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A Nation on the Line

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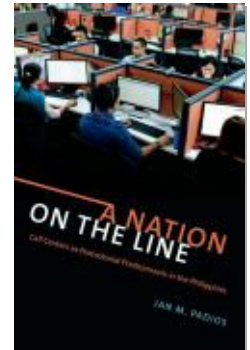
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INSIDE VOX ELITE*Call Center Training and the Limits
of Filipino/American Relatability*

March 2009. Joel Partido was a slim and smartly dressed man in his early forties, making him one of the oldest people I had met in the call center business in the Philippines. As we shook hands in a crowded Starbucks on a Friday night, I quickly took in Joel's friendly if fairly harried demeanor. As the vice president of human resources for Vox Elite, Joel was in the midst of the company's major acquisition of an Elphin call center in the very building where we were meeting. Elphin, a major U.S. computer company, had long maintained a large in-house call center in Metro Manila along with several onshore in-house centers in Florida and South Carolina. Several years earlier, however, Elphin had begun shutting down its centers in the United States and outsourcing that work to Vox Elite in the Philippines; after the financial crash hit hard in 2008, Elphin went forward with plans to turn over its last remaining in-house call center, the one in Metro Manila, to the third-party company. Almost overnight, thirteen hundred Elphin workers would become employees of the already large Vox Elite, and Joel had to oversee this transition as well as the addition of sixty additional employees to the human resources department. As I talked with Joel about the changeover, it seemed he was most stressed by having to report to a number of people on both the Elphin and Vox Elite sides but also, as he described it, "trying to marry the cultures" of the two companies.¹ Joel described Vox Elite as flexible and Elphin as somewhat rigid—which made sense in light of the fact that Vox Elite, as one of the oldest and most global third-party providers in the world, had grown accustomed to twisting and bending to accommodate the needs of corporate capital, whereas Elphin, a company with a strong brand name and specific corporate cul-

ture, was used to doing things its way. As Joel explained, it was by far the biggest project he had handled in his twenty-one years working in human resources, which included working for Coca-Cola and Toyota, both in the Philippines.

Still, Joel was excited about his work and what was happening with the company. “Once you’ve tasted the adrenaline rush of this job, of working in a call center, it’s really difficult to settle for a more comfortable role or routine, where you won’t be jumping from one emergency to another.” Joel let out a bemused laugh, as he often did when talking about his work. When I asked if he could pinpoint what gave him the adrenaline rush, he cited the novelty of the industry. “The BPO industry is relatively new here in the Philippines,” he started. “While in my case you may have a couple decades of HR experience to lean on, there are still so many gray areas, ambiguous scenarios, where you can’t rely on experience . . . just nail biting.” Joel laughed again and then continued, “The old industries here in the Philippines—manufacturing, banking, pharma[ceuticals] and so forth—you can’t always apply what you might know from there. This is just such a new environment.” It was the refrain I had been hearing again and again from my research participants: call centers were a world apart, workplaces so different and so particular, with their own social world and cultural practices.

I conducted several long interviews with Joel, who had studied social sciences at an elite university in the country and seemed to take vicarious pleasure in my research. When he suggested that I apply for a call center job at Vox Elite—and generously assisted me in getting the proper approvals for the research—I was eager to get started. As I came to learn over those next several weeks, the sense of call centers as a space apart begins the minute one starts the application process. Most call center companies, Vox Elite included, do not even use the term *application process* but rather *recruitment*, the corporate word of choice when referring to attracting, selecting, and hiring employees. With its military connotation, *recruitment* does not include only choosing appropriate people to enter a call center’s highly demanding social and cultural environment. Recruitment also has a pedagogical function: applicants learn about the company or work in question by undergoing a series of evaluations that ostensibly prepare them for the challenges that lie ahead.

Applying and training for a call center job at Vox Elite brought me face-

to-face with the contradictions and predicaments of call center work that I have explored in the previous chapters: the highs of competition versus the lows of emotional labor, the tedium of routine tasks versus the privilege of the workspace, and the delights of friends versus the near delirium of working overnight. Most important, during U.S. cultural competency (cc) and Elphin product training—the two main components of Vox Elite’s training process—I began to see how Philippine call centers are not just sites of corporate communication about mundane matters like printers and mobile phones but spaces where workers actively construct national identity and the nation-state through a contradictory engagement with, and disavowal of, the United States as both a material entity and an imaginary location. Training sessions in cc and product information were rich sites from which to observe such dynamics because both offered direct engagement with America and Americans: cc in its presentation of the United States as an object of pedagogical significance, and product training through the actual presence of American trainers from Elphin. As a Filipina American participating in and getting to know people in both settings, my presence, too, came to reflect and refract these negotiations. This chapter thus builds on the previous ones by offering a grounded and detailed ethnographic look at how workers negotiate the terms of Philippine postcolonial nationalism through Filipino/American relatability specifically.

