000 and ₱6,000 per month, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, with its stringent requirements for English language skills and a full or partial college education, the call center industry was in fact more exclusive than many initially imagined it to be. Thus, my research participants understood that, structurally speaking, they were cheap labor, but they often did not perceive themselves as such.

This chapter looks closely at the social and cultural contradictions of call center work for workers, industry leaders, and the state, and the ways the latter entities attempt to resolve these problems. I argue that the tension and anxiety about the skill and value involved in call center work are the everyday expression of a larger set of questions about the symbolic and structural place of Filipino labor and culture in the global economy circulating throughout the industry. With their proximity to technology and knowledge, do call centers pave the way to a bright future or a dead end? Is call center work an opportunity to capitalize on Filipino/American relatability, allegedly one of the country's greatest resources? Or does it reproduce colonial relations of control? In keeping with the book as a whole, I do not aim to provide resolutions to these deliberations. Rather, this chapter examines the racialized and gendered terms in which the questions and ensuing debates are articulated, the stakes of the debates for various actors, and the ways of thinking and new practices—such as intensified market logic, investments in biocapital, and a renewed commitment to American English—to which these challenges give rise. In so doing, I demonstrate that the contestations over call center work arise in part from the symbolic investment that the state, and industry leaders, place in the call cen-

ter industry as the means of fulfilling a new narrative about the Philippine nation and Filipino subjectivity—a narrative in which the ontologically secure, decolonized Filipino subject delivers the Philippines into a post-racial and postgender international arena where the nation competes in the battle for knowledge and information. In other words, this chapter demonstrates that the problem of call center work is in many respects a problem of the Philippine elite's own making, in that attempts to discursively transform the class, racial, and gender complexities of transnational call center work into a boon for the nation make the irruption of these complexities all the more palpable and problematic.

### **Global and Local Social Relations of Call Center Work**

It is difficult to fully grasp the range of tensions linked to offshore call center work in the Philippines without mapping the global and local social relations on which the work is premised and in which it is embedded, as well as the significance of these relations in terms of race, class, and gender. Like nearly all offshore outsourced jobs, call center work has been moved to the developing world as a result of global labor arbitrage, the process by which corporations take advantage of differences in national or sub-national wage scales and what is benignly referred to in economic parlance as the *cost of living*. Yet if the latter names the socially determined cost of maintaining a life beyond mere subsistence, then paying wages consistent with (or even slightly elevated above) the lower costs of living in the developing world reproduces the uneven material relations between nations and the devaluation of life on which different costs of living are based in the first place—dynamics in themselves produced by histories of colonialism and neocolonialism.<sup>2</sup> In other words, that labor is cheap in the Philippines is not a natural fact but a social relation; without the differential value of Filipino life, the entire process of call center outsourcing to the Philippines would not be possible. Offshoring call center jobs would also not be such a lucrative option for foreign corporations were it not for high rates of surplus labor among college-educated Filipino workers—a surplus that also results from uneven economic and social relations that have their roots in neocolonial relations of control by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. As a manifestation of the already asymmetrical social relations between the U.S. corporations that are in command of the global

value chain and the Filipino workers seeking work within it, call center jobs are thus both a source and a symptom of social contradiction.

Social relations at the global and national scales come to bear on the meaning and experience of call center work for Filipinos in everyday life in ways contingent on their class positions. Call center work has consistently drawn from the Philippines' top four socioeconomic classes—nebulous categories referred to as classes A, B, AB, and C, with class A representing the most affluent and elite group.<sup>3</sup> Yet, for members of classes A and AB especially, and to some extent class B as well, call center work's ambiguous relation to conventional educational fields and markers of professional status, not to mention its instability, raises questions about such work's ability to reproduce their social positions and class identities. Such anxieties are expressed in references to call center work as a "dead end" and "last resort"; indeed, almost all my research participants described business processing work as a far cry from their first choice of careers in fields like physical therapy, business administration, or engineering but the only meaningful choice available to them in the Philippines' narrow and constrained labor market. When I first met Mia in person in 2009, she had been having an ongoing dispute with a friend, a former call center trainer named Sophia, about long-term professional prospects in call center work. Mia was convinced that there was room for growth in the industry—"most people treat it as temporary, but it doesn't have to be," she claimed—and it was not until Sophia's brother started working in a call center that she began to see the possible legitimacy of Mia's perspective. Mia's defense of call center work was interesting to me because, as a self-identified member of class A, she in fact had other options for employment, namely, to take over a thriving business her mother had started. Members of other classes—B and C especially—tended not to have such equally rewarding opportunities.

One of the primary groups giving voice to the class contradictions of call center work are workers' parents, who often see the job as a distraction from their children's future studies or careers. Moreover, given the low autonomy and the sense of indebtedness that young Filipinos tend to have vis-à-vis their parents, many college graduates interested in call center work often find themselves negotiating between their narrow range of choices for employment and their parents' expectations for their social mobility. Many of my participants worried about their inability to reciprocate

their parents' efforts in providing them with an education and therefore maintaining not only their class status but also the familial harmony that comes with honoring what they consider their parents' sacrifices. A Premier Source agent named Maricel, a college graduate who had studied architecture, explained the dilemma quite clearly: "I feel guilty working [as a call center agent] knowing that my parents worked hard and spent a lot to bring me to college and pay for what I wanted to be, so it's like, for me being in [a] call center, even though it pays for everything for me, I would like to pursue my career still." Moreover, as the story of my cousin Jocelyn that opened this book illustrates, choosing call center work can be particularly hard for young people who originally pursued nursing. Because nursing has been a primary means of social mobility for generations of Filipino families since the early 1970s, an individual's decision to desert nursing can instigate particularly intense anxiety on the part of family members, especially those who have provided the resources for pursuing this path.

In this context, the social anxiety about call center work as a dead end clearly stems from concerns about the social reproduction of class status based not just on income but also professional identity, proof of educational achievement, long-term economic stability, and cultural capital. John, a human resources employee I interviewed, explained that in order to support a young person's desire to pursue call center work, "They [parents and educators] have to be convinced that this is not just a job, but that it's going to be a good job"—meaning something that is stable, imbued with responsibility and respectability, and that creates value from parents' investment in children's education. I saw these worries most clearly in Bacolod in 2009, when call centers were just starting to proliferate there. According to the head recruiter of a top BPO company at the time, the applicants who possessed the skills required for the industry were the least likely to need or apply for a call center job, as their parents could support them while they pursued other career options. In many cases, parents in these families did not encourage their children to work in anything less than high-level professional jobs or family businesses, if they encouraged them to work at all. Such aversions are further bolstered by the history of locally situated class identities. Bacolod is the capital of Negros Occidental, a central Philippine province where for much of the twentieth century life and labor were organized around the cultivation, production, and export of sugar. Although its production has precipitously declined since the

heady days of the 1970s, the image of the bourgeois landowning family whose children do not have to seek wage labor remains powerful. As the recruiter further explained, this local history resulted in an overwhelming number of applicants who, unlike the sons and daughters of affluent families, were in dire need of jobs but were considered underqualified for call center work.<sup>4</sup>