Drawing the Line: Vox Elite Recruitment

April 2009. Vox Elite’s application center was located on the fourth floor of a shopping mall in one of Metro Manila’s densest commercial and public transportation hubs. Although the mall did not officially open until ten-thirty in the morning, Vox Elite applicants could enter the building earlier by signing in with a uniformed armed guard. In the absence of shoppers, store clerks, and music blaring from retail establishments, marching up the mall’s frozen escalators to the application office felt somewhat bleak. A whole different scene unfolded, however, on the fourth floor. When I entered the glass doors, a tired-looking administrative assistant asked for my résumé, hurriedly stapled something to it, and then handed me a lengthy application form. As I took my seat among fifteen or so other applicants already diligently filling in the names of their past employers or the schools

they had attended, I noticed a small placard reading “English only” and a large flat-screen television flashing Vox Elite corporate media on the wall behind the front desk. Directly behind the wall, through another set of glass doors, were about eight cubicles where the recruitment staff worked pushing papers and checking lists. Industry and IT-related magazines like *Corporate World* were strewn about me in the waiting room.

That call center work entails high-paced productivity and efficiency was apparent from the second I stepped into Vox Elite’s main recruitment office that morning at a quarter past nine. Before I had even completed the first of the form’s five pages, the administrative assistant called my name and handed me a small piece of paper stating the time for my first period of testing: eleven o’clock. As would later become clear, job seekers had to pass two rounds of computer-based tests before being granted a group interview with a recruiter from Vox Elite’s human resources department. If applicants made the cut after the group interview, they moved on to a voice test called Vox Check. While the application process consisted of six parts, it was possible to undergo them all in a single day, as tests and interviews were scheduled at regular intervals and applicants were placed in time slots according to the time they arrive at the recruitment office. As my research participants would later confirm, the pace was unlike that of any other professional line of work in the Philippines, where it might take weeks to learn whether one was being offered a position.

After completing my application form around ten o’clock, I sat and observed the constant flow of applicants into the recruitment office. Fifteen to twenty people entered the office every twenty minutes—almost one person per minute—and only a handful of applicants seemed past their twenties. Each applicant was dressed neatly but casually—no suits, blazers, or dress shoes. By a quarter to eleven, the office could no longer accommodate all of the applicants, so people spilled out into the public space of the shopping mall, which was slowly filling up with patrons. I knew from talking to human resources recruiters from other large call center companies that the number of applicants could reach upward of two hundred in one day, and yet only 5–12 percent would be offered a job at the end of the process, with more than half of the applicants not even making it through the initial rounds of computerized tests. Next to me, a young woman with a Vox Elite employee badge around her neck was helping her nervous-looking friend fill out the part of the application that asked about familiarity with

software. After they completed the application, and her friend left to return to her shift, I asked the young woman, whose name was Glenda, whether it was her first time applying to a call center. She answered with a cautiously optimistic “Yes” and then explained that she had just graduated from nursing school and needed money to take the review courses that would prepare her for the nursing board exams. We continued talking until my name was called for the eleven o’clock testing session, and although I did not see Glenda again after that interaction in the lobby, I wondered if, like my cousin, she would forego nursing and stick with call center work if given the opportunity.

The first round of tests took place in a large room situated behind the recruiters’ cubicles. The room contained four rows of ten cubicles that each housed a computer monitor and headset—a much smaller version of a typical production floor. As the thirty-seven other applicants and I sat down, a proctor called out our names to determine that we were in fact sitting at our assigned terminals. When two young men realized they had switched seats and began giggling as a result, the proctor admonished them with an authoritative and irritated look, making the situation seem not unlike my experience taking standardized tests in secondary school. With everyone settled, the proctor told us to begin the fifty-five-minute testing session.

Like other call centers, Vox Elite tests job applicants for the qualifications necessary to work on specific types of jobs assigned to the call center by corporate clients such as Verizon or Sony. In a manner typical of flexible labor markets, these clients may contract third-party BPO firms such as Vox Elite to take on their customer service or technical support needs before the BPO firm actually has the people to fill the positions on the account. In other words, the BPO firm often already has a corporate account or two waiting in the wings when evaluating job applicants, and thus the tests administered to applicants are tailored to those specific accounts. When I applied for a job at Vox Elite, the company was looking for people to do customer and technical support for Cobalt, a mobile phone account, and Elphin, a printer account, both of which were U.S.-based companies. Thus, the second, fourth, and fifth tests of that first exam period were related to computer hardware, printers, mobile phones, and some of the technical specificities of the Internet and networking. The questions addressed matters ranging from consumer-oriented knowledge (such as “Which of the following is not a manufacturer of cell phones?”) to more technical

knowledge, such as what the acronyms *WAP* and *VPN* stand for. Some of the questions even ventured into customer service and technical support territory, using hypothetical scenarios like the following: “A customer calls to complain that she cannot make a call with her phone. Which of the following do you not need to ask?”