Instability also contributes significantly to doubts about the value of call center work. While call center wages are comparatively high, the jobs themselves are contingent on corporate actors whose decisions to pursue or cancel a contract with a BPO firm can change with little to no warning. “The thing that really scares me,” a Premier Source employee named Victor proclaimed, “is the job security. Because we know our contracts are really tied to the client, so if the client pulls out, then you don’t have work. It’s in your contract that you are ‘coterminous’ with the account you are handling. So in terms of stability with work, we don’t have it, because it’s really, really easy for a call center to just pull out and . . . they’re gone. And what are you going to do with the millions and millions of Filipinos who are working in the call center?” While not conveying accurate statistics about call center employment in the country, Victor’s comments reflect his anxiety about being a part of a highly contingent workforce and his sense of the economic devastation that might befall call center workers if corporations decide to look elsewhere to fill call center seats. One way workers respond to these precarious conditions is to mirror the flexibility and speculation they see in the market.<sup>5</sup> A woman named Tess, whom I met in 2009, told me that after being let go from two accounts in which the corporate client abruptly discontinued the contract with the BPO firm, she had recently started another job handling life insurance claims for a more stable Canadian company. Although the job paid less than the previous two, Tess and her parents had decided that it would be better for her to take the more secure job at lower pay than to risk staying with an unstable account. Even though she had worked in the call center industry for five years, her parents still frowned on her line of employment because of its disconnection with her college education and its instability.

The tensions that call center work poses for young college-educated Filipinos thus amount to more than a personal dilemma or an uncomfortable conversation with a parent. Along with its affective and service-oriented purpose, call center work’s precarity, lack of clear opportunities for pro-

fessional advancement, and routine nature bear all the markings of feminized, low-status work, at the same time as it pays relatively high wages. In this way, the anxiety my research participants experience in everyday life points to how gendered and racialized global processes shape perceptions of skill and value, and thus the way class identities are socially constructed both locally and transnationally. At times, the various scales of these conflicts converge around the question of what constitutes a normative social exchange for a member of the middle or affluent class. In one of my many discussions with Joel Partido, the vice president of human resources at Vox Elite (and, in his forties, one of the oldest people I had met in the industry), he explained the following about Cobalt, the prepaid mobile phone service offered by a major wireless company in the United States that was one of Vox Elite's corporate accounts:

Cobalt cater[s] to the lower-class folks in the U.S., so normally [agents will] be talking to blacks or Hispanics [*sic*]. You know, it's very slang, very loose, and it's very direct, no room for "Ma'am, Sir." So if an agent, suddenly he or she—let's say she—gets a caller who says, "Yo, dude, I ran out of minutes, blast me thirty bucks!" it would make them think, "Is this something that I'd like to do for a living? Talk with those dudes?" And, you know, once we are not able to serve them or resolve their problems, they use very colorful language. . . . I'm probably stereotyping some agents who are middle-aged, coming from a conventional family and not so used to slang and American street jargon. But let's say for the more toxic accounts or programs, where it's normal for you to get shouted at, the Filipino tries to rationalize everything and say, "I've not been raised by my family to be shouted at from someone halfway around the world who I don't even know, and I'm supposed to resolve his problem?"

Joel's description of the Cobalt clientele implies that this racialized encounter with low-income, nonwhite Americans might be perceived by Filipino call center agents as below their social location. His comments further suggest that racial identity, intersecting with class position, is perceived as having a bearing on not only speech but sociability writ large: black Americans and Latinos of the "lower classes," according to Joel, eschew polite formalities and resort to cursing when there is a problem resolving their customer service needs. Constructing an economically



marginal black or Latino man (“those dudes”) as the subjective *other* to a middle-aged Filipino woman, Joel’s description also demonstrates how interacting with customers perceived to be black or Latino and lower class is imagined as the limit of agents’ social capacities and thus their class positions. Within this cultural logic, the kind of treatment an agent deserves is legitimized by the conventional institution of social reproduction and class status (a family), but such interlocutors, by using speech linked to a space imagined as devoid of formal institutions (the street), frustrate agents’ class-based expectations. In turn, these interactions reveal how class identities can be constructed transnationally through intersections of race and gender, but also how Filipino agents attempt to recuperate a perceived loss of status by undermining American authority in a way that relies on the vilification of the poor and nonwhite.<sup>6</sup>

### **Contestation and Negotiation in the Public Eye**

The anxiety that workers feel about perceptions of their choices and status was palpable throughout my fieldwork and interviews. In fact, seeing me as someone with an audience for my scholarship, my research participants were often extremely keen to clarify many aspects of their work for me.<sup>7</sup> Their eagerness made sense in light of the periodic public contestation over call center work’s value to the nation. For example, in March 2013 Juan Miguel Luz, the associate dean of the Asian Institute of Management, delivered a commencement speech to the graduates of Bacolod’s prestigious University of Saint La Salle. After waxing nostalgic about his early days teaching at a mission school in one of the city’s working-class settlements, Luz described the Bacolod that he sees in the present, focusing exclusively on the call center industry. He began by mentioning Bacolod’s status as a Next Wave city, which marked it as one of the country’s premier hubs for information and communication technology outside of Manila, and then ran through the standard descriptors of call center work: global connections, overnight shifts, American English, and happy hours that begin at six in the morning. What Luz said next, however, struck a dissonant chord with the crowd. Describing call center work as a “highly competitive” world, a source of signing bonuses, and a chance to make lasting friendships, he proclaimed, “But call centers are also the lowest-paying, least skilled jobs in the knowledge-processing industry. And if

the Philippines (and Bacolod) do not move up the skills ladder to more knowledge-based work (as opposed to voice or call agent work answering simple questions or problem-solving online), call center work will move elsewhere to a lower paying jurisdiction or country. Such is the nature of the BPO industry.” Luz then encouraged the students to keep in mind that should Bacolod move up the knowledge-processing ladder, away from the “transient” call center industry, it would contribute to the recent economic growth for which the Philippines had become “respected again abroad.”<sup>8</sup>