In this way, the contradictions and tensions regarding the skill and knowledge involved in call center work began to emerge in the application process itself. Although there was indeed knowledge being tested here, one did not have to be a computer scientist or an engineer to pass these tests. Any type of continued exposure to IT—whether as a consumer, a student, or a self-taught person—could prepare applicants for the exams; prior professional experience could help but was not necessary. At the same time, the exams were clearly weighted toward applicants with a high degree of familiarity with consumer electronics, and thus individuals with the means to access such goods, whether through personal ownership or schools with such resources. Although I was stumped by a few of the questions during that first round of tests (I could not confidently identify all the hardware of a desktop computer, for example), an *educated* guess is perhaps all I needed to pass these technical tests, since educated guesses are exactly that—based on education and thus cultural capital. My upbringing in the United States, which included having computers and the Internet in my home since I was fourteen years old, gave me sufficient knowledge to make it to the next round of tests. Since in the Philippines private ownership of these kinds of consumer electronics was at the time of my research mostly limited to affluent and some middle-class people, I assumed that most applicants who passed these tests either had some background in computers or other IT or had access to them at home or in well-resourced schools. It was impossible to tell, though, just who was tech savvy and who was not, since the exams also wove together tests of technical knowledge with assessments of applicants’ knowledge of English grammar. The first test asked applicants to identify the word or group of words that would correctly complete a sentence written in English, while the third required reading a paragraph-long short story and retelling the story using direct speech. By requiring applicants to switch rapidly between technical acumen and language competency, the test modeled the way that call center work drew on both sets of skills simultaneously.

As suggested by their squeaking chairs and restless movements, most

of the applicants finished the assessment about forty-five minutes into the session, although one or two people seated near me worked until our time was up. No more than five minutes after the official end of the test, our proctor called out about fifteen names—a little under 40 percent of the applicants in the room—and asked those people to collect their things and leave. She then congratulated the rest of us, announcing that we would be moving on to the next round of exams. Many people breathed a sigh of relief or uttered, “Yes!,” underscoring the competitive but also exciting nature of the testing process. Given that I had stumbled on some of the tech tests, I, too, was relieved to have passed. It was my first taste of how call center work could be challenging but could also leave people with a sense of accomplishment and reward.

The second set of exams proceeded immediately after the rejected candidates left the room, but the tests themselves were shorter. The first test in the second set consisted of a timed scavenger hunt, in which we were asked to scour the Internet for the answers to trivial questions, such as “What is the longest bridge in the world?” This test of comprehension, speed, and resourcefulness was followed by a short essay question that asked applicants to write down “anything about yourself” and then to describe a personal experience of selling something to someone else, and the reasons that we did so. Although I was keen not to be placed on a sales account—owing to my strong aversion to trying to convince people to part with their money—I drew on my experiences as a customer service representative at a bookstore where I worked directly after graduating from college. Once again, at the end of the test, the proctor called out the names of the people who did not pass. At that point, only eleven people—just over 25 percent of the original testing group—were asked to return to the application center at five o’clock that afternoon for the next stage of Vox Elite’s application process: the group interview.

Since I had a few hours to spare between the end of the second round of testing and the group interview, I walked to a nearby mall, where I plopped down on a lounge chair in Starbucks, hungry and already tired from the morning’s activity. As I ate my lunch and wrote out my field notes, I began to reflect on how the recruitment process worked like a well-oiled and productive machine, turning eager and willing young people into human resources for a large company that would mold and discipline them even further. It was also possible to see how almost every affective aspect of

call center life that I had observed for myself or learned about through my research participants was manifest in the recruitment process: the competitive spirit, but also the camaraderie between friends, the regulated environment, and the relief that came from a sense of achievement or the disappointment in not moving on. The need to multitask, to simultaneously engage cognitive and communicative skills, and the fact that nothing went unrecorded—these, too, were elements of call center work that made their way into call center recruiting. I had even already encountered the cultural politics of and social tensions surrounding the English language, when in the lobby I overheard a discussion between a few older applicants who, apparently upset by the way the administrative assistant at the front desk had treated them, declared rather loudly that she “didn’t even know how to speak English.” However, besides the stress that came with wondering whether one had passed Vox Elite’s evaluations, I had not yet seen anything that evoked the psychologically distressing aspects of call center work—that happened in the group interview.

When I returned to the center for my group interview, the place was empty except for applicants waiting for testing or employees processing paperwork. At precisely five o’clock, three other applicants and I were called into a frigid room no more than eight by ten feet in size. In my group were Abby, Janice, and Matt, all recent college graduates in their early twenties. Jeff, our interviewer, walked and talked as though he was a seasoned Vox Elite recruiter, although he too seemed to be in his twenties. Sitting down to face me and the other applicants, Jeff wasted no time getting down to brass tacks. “Okay,” he said, looking down at a stack of completed job applications, “let’s start with Matt.” Matt straightened in his chair and eagerly responded to Jeff’s prompt by saying his name and the college he graduated from and listing his work experience. Then Jeff began:

“Okay, Matt, so why do you want to work in a call center?”

Responding with enthusiasm, Matt said, “I believe it is my destiny.”

Apparently amused by Matt’s answer, Jeff scoffed, “*Destiny!* That’s a strong word. Okay . . .”

“Well,” Matt continued, “I was going to go into engineering, but I failed the entrance exam to my field, so I think . . . that wasn’t my destiny.”

Jeff chuckled and then moved on. “Okay. So, Matt, if you could be any superhero in the world, which one would you be?”

Again Matt answered quickly. “I will be Superman.”

“Why?”

“So I can move mountains.”

“Move mountains? Why would you want to do that?”

“It’s an idiom . . .”

With a full laugh, Jeff responded, “*An idiom?! Okay, so what else would you do?*”

“I will help people.”