When I arrived in Bacolod in June of that year to conduct my research, the memory of Luz’s speech still lingered in the minds of many call center workers. Here was a leading educator and prominent businessman, my research participants said, who was trying to make the Philippines more globally competitive—“as we all are,” added one person—but who clearly knew nothing about the trials and tribulations of the workers on the front lines of the industry. On the Facebook page where the speech was posted, call center employees angered by Luz’s description of their jobs as low skilled and low paid thus mounted a defense of their work. Many eagerly pointed out the strenuous demands of the job, their bountiful paychecks, and the “excellent, competitive, smart, and strategic” qualities of call center employees. “The BPO [industry] has long been stereotyped by those people who haven’t been there,” wrote one commenter. “They will always think people who work in a call center don’t know much; [are] not qualified [for] their suppose[d]-to-be-career so then they opt for call centers.” Another person summed up these sentiments by simply saying that “the speech discredited the value of the people working for the BPO industry.” In response to this collective protest, Luz issued a public apology for the offense and “misimpression” his speech had caused. In the apology, Luz revised his description of call center work, referring to it vaguely as “all about knowledge-processing” and more specifically as “a service industry” and therefore “built on individuals . . . who bring on board two distinct skill sets (if not more): English communication skills and technical skills in a wide range of disciplines.” He ended the apology by explaining, “As rightly pointed out to me by call center agents themselves, the work is tough, the ability to ‘think on one’s feet’ and ‘out-of-the-box’ is paramount, and the need to stay calm in the face of demanding clients is difficult to master, but this they do with great ability.”<sup>9</sup>

Luz’s speech and the intense discussion that ensued highlight the way

call center workers tend to respond to the charge that their work does not require skill or lacks long-term value. While pointing to the social and cultural demands on their labor, workers also turn to the language and logic of the market, specifically through the discourse of professionalism. In my conversations with call center employees, professionalism was invoked in a variety of ways, but the most prevalent was as a way of creating emotional distance from racist and xenophobic customers. As previous scholars have documented, call center work subjects agents to the policing of racial and national boundaries by customers for whom a non-American accent becomes an occasion to delegitimize a call center agents' skills (by asking to speak to either a supervisor or an American) or accuse agents of stealing American jobs. Kiran Mirchandani, following David Theo Goldberg, refers to such acts as expressions of neoliberal racism in which customers display their entitlement to racist behavior on the basis of consumer preferences or choice.<sup>10</sup> In this context, professionalism means being nonreactive, not taking customer racism personally or overidentifying with it, and thus not disrupting the course of service delivery. In other words, the discourse of professionalism allows call center agents to see dealing with racism and xenophobia as simply what the market demands of them, or what Mirchandani describes as a "job-related skill."<sup>11</sup> This discourse also perhaps helps explain why most of the questions about dealing with customer racism that I posed to interviewees were met with rather flat responses. While perhaps initially upset by a caller's aggressive remarks about their accents or location in the Philippines, my informants shook these experiences off by saying things like "That's just how some people are" and "You just have to know how to deal with them, mostly by ignoring them."

Professionalism was also invoked in ways that challenged the idea of call center workers' jobs as menial. In the later years of my fieldwork, for example, the concept of call center workers as subject-matter experts emerged, recasting workers into knowledgeable roles where their value came not from the breadth of their skills or their theoretical knowledge but their familiarity with a particular subset of information about a product or service. Similarly, by reiterating the call center industry rhetoric about options for advancement and permanence, the language of professionalism also helped workers negotiate the pushback about their jobs being dead ends. Call center agents quickly learn the corporate hierarchy on which outsourced call centers are built, starting with rank-and-file agents and

moving up to team leaders, account heads, and operations managers; indeed, many of my informants became team leaders and midlevel managers faster than they had anticipated and before they even really understood what the jobs entailed. “In this industry,” said Bryan from Global Invest, “you can be promoted as fast as you can climb the ladder.” Similarly, Billie, an agent whose initial impression of call center work was as something “anyone can get into,” realized that “there’s a future here,” a notion she started to gather from her company’s human resources representatives on her very first day of training.

For many, the value of call center work could also be recuperated in relation to its demand for advanced speakers of English. Even though English-language instruction is extended to all Filipinos through public education, only those whose social positions and material resources allow them to hear and practice the language stand a good chance of being able to command it at the level used in call center work. Such cultural capital is derived from formal education but is also inherited through parents or other family members whose jobs and/or education necessitate high-level English language skills. In turn, such privileged families have better access to cultural products that help refine one’s language skills, such as opportunities to travel to English-speaking countries or expensive cable networks that broadcast American television shows. It was no surprise to me, for example, that Mia, who had attended elite private schools in Manila, had experienced such speedy upward mobility in the industry. Similarly, after attending school in England and working for a few years at a resort in southern Florida, Mia’s friend Sophia was so adept at English that she moved from the position of rank-and-file agent to trainer in a matter of weeks. The class contradiction of call center work could thus not be clearer: what many consider a low-skilled occupation fit for cheap labor turns out to be a job that requires a type of cultural capital that correlates strongly with economic privilege.<sup>12</sup>

Luz’s speech also points to the way elite industry leaders’ abstract and detached understanding of the global value chain eclipses the everyday toil of actually existing workers, even if both share the same aspirations and vision for the future of the nation-state. Workers indeed understand that as customer service or technical support representatives they are considered less skilled than workers higher up the global value chain, often expressing their awareness of their structural status through descriptions of their jobs

as ones that “Americans don’t want to do,” a statement that I believe speaks less to an empirically based understanding of the actual jobs people in the United States are willing to take on and more to their awareness of how U.S. corporations seek to pay workers the lowest wages possible and therefore move jobs overseas. Their outcry against Luz was thus not a result of ignorance or misrecognition about how value is constructed and perceived within the global economy. Rather, workers objected to the framing of their labor as a mere preliminary space in their nation’s march toward modernity, one in which they indulge in juvenile desires for fast money and a good time. This meant, however, getting Luz to see their struggle as racialized and feminized cheap global labor that nonetheless contributed to the nation with their knowledge-based skills. Luz evoked this ostensible contradiction in his apology, in which he subsequently described call center work as, vaguely, “all about knowledge-processing” and part of the service industry. The contestation over Luz’s speech thus demonstrated how Filipino call center workers grappled with the complex process of valuation and devaluation involved in service work in the postindustrial global economy—that is, how many service industry jobs draw on mental acumen but are nonetheless classified, and classed, in ways that devalue workers’ labor.

Public discussion of the social and cultural value of call center work also periodically emerged from the other end of the political spectrum, among those critical of the state’s complicity with the forces of global capital in general and the United States in particular. Standing before the Philippine congress in 2005, Raymond Palatino, a representative of the radical Kabataan (Youth) Party, excoriated the government for using foreign jobs as a palliative against the country’s chronic labor crisis. Voicing concerns about how call center workers are degraded by BPO companies, Palatino referred to the workers as “honor students [and] student leaders who graduated from the best universities in the country” who are “relegated to answering calls from customers whose problems most of the time can be fixed by even a toddler.”<sup>13</sup> By characterizing the work as fit for children, the speech played on the powerful metaphor of the Philippines as the object of infantilization by more powerful countries, suggesting that the call center industry reproduced this colonial discourse in the contemporary era. Yet descriptions like Palatino’s also elide the nuances and complexities of call center work, in part by perpetuating the image of call center agents as mere casualties of neoliberal globalization’s advance.

Blamed by Americans for stealing jobs, criticized by elites for lacking aspiration, and painted as subjugated victims by critics of globalization, call center workers are thus caught between the misplaced grievances of the American populace and the frustrations of contemporary Philippine nationalisms. In response to this explicit and implicit outing—a revelatory discourse that seeks to expose the supposedly true value of call center work—call center workers insist on the challenges and professionalism that their work entails. My research participants were adamant, for example, about the difficulty of their work, which they describe not as strictly or even primarily stemming from what scholars call work's effort—the particular task at hand—but from work's intensity, or the conditions under which they do these tasks.<sup>14</sup> Time and time again the call center employees I interacted with underscored the importance of their affective efforts, the pressure to perform, and the work's strain on their social lives. For most of my research participants, the combination of these demands—managing feelings while getting through all the service delivery steps in a timely manner—proved to be the most taxing aspect of their work. “It’s hard,” one Call Control worker explained to me, “because you want to build rapport with [the customer], but in less [*sic*] time possible, and if you’re not assertive, you’ll end up with more complaints from them, the call takes longer, and [they won’t find you] convincing anymore. . . . Then the person will literally run all over you. You can’t let them take control of you. You have to always be on top and be pleasant at the same time.” Call center workers thus attempt to revalorize their feminized and racialized labor by not only calling attention to the efforts involved in emotional interactions but also highlighting the struggle for power that each call entails. Moreover, this revalorization is an attempt to revise the signs of gendered, racialized, and sexualized servitude that, in public discourse, are linked to call center work: rather than being completely ruled by customers’ desires, workers point out that they are actually the ones who have to “be on top.”

Yet there are inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions in workers’ defenses as well. As I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, when it comes to racism and xenophobia, the discourse of professionalism is merely one of containment rather than confrontation or critique, thus leaving transnational racialized structures of power intact. Similarly, the language of expertise in the title “subject-matter expert” obscures rather than acknowledges the potential difficulties of finding future work based

on the very limited knowledge that such expertise represents. Moreover, while workers highlight the potential for advancement in the industry in order to contest its dead-end status, they just as often refer to the work as temporary so as to present themselves as serious people not swept up in the industry's hype and emphasize their desire to move on to the more normative professions for which they were previously trained or educated. A Call Control employee named Charlene articulated this position most clearly when she described the job "as something transient," despite having worked in call centers for eight years. "For most grads, it's the last option. I was a clinical dietician before I got into the industry. Call Control was paying the highest, so I grabbed it. It's the first time to earn your own money . . . but you won't want to stay there." After hearing sentiments like Charlene's throughout my fieldwork, I began to ask people more directly about whether or not they had plans to continue working in the industry. In a group interview, Valerie, a single mother, responded, "I just hope to stay here in the meantime," then explained that she was interested in returning to her original choice of careers, in marketing. Valerie added that in the four years she had been working in the industry, she had never heard of anyone making a long-term plan to stay in the industry for good. "This place is temporary, really. This is more like a ways and means for a short period. This is not a place wherein you anticipate becoming a manager."

Again, rather than understanding my research participants' discrepant descriptions of call center work as a sign of confusion, I understand them as active negotiations of the social and cultural contradictions of the industry and their own ambivalence about being part of it. In attempting to alleviate their parents' and their own anxieties about the value and skills involved in call center work, agents could, for example, always point to the ample compensation they were receiving. Making assertive and declarative statements like "There's no other industry that will pay you the same" or "I'm really earning a lot in this job," my research participants often spoke of call center work as a kind of trump card in the country's educational and employment gamble, and the only way they could make a substantial contribution to their family's survival, growth, or well-being. Such sobering economic logic is of course difficult to dispute. What I found intriguing about such claims, however, is how my research participants themselves were never quite willing to accept that this type of rational market logic *should* dominate their thinking or their lives—only that it did. Indeed, al-

though I was not surprised to find that most of my participants' parents acquiesced to their decision to work in the call center industry once they witnessed their children's earning power, I also learned that such deference to money could not be assumed. Within a cultural matrix in which class status is attached to education and the perceived social value of one's work, for some families income alone does not automatically justify a digression from a more professional path. By voicing the desire to pursue different lines of work, my research participants and their parents were thus not only making efforts to recuperate a perceived loss of class status but also expressing hopes that one day Filipinos would be able to choose their line of work based on something more than just income. Thus, it is possible to interpret statements about high earning potential as affirming the industry's rewards in the face of those who criticize these workers' choices but also lamenting the uneven social relations in which their lives were clearly enmeshed.

### **Industry Anxieties**

Given the Philippines' attempts to gain a firm foothold in the knowledge economy, the sense that call center work entails feminized and racialized forms of service, is structurally precarious, and maintains an ambiguous relation to educational achievement presents a problem not only in the everyday lives of workers but in the ideological imaginaries and material practices of industry leaders as well as the state. Steered by industry leaders who, as elite actors, have a strong influence on its objectives, the Philippine state since the late twentieth century has played a major role in what scholars describe as the disarticulation of industry and services from the national economy and their reintegration or rearticulation with transnational political-economic structures that serve global capital.<sup>15</sup> Both state and elite actors also significantly shape the reproduction of the nation-state as a symbol and a story, in which Filipino labor and culture come to have significant meaning in the everyday life of the nation and within the international arena.<sup>16</sup>

Given their aspirations, business leaders and the state are thus caught between the need to support the existing call center industry and the need to relentlessly upgrade the Philippines and its citizens. On one hand, for example, industry and state actors concede that there are not enough peo-



ple to fill call center jobs, recognizing this as a problem that industry leaders must face head-on. On the other hand, these same parties insist that the Philippines can move up the global value chain to higher-order and more complex service work. Indeed, since the call center industry's emergence, BPO business leaders have been clamoring for more jobs in knowledge-processing outsourcing and health information management, leading to a pervasive anxiety about the nation's store of human capital, and a stark contradiction between the optimism about the Philippines' place in the global service industry and the fear that its failure is inevitable. In article after article in *Breakthroughs!*—the newsletter for the Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing Association of the Philippines (IBPAP), an umbrella organization for the industry that facilitates offshoring outsourcing to the country—observers express considerable concern about a gap between the growth of the industry and the skills of available workers. In 2007 one writer worried that there might be an “insufficient quantity of suitable and willing talent to fuel growth” of the call center industry.<sup>17</sup> Several years later, after the Philippines had already surpassed India in voice services, another declared, “Unless something dramatic happens very soon, the Philippines will not be able to meet demand for educated and talented people by next year.”<sup>18</sup>