Jeff pushed. “Like who? Who would you help?”

“I will help the beggars.”

“Help them do what? Would you rob a bank?!”

Finally, Matt paused. The confidence he had displayed at the beginning of the interview seemed to wane as he sensed, as I think we all did, that Jeff was deliberately trying to frustrate his attempt to fashion an articulate response to the question. Indeed, I suspected that Jeff was performing the role of an antagonistic and pompous customer, whose condescending responses to a nonnative English speaker would be masked by a jocular affect. Matt continued in earnest:

“No, I would take them . . . I would take them . . .”

Jeff’s tone radiated with irritation. “*Take them?! You mean you are going to kidnap them? Where would you take them?*”

Matt, unable to conceal his nerves, replied, “I would take them, and . . . I would take them . . . Oh, what is this? [*How do I put it?*] . . . I would take them . . .”

Matt continued in this semifrozen state for a few more seconds before Jeff interjected, “Okay, you would take them somewhere. What else would you do as Superman?”

Clearly eager for this exercise to be over, Matt responded rapidly, “I will fly around because that’s what I want. I will see places I have never seen.”

At that, Jeff thanked Matt and then moved on to Abby, with whom he used a similar destabilizing tactic.

“Abby, how would you describe the color red to a blind person?”

Abby thought for a few seconds and then replied, “I would say it is the feeling of a rough rock.”

Jeff pounced on her response. “I don’t understand. How is a rough rock like the color red?”

Nervously turning her hands as if holding a rock, Abby said, “The rough rock . . . a rough rock . . . is like the color red because . . . it is rough and . . .”

With some hostility, Jeff said, “I don’t get it.”

After a long pause, Abby responded, “The rough rock symbolizes red for me. I would also describe something hot, like *pancit canton* [cooked noodles].” She then smiled a little, apparently pleased with her recovery from the line of questioning.

At that point, Jeff let Abby off the hook and moved on to Janice, who seemed to have a relatively easy time answering Jeff’s question about which candidate she favored in the upcoming presidential elections.

As someone who has both witnessed and experienced firsthand the demeaning treatment of service workers in the United States—especially workers of color or those who come across as foreigners—I found the tenor of Jeff’s questions immediately recognizable, even if I was a little surprised that he actually chose to test the candidates in that way. Such techniques made clear that recruiters look for applicants with both good speaking skills and the ability to withstand the many pressures of the job, including interacting with hostile, rude, and racist customers over the phone. In other words, like the flight attendants at the center of Arlie Hochschild’s canonical study of emotion work, call center workers must be smart but also able to cope with being treated as dumb.² In this way, Jeff’s orchestration of this emotional exercise speaks to the prevalence of racializing encounters in transnational call center work, a process of racialization that occurs on the terrain of speech and accent. The fact that Jeff refrained from posing such tricky questions to me, a native English speaker and American citizen, underscores this point—although it is worth considering that Jeff was not exactly easygoing with me, either. In response to my description of my master’s thesis, which Jeff asked about as part of the interview, he somewhat aggressively stated that he did not understand the point of the study. I suppose I passed his test by calmly and confidently responding to his question and not taking a long time to do so.

The group interview marked the end of my first day undergoing recruitment. Later on that evening, as I was getting ready to see some of the Pyramid Processing employees before their shift started, Jeff called me to say that I would be moving on to the last stage of recruitment, which consisted of the Vox Check, a voice, accent, and comprehension test that I completed first thing the next morning. Alongside me were ten other applicants, one or two of whom I recognized from my testing group. That Vox Check was the last major hurdle in a multistep application process underscores call

center work's reliance on English-language communication. The examination required us to don a headset with a microphone and then listen to and answer a series of questions in English. Part 1 of the test asked applicants to repeat aloud sentences they heard through the headset, while part 2 asked applicants to listen to sentence fragments and put them together into a complete sentence. Part 3 involved listening to a short, six-sentence story, answering a series of questions that tested one's comprehension of the story, and then retelling the story in one's own words. Finally, the last two questions asked applicants to speak extemporaneously about two different topics: the importance of family in our lives, and music and art. Once again, only minutes after the test ended, applicants who did not pass the test—two people—were asked to leave. The rest of us completed a typing test and were then told to come back to the recruitment center at three o'clock. At this point, the reason we were being asked to come back was unclear. Would there be another evaluation? Had we passed the final test and were being offered a job? Some of the applicants even asked the guard stationed outside of the main lobby of the recruitment office, but he simply shook his head and said he didn't know.

Back at the office at three o'clock, I was quickly shown into a small room where seven chairs were arranged in a circle. I took a seat among four young men and one woman. Within minutes, a Vox Elite recruiter entered the room holding a bundle of papers. With a big smile, she welcomed us all to Vox Elite and handed us each a piece of paper describing the job we were being offered on the Elphin printer account. About seventy newly hired employees in total were being assigned to this one account alone, she explained. The job offer paper described the main details of our position, the account we would be working for, and our compensation, benefits, health insurance, and "attendance bonus"—additional pay given to employees who did not miss a single day of training. Then the new hires' questions started to fly: Was it possible to be moved to another account? Was it possible to request the morning shift? How soon could someone apply for a higher position in the firm? One young man even explained that he was unhappy with the ₱15,000 per month compensation Vox Elite was offering, quoting ₱20,000 per month as the entry-level pay of his previous technical support job. He then told the recruiter that he would have to think about the offer and left the room before the others in the group were done asking questions. That moment made me realize that despite or perhaps because

of the rigorous process of weeding out numerous unqualified applicants, the remaining individuals did not see themselves as supplicants to the firm. Somewhere along the way—most likely through previous call center positions, as suggested by the dissatisfied applicant—they had learned to negotiate the circumstances of their employment and look for ways to move both up and out. Indeed, at this moment I saw quite clearly how young Filipinos struggle to affirm the value of their labor within the structural and psychological constraints of racialized and gendered capitalism.