Industry organizations attempt to handle this shortage of talent in a number of ways, one of which is to intensify efforts to generate biocapital, or the labor power and thus potential profits from the cognitive and emotional capacities appropriated in call center work.<sup>19</sup> Such efforts take the form of government-sponsored programs, including ones that train individuals marked as “near hires”—candidates who have passed an initial screening by potential employers but still need to develop certain skills to qualify for employment.<sup>20</sup> Often marking a person from a lower economic class and/or one who lacks proficient English language skills, the category of a near hire reveals how proximity to the call center industry and the chances of landing a call center job are contributing to new constructions of class in the contemporary Philippines. But the efforts to produce biocapital for call centers extend across the educated populace at large. One of the best examples of this drive is the Global Competitiveness Assessment Tool (GCAT), which assesses competencies relevant to service work, including a person's verbal and quantitative skills, computer literacy, and visual-spatial acuity. The GCAT also has a behavioral component, which

“tests a BPO candidate’s service orientation,” including “responsiveness, empathy, interpersonal communication, courtesy, reliability, and learning orientation.”<sup>21</sup> Evoking the standardized tests for entry into graduate degree programs in the United States, such as the MCAT, LSAT, and GMAT, the GCAT thus functions as a credentialing and professionalizing technique that addresses the stigma of outsourced work among middle-class and elite educated workers by codifying the exclusivity of the labor market for call center workers in the country and measuring a person’s competitiveness within it. The assessment also evinces the aspirations of the industry and the state to move up the global value chain: “What the GCAT emphasizes,” states an industry newsletter, “is that the IT-BPO is not limited to voice services” but can expand to include more knowledge process outsourcing and other professional services.<sup>22</sup> To top off these efforts, in 2013 the BPAP added the term “information technology” to the organization’s original name (the Business Process Outsourcing Association of the Philippines), creating the Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing Association of the Philippines (IBPAP). The additional reference thus emphasizes the organization’s ability to “provide the whole spectrum of world-class services . . . including corporate and complex services, creative processes and products, customer relations and health care information management, and software product development”—that is, not just support for customer service call centers.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the idea for the GCAT started with the IBPAP, which referred to it early on as the BPAP National Competency Test.<sup>24</sup>

Like call center workers, industry leaders also see the discrepancy between call center work and educational achievement as an obstacle to its growth. In another issue of *Breakthroughs!*, IBPAP executive Martin Crisostomo declared that “the task is to market the IT-BPO or call center job as a worthwhile and long-term career in order to attract more qualified applicants.”<sup>25</sup> Part of these efforts have been targeted at overseas Filipino workers, whom business leaders hope to entice to return home to fill call center seats. To do so, however, industry leaders must be able to demonstrate that call center work constitutes a massive improvement on overseas work. In an article entitled “It’s Time for Heroes to Come Home,” Crisostomo told the story of a single mother working in domestic service in Saudi Arabia who was able to return to the Philippines and raise her two children with a salary and benefits comparable to what she had been

receiving from her previous employer.<sup>26</sup> “As a domestic helper for years,” Crisostomo explained further, “English was the only way she could communicate with her Arabian [*sic*] employer—and this honed her speaking skills, which probably helped her qualify in our industry.” In a different article, Crisostomo discussed another domestic worker, employed in the United States, “who is now CEO of her own IT outsourcing company in Davao—with one of its clients being no less than U.S. president Barack Obama.”<sup>27</sup> Such stories suggest a reconfigured hierarchy of labor, in which call center work’s proximity to technology and ostensible pathway to ownership of the means of production elevate it above overseas Filipinos’ work abroad, which is rendered into mere preparation for the more cosmopolitan and corporate world of call centers.

Stories of overseas Filipino workers who return to the Philippines to pursue call center work thus stage several resolutions to the ideological problems challenging the Philippine nation-state, including the problem of labor migration. The narratives suggest that after decades of failing to generate jobs within the country, the Philippine state is finally able to reclaim the bodies of its citizens, though not necessarily the surplus value they produce. By knitting together the threads unraveled by globalization, the call center industry becomes the site of an imagined return of overseas Filipino workers to the Philippines, and thus a reassembly of the nation as home. Such stories also consistently convey—however inaccurately—that call center work allows Filipinos to withdraw from a sphere of dependence that revolves around the United States. Crisostomo went on to write about a Filipino nurse who, “on getting her visa and complete papers for working in the States, just turned her back and decided to stay home in exchange for a great opportunity in healthcare information management outsourcing.”<sup>28</sup> Another IBPAP newsletter article profiling people whose lives have been transformed as a result of their employment in the BPO industry is about Peachy, “a registered nurse who wanted to work in an American hospital” but who sought call center work when the U.S. financial crisis struck. For the author, “Peachy proves that you need not stray too far from home to find fulfillment and prosperity.”<sup>29</sup> The inherent irony of these narratives is that most call center jobs in the Philippines not only are for U.S. corporations but also sometimes succeed in bringing Filipinos in *closer* proximity to the United States, as was the case with the domestic worker-turned-CEO cited above. Yet this does not stop industry leaders

from using these notions to brand the industry as elevated above overseas work and therefore recruit new workers.

In its attempt to project the image of a technologically advanced Philippines ready to take on complex offshore work at home rather than sending citizens abroad, the Philippine state affirms and supports industry aspirations. An early iteration of this state-generated national imaginary was the Arroyo administration's project for the Philippine Cyberservices Corridor (PCC). Modeled after the miles-long stretch of office space in Dallas, Texas, that houses major IT companies like Ericsson and AT&T, as well as Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor, the PCC would cover six hundred miles, connecting cities in the northernmost and southernmost regions of the country.<sup>30</sup> The economic goal of the PCC was to encourage foreign and local investment in IT-enabled services in general and, in keeping with the Arroyo administration's aspiration for greater inclusion in the knowledge economy, to move the Philippines beyond BPO work and toward knowledge process outsourcing and health information management. Yet the image and rhetoric surrounding the PCC did cultural work as well. By linking the nation's super regions through technology, the PCC contributed to what Neferti Xina M. Tadiar calls the "dreamwork" of national development in the age of neoliberal globalization, a fetishization of the Philippine state's desire to produce an unimpeded flow of information and capital.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as a backbone on which the national economy hangs, the PCC enhances the representation of the Philippine economy as rehabilitated, economically virile, and able to be penetrated by foreign capital with the integrity of a consenting partner protected by the ASEAN—its family and economic pack—rather than a victim of the aggressive advances of stronger, wealthier nations.