Orientation, Orientalism, and Capital's Objectives

About two weeks after being offered a job as a technical support representative for the Elphin printer account at Vox Elite, I began the orientation and training process. The time lag between recruitment and training contrasted sharply with the swift and efficient application process, but it, too, reflected something important about outsourcing: its contingency on corporate capital. As I learned from Joel during those two weeks, Vox Elite still needed to find enough suitable employees to fill the seats on Elphin's printer account, which meant that those hired earliest would have to wait the longest to start working. Even the amount of time it takes to train for an account depends both on the complexity of the product that technical support representatives must learn to service and on parameters set by the client, such as how much they are willing to spend on training. Some training sessions can last up to two months, while others can run for as little as two weeks.

For the Elphin printer account—in which we were to service only one type of Elphin printer (the inkjet) for one type of use (personal), with the others being serviced by a different account—the new hires and I were scheduled for one week of training in American culture through a course called U.S. Cultural Competency, or simply CC, and four weeks of product training with Elphin. Like other courses of its kind in call centers across the global south, CC aimed to orient new call center agents to features of American culture and society deemed relevant to customer service and technical support work, including major U.S. holidays and the abbreviations for each state, as well as U.S. history, American English and accents, and American norms of interaction and social behavior. To prepare new employees for the physical rigors and psychological challenges of working

in Western time zones, the class started at ten in the evening and ended at seven in the morning.

Vox Elite's orientation and training sessions were held on the eighth floor of a high-rise building not far from their recruitment offices. Compared to other call centers I had visited during my fieldwork, Vox Elite's facilities were unexpectedly bare and cheerless. There was no lobby with brightly colored couches or computer stations where employees could surf the web in their downtime, and smokers made do with the corner of a parking garage, where cigarette butts lingered in pools of oil and dirt on the cement floor. Still, as I settled into a seat in the middle rear of the classroom for orientation, I sensed that the dozens of other trainees were happy to be employed in a place in which computers and air-conditioning were integral features of the working environment, and where our hourly rate—around ₱86 per hour (about \$1.80)—included extra pay for working at night and was well above the country's minimum wage.

Waiting for orientation to start, I met Archie, a Philippine citizen who, as an immigrant in the United States, had just spent two years in California working as a call center agent with a major U.S. gaming company but who had gotten tired of the loneliness and expense of living in the United States and wanted to come home to Manila. Then there was Mika, who had worked on an Elphin account before but in sales, which she found stressful. "There were days when I couldn't make extra sales on top of the ones that the customers had called in for, and I felt so stupid," she explained. As the three of us were chatting, orientation began, and it was quick but illuminating. A human resources staff person, whom I recognized as one of the facilitators of the aptitude tests, offered her congratulations and then welcomed us all to the company and the account. She also wasted no time in assuring us that Vox Elite was a top-notch company providing some of the best customer experiences in the world and therefore that we had "made the right decision" in coming to work for the company. Another recruiter then chimed in to convey that there were ample opportunities to move up in the company, and swiftly. Knowing what I did about attrition and job-hopping, I understood these opening remarks in relation to agents' willingness to leave a call center for a better opportunity elsewhere or because of the stress of the work. Capital's struggle for adequate labor thus continued even as employees were being integrated into a firm's culture. To this end, the recruiter ran through the list of amenities and services we

could expect to find at Vox Elite, such as sleeping quarters and a free fitness center. When she covered the working hours and the various shifts—the majority of which were of course at night—the recruiter reminded us that “this is the industry you wish to embrace.” She then lightly clapped her hands in front of a new hire who had already fallen asleep in his chair, and many laughed.

Following this presentation by human resources, I found myself in a classroom containing twenty two-person desks, with a computer station for each person. A lone window covered with a sheet of peeling dark blue cellophane was set high on the wall in the back of the room, compounding the sense that we had entered a temporal and physical capsule, isolated from the outside world. Still, there was enough nervous energy among my thirty-four fellow trainees—two-thirds of whom were young men—to keep that first night buoyant and engaging. Once we were seated, our CC instructor, Bella Chiu, a fair-skinned young woman who was about my age, led us in our first icebreaker exercise, in which each person was asked to draw a picture that described their personality and then present it to the class. To my surprise, the soft-spoken shy young man sitting at my desk got up to present his drawing and with a dry tone said, “My name is Junior, but you can call me ‘007’”—a reference to the fictional British secret agent James Bond—which drew laughter from the class. As my fellow trainees presented their drawings and more jokes were made, a relaxed tone began to permeate the room. There was polite silence, however, when I presented my drawing of a bicycle—which I used to describe myself as a “balanced, skilled, and fun” person—as it was the first time that anyone in the class heard my American accent. Indeed, my status as the only person in the class who had been born and raised in the United States set me apart from the others and, as I would soon learn, affected how some of my fellow trainees related to me during the course of our training.

As soon as we were done with our introductions, Bella flipped to a page in a thick spiral-bound training manual and said, “Okay. So, who here knows the meaning of the word *ethnocentrism*?” In response, one of the new hires quickly shouted out that “ethnocentrism means seeing things from your own culture’s perspective.” Satisfied by this definition, Bella said, “Correct! So, remember this, everyone: On the [production] floor, it will always be the perspective of the Americans that you should be adopting.” Bella then showed the class a PowerPoint slide displaying two col-

umns of cultural descriptions, one for Americans and the other for Filipinos. Americans, the lists informed us, are task-oriented, individualistic, and egalitarian, while Filipinos are relationship-oriented, collectivist, and hierarchical. Bella further explained that “Americans have ‘now or never attitudes,’ process information sequentially, and do things in an orderly fashion,” whereas Filipinos “often try to process many things at once.” Americans’ task orientation, moreover, means that they value productivity, unlike Filipinos, who most value social relationships. Last, Bella told us, the United States’s egalitarian culture means that Americans regard each other as equals, such that differences in status only signal differences in skill or development, not essential personhood: “Teachers are guides, not gurus, and managers empower employees, rather than demand deference.” Bella continued by explaining that we should think of American and Filipino culture as two icebergs that might collide.

Writing all of this down in a small notebook, I was struck though not surprised by the rather blatant Orientalism on display. Before my fieldwork, I had read much about the way offshore call centers, as transnational spaces of global capital and communication, reproduce colonial dynamics of control. The CC training fulfilled this expectation right off the bat, establishing hard-and-fast distinctions between Americans and Filipinos and therefore indexing a legacy of colonial relations through which the West produces knowledge of the East, especially through the realm of culture.³ According to this catalog of difference, Westerners are rational in both thought and action, while non-Westerners adhere to tradition and nonrational social and kinship bonds. Here, then, was our first major lesson in relatability. Filipinos would have to adopt American ways of being in the world and use their flexibility to cross the imagined chasm of culture to reach Americans on the other side—or, in CC’s metaphor, to keep the two icebergs from colliding. But what exactly would it mean for these cultures to clash? What, in other words, was at stake in this cultural negotiation, this pedagogy of relatability? The next part of the lesson made clear that call center work required particular behaviors and affective orientations that were necessary for Vox Elite and its client companies to achieve their bottom lines. “To do [your] jobs well,” Bella said, agents needed to develop “cross-cultural skills” that translated into “certain comportments,” such as immediately and accurately getting tasks done, speaking descriptively but concisely to customers, working efficiently, practicing a sense of urgency,

and being assertive. As agents, Bella elaborated, we would have to think “in a linear” way, give directions clearly and directly, and not “beat around the bush” when explaining things to callers. The latter is considered a passive form of communication that would surely irritate American callers.

The first lesson of CC was therefore a key moment of colonial recall in the service of capital’s objectives. Just as Orientalism has historically justified the control of peoples deemed irrational, unruly, and traditional by those considered elevated to modern and civilized status, CC used racial and national difference to further discipline Filipino call center agents into conforming to company standards and to rationalize the behavioral and affective rules to which Vox Elite agents would be subject. That the company’s standards were often represented as *customer needs*—rather than capital’s demand on both customers and labor—made these expressions of power all the more insidious. This obfuscation of the capital-labor relation reminded me of the many ways that the figure of a generic American consumer who wants cheap goods and fast, efficient service is often evoked in dominant discourse as a justification for the free trade policies that allowed corporations to outsource offshore in the first place. In contrast to this dominant explanation, during my fieldwork I overheard (and heard of) more than a few calls in which customers did not express the sense of urgency that CC implied they would; in fact, the opposite was the case, as customers were often slow or inefficient in their explanations of the problems at hand, had to search for information the agent needed to address the customer’s problem, or even deliberately kept the agent on the line to talk about something unrelated to a product or technical problem.⁴ This is not to suggest that there were never customers who acted in the ways that the CC lesson described. Passive explanations of problems and excessive apologies indeed irritate many callers. Yet the need for extreme efficiency and obsessive adherence to the labor process is more directly tied to management rather than consumer demands.

Training in CC was therefore about teaching agents to discipline themselves and control customers through various scripts and communicative techniques, such as “call flow” and “active listening.” Only through call control, managers argue, can agents meet the long list of demands that corporate clients place on BPO firms, including call-volume quotas, customer satisfaction scores, and new sales. For the Elphin printer account, for example, we would be pressured to achieve “first-call resolution”—meaning

completely handling a caller's issue the first time he or she calls about it. At the same time, the imperative for agents to engage in efficient communication and controlled conversations was coupled with the seemingly contradictory demand for polite speech and empathic behavior—that is, to relate to customers in an understanding manner. When customers expressed their issues with agitation or frustration, for example, we were told to mirror their dispositions by saying things like “I understand that you are frustrated” or “I can see how that would be a problem.” Agents were also told that it was almost never a good idea to indicate that the customer was the source of the problem about which they were calling. As a result, agents' affective skills are both activated and constrained.