In this way, the PCC reinforced the notion that in the twenty-first century exploitative relations of dependence between the global north and south have been reconfigured into relations of investment and partnership. The nation is thus imagined as a postracial, postgender space in which Filipino labor is intelligible through the neutral register of human capital rather than the differential language of race, gender, and ability. The workers I interviewed evoked this imagined equitable partnership between the Philippines and other nations. One such person was Bryan Aclan, the midlevel manager for Global Invest who had given me a tour of the bank's call center in Manila. After we talked about Bryan's ambition to climb the corporate ladder from

his starting position as a customer service representative, we then discussed the ideological conflict in the Philippines between those struggling for the development of national industries and those, like Bryan, who believe that the Philippine government ought to court investment from other countries as much and as often as possible. According to Bryan, the Philippines “can no longer afford to be insular.” “We live in a global society,” he elaborated. “The world is so small. Being too patriotic doesn’t suit us as a growing nation. Even China had to open up—it’s the largest country in the world, but it realized it needs other countries, too.” Bryan’s comparison of the Philippines (a country of 90 million people with a GDP hovering around \$250 billion) with China (with 1.4 billion people and a GDP of \$12.4 trillion) reveals how the post-Cold War rhetoric of national partnership enables an understanding of countries as occupying an even ethical terrain even as they inhabit radically different economic territories. It also points to the allure of the market logic through which many people attempt to resolve the contradictions of call center work.

### **Filipino/American Relatability and the Contradictions of Colonial Recall**

My interest in industry actors and the state has less to do with the efficacy of their efforts in solving the problem of the talent gap and more with how the problem of call center work is socially constructed and imagined, including how it is rooted within a longer history of the Philippines’ structural subordination within the global economy and of the racialization and feminization of Filipinos as subjects of U.S. colonialism and U.S.-led neoliberalism. Many of the ideological contradictions and national anxieties related to call center work emanate, I argue, from the recapitulation of these dynamics, or what I refer to as *colonial recall*. After outsourcing jobs to Europe and then India, U.S. companies flocked to the Philippines not only because Filipino workers command lower wages but also because the latter could offer what I have called Filipino/American relatability as an affective and communicative resource. References to this ostensibly distinct Filipino capacity abound in the Philippine call center industry’s marketing literature and research reports. An account of Philippine services written in 2005 insisted, for example, that with the takeoff of call centers, “the country stands to gain from its cultural affinity with the major major

that is the United States” and that “a result of this affinity, strengthened through the country’s public educational system patterned after that of the United States, is the functional level of English-speaking skills of the Filipinos.”<sup>32</sup> Using greater rhetorical flourish, a more recent “Investor Primer” produced by the IBPAP boasts that “when a North American client’s customer makes a reference to the New York Knicks, Lady Gaga, or upcoming national elections, the Filipino knowledge worker always relates.”<sup>33</sup> Nor is the discourse of relatability limited to these official spaces of representation; my research participants also often spoke of this ostensibly distinct Filipino quality as well.

It is possible to read the rhetoric of relatability as yet another instance in which elite labor brokers and workers, desperate for capital investment in the country and decent jobs in general, essentialize Filipino identity to secure a comparative advantage in the global marketplace. In this way, colonial recall entails an instrumental evocation of the colonial past that sanitizes it for the purposes of global capital and the neoliberal national project.<sup>34</sup> Beyond this, however, we might ask what ideological purposes and effects these claims about the affective features of Filipino subjectivity actually serve and set in motion within a larger narrative about the Philippine nation-state. In other words, it is worth noting how everyday claims about Filipino social capacities are embedded within a kind of vernacular understanding of the colonial past and in turn become part of the material conditions of possibility of the present. When workers, industry boosters, and state actors refer to an exceptional affective relationship between Filipinos and Americans, they refer to what I call *Filipino/American relatability*, or an intimate form of power crafted by American colonizers, in which the latter extracted cooperation and communicative capacities from Filipino subjects as a means of both disciplining them to the colonial order and also achieving the cultural proximity and so-called fellowship between the United States and the Philippines on which the colonial project relied. Moreover, as a technology of power that was justified on the basis of Filipino racial difference, Filipino/American relatability was also a racialized mode of sociality in which the colonized subject’s proximity or likeness to colonial authority—that is, Filipinos’ ability to relate to Americans (or Americans’ demands that Filipinos relate to them)—was a crucial way in which imperial influence and control were wielded through affective, social, and communicate capacities. Filipino/American relatabil-

ity is thus a manifestation of colonialism in its cultural and most subjective forms, and it is recalled—that is, brought to mind but also transferred back to its source—in the structure and substance of offshore call center work. The appropriation of Filipinos' affective capacities, the imperative to speak American English, the need to orient the self to American customers and corporate clients, and the vexed invitation to think of oneself as part of American domestic spaces—all of these aspects of Filipino/American relatability reemerge in call centers, creating unsettling moments in which the demand for subservient imitation and internalization of American culture and rules of order emerges in the present.

Within the postracial and postgender discourse of the global economy, however, Filipino/American relatability is seen not as a technique of power but as a source of empowerment, a cultural attribute and affective orientation of the Filipino people defined by an exceptional ability to understand and forge cultural connections to Americans—in other words, not as a problem but as a kind of social capital. Within this ideological landscape, the Philippines' apparent success in call center work indexes the ontological security of “Filipino” as an ostensibly decolonized, postconquest identity.<sup>35</sup> Former colonial subjects whose ability to relate to Americans was intimately tied to their very subjugation, and who had the English language imposed on them from above, Filipinos could now be neoliberal subjects for whom relatability is a form of commodified affective labor that proves not their subservience to the United States, but their necessity and value to the global economy; not their imitation of American culture, but their flexible command of it; not their colonially induced confusion over Filipino identity, but their unique ability to adapt to other cultures as a result of it.

The clearest articulation of this cultural logic was presented to me in 2009 during a series of meetings with BPAP executives Melvin Legarda and Joseph Santiago, men in their forties who, unsurprisingly, treated our encounters as just another opportunity to market the Philippines by reiterating the cultural qualities that ostensibly make the country and its citizens ideal for call center work.<sup>36</sup> In one portion of our discussion, Joseph, the senior of the two, described a commercial that BPAP had developed to market the Philippine BPO industry to corporations with a U.S. customer base. According to Joseph, in the commercial a white male customer service agent smiles and speaks “perfect English” to a customer over the phone. At the end of the call, the audience sees the white agent peel off a

mask to reveal that he is really Filipino, clearly suggesting that Filipinos are so adept at sounding like native English speakers with American accents that the usual disruptions in communication that come with differences in language and accent would not be a problem with Filipino agents on the line. Importantly, however, Joseph explained that BPAF decided to drop the commercial after the organization realized it no longer needed to convince potential U.S. corporate clients that Filipino agents could affect an American accent to service a U.S. customer base. At a certain point, Joseph explained, BPAF executives came to believe that agents could simply “be themselves” while on the phone with customers, which “made for the best [training] programs.”