Revising the Script

Despite what I considered the intensity of the messaging in CC, the class itself was relaxed and rather fun, with our lessons broken up by group exercises meant to ease us into a new environment but also instill the camaraderie that was characteristic of call centers. However, although people in the course were generally boisterous and engaged with one another, and although I found the cultural training rather problematic, my fellow trainees seemed to absorb the lessons with relative indifference, as if learning about the United States was uninteresting or perhaps even *passé*. While Bella talked about American and Filipino cultural differences, for example, most people surfed the web, played online games, watched YouTube videos, visited social networking websites, and chatted with friends via instant messaging.⁵ In fact, although Vox Elite had placed Internet-blocking software on all the computers, it proved a minor obstacle for many in the course who knew how to access tunnel websites that bypassed the blocks—the irony being that the very tech savviness that helped trainees qualify for call center work in the first place also allowed them to avoid workplace demands and maneuver around management-imposed barriers. I engaged in such distractions as well, since there were moments when neither the content of the course nor the field I was observing was more than minimally stimulating.⁶ Bella, either blithely ignorant of everyone's transgressions or aware of but entirely unconcerned by them, almost never said a word about these activities.

A number of explanations for a lack of interest in CC come to mind. One

is the perception of the rather low stakes of training. In fact, to pass CC, the trainees only had to successfully perform a single mock call (in which our instructor Bella played the role of a caller) as well as tests that addressed easily memorable facts like the abbreviations for American states, the names of state capitals, and famous U.S. landmarks. Perhaps most important, new hires could take these tests as many times as needed to pass them. Then there was the fact that, as I learned throughout the week, many people had been previously employed by a call center and therefore were already quite familiar with the communication protocol and accustomed to providing customer service to U.S.-based callers. Such familiarity even allowed trainees to informally critique the official CC training manual, often by exposing the ways that American callers, not Filipino agents, were unruly, combative, or communicated poorly. During lessons on call handling and control, for example, a young man named Arthur explained that customers cause agents stress because “they only want to hear what they want to hear.” One woman, Beatrice, drew on her past job experience to make an explicit intervention with regard to the idea that trainees are their own obstacles to good call control. In response to a PowerPoint slide that addressed “what agents need to overcome to ensure total customer satisfaction”—where the bullet-pointed items were “negative emotions,” “lack of confidence,” “personal beliefs,” and “fear of the customer”—Beatrice said to the class, “It’s really not necessary to be scared of Americans. They are just really rude, but you don’t need to be scared.” In other words, Beatrice suggested that American callers, not Filipino agents, were the ones with the problem to overcome.

In some ways, then, the new Vox Elite employees came to the training with an understanding that while there may be differences between Americans and Filipinos, this did not have to signal relations of inequality. Indeed, there were a number of moments during CC in which Bella and the others worked against not only CC’s training protocol but the very logic of Filipino/American relatability as a history of inclusionary and exclusionary colonizing and imperial practices. For example, Bella punctuated her introduction of CC by stating that although we would be taking on American perspectives during service calls, “this did not mean upholding Americans as the best people in the world.” After she had run through the first set of slides on American and Filipino cultural differences, Bella also cheerfully implored the class, “Remember, we are not Americans, we

are Filipinos!”—an exhortation met by nods of agreement from many in the class. Later that week, during an exercise meant to convey the idea of the United States as a melting pot of immigrant cultures and a site of upward mobility, Bella stopped to ask whether people in the room “still believe[d] that America is the land of milk and honey,” to which someone emphatically replied, “No, because now we have their [Americans’] jobs!” Such comments signaled not only resistance to the official training script but a decolonizing position anchored in a disavowal of the desire to achieve proximity to American culture. Expressing more than just resistance to Vox Elite’s training script, for example, Bella’s interjections struck me as subtle but critical revisions of a larger narrative of U.S.-Philippine relations. By *reminding* the class that “we are Filipinos, not Americans” (a statement that did not technically apply to me as a U.S. citizen, and was also problematic in its implication that one could not be both Filipino and American), Bella not only reinforced a distinction between the two identities but also implicitly undermined inclusionary racist narratives that cast Filipinos as part of the American family, either as “little brown brothers” or as part of a redemptive and reciprocal historical relationship between the Philippines and the United States.⁷ As I discussed in earlier chapters, such explicit clarification is necessary only in a historically specific ideological setting that would cast Filipinos in the American mold and exalt the latter into positions of superiority in the first place.