Joseph’s explanation that managers began to discard the practice of training agents to mimic national accents—replacing it with accent-neutralization training—points to a real policy shift in the industry at large that started as early as 2004. A number of issues precipitated the change. First, training in neutral accents was a response to U.S.- and U.K.-based customers who felt angered by the perceived insincerity and foolishness of the mimicry and thus became distrustful of the companies the agents represented. Indeed, in my training experience at Vox Elite we were warned that “Americans can always detect a foreign accent so don’t bother trying to fake one.” Another reason relates to cost cutting and flexibility: accent-neutralization programs allow staff to move easily among accounts that are linked to different parts of the world and therefore reduce the cost of training. Moreover, language experts had finally managed to convince call center managers and trainers that miscommunication was not necessarily due to an agent’s accent but their lack of proficiency in conversational and colloquial English, and therefore that more attention should be given to those aspects of speech, rather than culturally specific modes of pronunciation.<sup>37</sup> Antonio, the QA manager at Pyramid Processing, articulated this point to me when he explained that “most customers know that his or her service calls will be thrown somewhere in the third world.” The “real” source of customers’ frustration, Antonio explained, was not the agents’ accents but their lack of facility in the English language.

The idea and practice of accent neutralization has received greater attention from scholars in recent years, given its increasingly widespread use in offshore call centers.<sup>38</sup> Whether an accent can ever in fact be neutral and what such attempts at neutrality might mean are pertinent questions



that echo similar uncertainties about the concept of global English, which I discuss below. For A. Aneesh, accent neutralization is a significant part of a larger process of “unhinging” people from the particulars of place, identity, and biological clocks; neutrality and standardization are thus key to understanding globalization.<sup>39</sup> To Joseph Santiago, however, the implementation of accent-neutralization policies allowed Filipinos to further express their particularities *as* Filipinos. Emphasizing that with neutral accents Filipinos could just “be themselves” (since they had what he called “light accents” anyhow), he offered a nationalistic interpretation of the policy changes. In other words, Joseph’s understanding of the policy shift created an interpretive opening in which he could reinforce the ontological security of Filipino subjectivity within a transnational labor process that demanded that Filipinos speak for U.S. corporations in the language of a former colonial power. Within this cultural logic, the idea that “we don’t have to sound like them” to be good at our jobs became a powerful confirmation of Filipinos’ unadulterated and undisguised presence on the world stage. It also further reinforced that if call center agents learned to speak American English, it was because American English is what an account—that is, the market—demanded, not because it was a naturally superior language. Indeed, Joseph’s brief but illuminating interpretation of the accent-neutralization policy suggested that the meaning of Filipino/American relatability had shifted from a sign of colonial control to one of neoliberal cultural capital, and thus that Filipinos had moved past mimicry as a way to relate, literally and figuratively, to America and Americans. In this way, I saw how, as an umbrella organization whose managers and staff interact with potential clients from around the world and which services the whole industry, the IBPAP plays an important role in maintaining the ideological apparatus on which Filipino citizens might hang their aspirations for the nation-state. For example, in his requisite talk about the Philippines’ labor power or “talent supply,” Melvin cited the nation’s annual graduation rate (then 400,000 graduates per year), as well as its strength in English and IT. Knowing what I did about the deskilling that outsourced customer service work represented, I asked Melvin how training in IT would help an employee in the industry, but he did not answer my question directly. Instead, he parlayed the question into an opportunity to herald the Philippine government’s support for building IT infrastructure and thus greater digital connectivity across the country through the PCC.

Moments like these reveal how industry leaders themselves struggle to make sense of the narratives they have a role in creating. At one point, for example, my conversation with Joseph and Melvin turned to competition between India and the Philippines within the global market for back-office work. Echoing a popular topic in many of my interviews with other people, Joseph began to speak about the cultural traits that make Filipinos far better suited for customer service work than Indians. When I asked why he thought this was the case, Joseph responded, “There’s an exact set of rules to service in India. They are more utilitarian. Filipinos are compassionate,” to which Melvin added, “We are good at working with the heart.”

Joseph continued, “It also has to do with our deep immersion at the bottom of the ladder for so many years. We were a colony of Spain, and then the United States, the Japanese invaded us during the war, and then poverty really pushed us under.”

“What do you think is the effect of these experiences?” I asked.

Without missing a beat, Joseph replied, “Benevolence. You know, the Philippines is the only place that you can see a Japanese, American, and Filipino war memorial in the same place.” Again, Melvin interjected by saying, “Also, our religion.”

“Yeah,” Joseph agreed. “We are for loyalty and equality. Just go back to basic nature, and you have your answers. I even told someone from an Australian collections account that the Philippine psyche is perfect for helping them collect on debts from customers. We know what it means to be in debt. We present ourselves as part of the solution, as someone who can help manage their money. We are not targeting customers, attacking them [as scary debt collectors].”

“Do you talk to investors this way, about these kinds of details, like the Philippine psyche?” I asked.

“Yes, we are very detailed,” Joseph insisted. “We talk about history.”

Again, at first blush, these vernacular accounts of Philippine history and Filipino/American relatability seem like yet another way that elite Philippine actors, responding to competition with other developing countries, attempt to establish the “value proposition” that Filipinos can ostensibly offer corporate capital—what Anna Tsing calls a “niche-segregating performance.”<sup>40</sup> Yet in offering up a version of Philippine history in which Filipinos are gifted with an incomparable capacity for compassion, empathy, and understanding, Joseph and Melvin also reproduce and extend

the exceptionalist narratives on which U.S. imperialism and the American colonial state in the Philippines relied. It is significant, for example, that Joseph uses the term *benevolence* to describe the Philippine psyche. In so doing, he evokes the key word and sentiment President William McKinley used to describe the American colonial project in the islands in 1898.<sup>41</sup> In recalling this narrative and citing the coexistence within the country of memorials and cemeteries that mark the respective deaths of Filipinos, Americans, and the Japanese during World War II, Joseph implies that Filipinos have inherited the benevolence of their former colonizers. Evoking World War II as what Dylan Rodríguez calls “another genesis moment of political union and nationalist coalescence” between Filipinos and the United States, Joseph reinforces a “historical congruence” between Filipino subjectivity and the United States as an exceptional nation whose benevolence compels and deserves the allegiance of the colonized.<sup>42</sup> In such a framework, Filipinos’ relational capacities are treated as the outcome of the colonial past, now domesticated within Filipino identity; Filipinoness, in other words, is defined by exceptional affective capacities that emerge from the Philippines’ exceptional history. For Joseph in particular, “the Philippine psyche” is conflated with Philippine history, and has become especially attuned to the plight of others as a result of decades of subjugation and war. Such ideas are articulated and elaborated on elsewhere in the IBPAP’s literature. In a *Breakthroughs!* article entitled “Filipino Qualities as Competitive Edge in This Crisis,” Jonathan de Luzuriaga writes:

The one quality that our clients have treasured in the Filipino BPO worker, and which they are hard-pressed to find anywhere else, is our customer-service orientation. The average Filipino BPO-IT worker, especially those in the voice sector, genuinely wants to serve their clients and are more than willing to go the extra mile. And, may I add, they can weather the harshest demands with a smile that turns an irate customer into a happy, long-lasting one. That kind of sunny service comes from within and would be difficult to duplicate. Another related quality is the legendary Filipino resilience. This is something that we as a people laugh at among ourselves as an inside joke, yet ironically it is an emotional and spiritual resource that we have not yet fully valued or capitalized on. Poverty does not faze us; the threat of an impending job loss would not drive us to suicide.<sup>43</sup>

Luzuriaga further underscores these statements by also attributing Filipino resilience and hospitality to “attitude,” which, he explains, “is something that is far more difficult to emulate, because it is embedded deeply in culture, seeded by history, and nurtured over a long span of time.”<sup>44</sup>

The language of “spiritual resource,” “value,” and “capitalization” in the above excerpt also speaks to the way industry leaders transform the meaning of culture and identity through their use of market logic. Yet Melvin and Joseph were also careful to distinguish between Filipino or Asian approaches to the capitalist marketplace and American or Western ones. In another meeting Joseph expressed his frustration with the assumed superlative value of Western business practices. He explained that “there are actually people within this industry who tell me that I should be more Western. I say to them, ‘Look, you are the ones who came here for our help, and you are telling me I should be more Western?’” In 2009, when I first met Joseph and Melvin, it was common for my research participants to regard U.S. outsourcing to the Philippines as a sign of a United States in crisis and in need of Filipinos’ assistance. This idea was integral to Joseph’s understanding of why Western companies were drawn to the Philippine call center industry in the first place. During our interview he explicitly argued that Americans fundamentally misunderstand capitalist enterprise. “Jan, you are from New York, right? Well, don’t mind me saying so, but the way Americans think about capitalism is all screwed up,” he said. Further explaining that “the beauty of capitalism is in innovation, not blowing the competition out of the water,” and that “the Americans forgot that when they went to India,” Joseph went on to denounce Americans’ supposedly misguided obsession with the crass concerns of cost cutting rather than the lofty goals of added value.<sup>45</sup> He topped this off by remarking that the Philippines “fight[s] on a level playing field. We are a global player. As a culture, it is deeply embedded in us to forgive easily and not take competition too seriously.”

For Joseph and other industry advocates, the value that the Philippines offers the United States is tied in part to workers being Filipino. Moreover, this Filipino *being* to which Joseph attests ostensibly comes to fruition when the United States, and Western powers more broadly, leave global capitalism’s center stage to make room for “emerging” Asian nations and their subjects.<sup>46</sup> As if to hammer home his point about the rise of Asian countries in the wake of a U.S. decline, Joseph noted that many Ameri-

can families had begun living in extended households as a response to the global economic downturn, which he interpreted as “Americans beginning to see the beauty of the Filipino and Asian concept” of sharing space and resources as a family. Within this cultural logic—a logic that upholds a neoliberal postcolonial imaginary—Filipino compassion in general and ability to relate to Americans in particular are not signs of Filipinos’ continued subjugation to dominant world powers but rather proof of their modern subjectivity and their readiness to lead the global economy with both technical skill and affective acumen.

### **Having Your English and Speaking It, Too: The Problem of Market Logic**

As my interviews and observations make clear, Filipino industry leaders and call center workers, reinforced by the state, lean firmly on the logic of the market to stabilize the often unsteady social and cultural connotations of call center work. By way of closing this chapter, I explore how this process operates on the shifting terrain of local and global English-language politics, which play an important role in the neoliberal ideology nesting within postcolonial Philippine nationalism.<sup>47</sup> Doing so reveals some of the ideological pitfalls of and problems with the post–Cold War notion of the global economy as an even and collaborative playing field and thus the interpretive framework in which the Philippine call center has come to have meaning for many involved in it.

In the late 1980s, Filipinos of the middle and elite classes began a cultural nationalist project to decolonize the English language—that is, “to reclaim it not as a sign of colonial dependency but as part of the national culture.”<sup>48</sup> This reclamation manifested itself as a rejection of American English as the standard-bearer for the language and thus the recognition of Philippine English as a distinct and autonomous form. Filipinos were not alone in these efforts. With the emergence of the concept of world Englishes, many people around the world began to emphasize that different varieties of English had developed their own legitimate identities, thus establishing a postcolonial reconfiguration of the dominant hierarchies of the language.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this decentered approach to English became part of a postracial vision of language in which “the racist attitudes prevalent during the colonial period” are thought to “have mostly given way

to more rational approaches to cultural diversity,” in which more varieties of English are considered not only acceptable but are welcomed additions to the linguistic repertoire.<sup>50</sup> The decolonization of English has thus been crucial to a middle-class and elite cultural nationalist project as a kind of linguistic modernity in which Filipinos can have English as a national language and speak it, too. These efforts also set the stage, I argue, for the kind of thinking espoused by the IBPAP executive Joseph Santiago, who saw the call center industry’s turn toward neutral accents as part of the disavowal of U.S. cultural hegemony.

What does it mean, then, that most call centers I visited, and the one in which I trained, required agents to speak American English? What will become of the Philippines’ project for linguistic modernity under these circumstances?<sup>51</sup> For many, the resolution to this problem of colonial recall is to not see it as a problem at all. As with the challenges posed by customer racism, which I discuss in the next chapter, the issue of American English is construed as one of market demand and not colonialism’s return. This framework of interpretation is made possible not only by the concept of postcolonial world Englishes—in which the United States and United Kingdom allegedly cease to be the source of the language’s legitimacy—but also by the rise of English as the undisputed language of the global information society.<sup>52</sup> In this hypercapitalist context, English has value not because of its proximity to former colonial powers but because of the possibilities of mobility within capitalism that the language ostensibly offers. The postracial shift from imperial English to world English thus reinforces a neoliberal narrative of the global economy as a marketplace in which capital and communication flow smoothly owing to English’s putative ability to function as a linguistic currency with no particular national origin. In turn, what Rey Chow refers to as the “neoliberal attitude toward multilingualism” discursively transforms languages into individualized commodities, “to be discretely enumerated and labeled like items of jewelry or parcels of real estate.”<sup>53</sup> Within this logic, capitalism in general, rather than any nation in particular, makes English worth speaking. These points are not lost on the Philippine middle and elite classes, who, as Vicente L. Rafael argues, since the 1990s have often experienced “periodic panic . . . regarding the deteriorating ability of Filipino students to speak English and thus compete in a global marketplace.”<sup>54</sup>

Yet there are fault lines in this ideological terrain. While Filipinos might

very well own their brand of Philippine English, its value in the global marketplace is still defined by transnational U.S. corporations and the Philippine elite who accommodate their demands—thus, American English has remained the standard and the norm for transnational call center work.<sup>55</sup> The question of English's value is thus an ever-present reminder that colonial recall is not just about how the Philippine call center industry is built on the structures of empire but also about how the specter of U.S. imperialism incessantly demands that Filipinos account for the substance, boundaries, and value of Filipino identity and the Philippine nation.