One of the most illustrative moments in the negotiation of Filipino/American relatability was during CC’s activity concerning immigration history. Upon our return from lunch one day, Bella split the class up into groups and asked each group to do about thirty minutes of web-based research on the history of “early settlers” in the United States. The ostensible goal of the lesson was to discover how the United States became a melting pot of people of various national origins. Yet the only immigrant groups we were asked to research were the English, Italians, Irish (to which my group was assigned), and Chinese. The assignment’s complete omission of Native Americans and African slaves, as well as the absence of almost all non-European immigrants, clearly reproduced a narrative of America as a nation of predominantly European origin (while the inclusion of Chinese immigrants perhaps played to a contemporary narrative about Chinese economic prosperity and the size of the Chinese diaspora). The lesson also further invisibilized the history of Filipino migration to the United

States, with which many, if not all, of the people in the class would have been familiar. By eliding this history, cc's lesson on immigration—the only U.S. history to which we were exposed during training—reproduced what scholars have called Philippine amnesia, or the symbolically violent exclusion from U.S. history of the Philippine-American War specifically and the experience of Filipinos as racialized labor more broadly.⁸ Moreover, such elision erased the very conditions of the Philippine call center's production—that is, the ongoing appropriation of Filipino labor for U.S. capital and the imperial regime in which that capital is intertwined. In this way, what constituted lessons in American culture were not just holidays and landmarks but ideologically specific ways to know and understand America—as white, as a melting pot, as a land of opportunity—in turn confirming how “‘America’ is a social relation as well as a set of knowledges,” rather than an empirically secure entity.⁹

The next day's training on accent neutralization and American English reinforced these contradictory dynamics of relatability. Again, at the start of the lesson Bella presented us with a list that compared American and Filipino culture, only this time the list consisted of American phrases with their Filipino English counterparts, referred to as “Filipinoisms.” Thus, the American “Goodbye” stood in contrast to the Filipino “I'll go ahead,” and “I'll pick you up at 10 A.M.” appeared alongside “I'll fetch you at 10 A.M.” The lesson was clearly designed to alert us to the ways that Filipino English is inadequate for customer service delivery to a U.S. customer base, reinforcing the contradictory recognition of Filipino English as an autonomous version of the language while also marking it as insufficient.¹⁰ Later that same day came a lesson on accents, in which Bella instructed the class to practice articulating the *f* sound and the *p* sound (which many Filipinos use interchangeably), pronouncing words containing long vowel sounds, as well as placing the stress in multisyllabic words. We did this by gathering into groups and reciting English-language poetry before our classmates, with Bella occasionally stopping the speaker to correct his or her pronunciation of a word. The lesson then moved on to a “Guide to the American ‘T,’” which enumerated the handful of ways that the letter *t* is or is not pronounced in American English and in various regions of the United States.

Writing about the control of the voice, speech, and accent of Indian call center workers, Raka Shome argues that within call centers “language functions as an apparatus of transnational governmentality through which

the voice of the third world subject is literally erased and reconstructed in the servicing of the global economy.”¹¹ Thus, “the Indian agent becomes reconstructed as a ‘modern subject’ (i.e. able to speak to a ‘modern’ clientele) by the presence of an impending legal apparatus of a faraway country that monitors her/his speech and language use.”¹² Yet accent neutralization is not only about expunging “unwanted cultural particulars” but also about creating and refining a placeless accent—one that cannot be fixed in any regional or national site, thus preventing customers from knowing exactly where their calls are going.¹³ Indeed, over and over again in the media and marketing related to the Philippine call center industry, Filipinos are described as having neutral or light accents that are easy to understand, with tacit or sometimes explicit comparison to Indian accents, which U.S.-based customers not only find difficult but also recognize *as* Indian. The value of the Filipino accent therefore lies in its seeming detachment from a particular people or place. While such methods work only if a caller is not familiar with Filipino accents, the attempt at obfuscation is premised on the assumption that Filipinos are largely unknown and imperceptible in the United States—in and of itself an effect of the historical erasure of Filipino bodies, labor, and voices from the dominant U.S. culture. Finally, such language training always already assumes that the customer is a native and/or fluent English speaker—which agents soon learn is not the case—thus reinforcing how the term *American*, despite being the object of pedagogical attention during training, is in actuality an unmarked, undifferentiated category to which racialized Filipino voices register as *other*.

Again, there seemed to be very little enthusiasm for these lessons among my fellow trainees, most likely because the mock-call test would focus on the trainees’ ability to engage in the correct call flow rather than on any particulars of grammar, vocabulary, or accent, and perhaps because having already made it through recruitment or having worked in call centers before, many in the class did not want or need additional English-language instruction. In any case, as indicated by the laughter that percolated throughout the room at the time, what seemed to interest the trainees the most was not the list of American English phrases but the list of Filipinoisms. On the following day, Bella asked each person to talk about something they had learned over the previous two days. A popular topic among the trainees was the lesson on Filipino English phrases, which they found particularly funny—a reaction that I understand through the

analytic rubric of Filipino/American relatability as a practice of proximity. My sense is that the Filipino English phrases struck the trainees as rather uncanny—that is, both strange and utterly familiar—when seen alongside their American equivalents. Their apparent delight registered recognition of the gap between the “original” American phrases and the Filipino “copy” in a way that is consistent with popular Filipino comedic performances in which one person tries to imitate someone or something else, such as an American person or accent. The popularity of such performances, and indeed their very designation as jokes, suggests the humor in what Rey Chow has described as “a certain advantageous position” of the colonized, who is “much closer to the truth of the mediated and divisive character of all linguistic communication” than the colonizer.¹⁴ This double consciousness—knowing what one sounds like to oneself and to the judging ears of power—is possible only because, for colonized subjects, learning the colonizers’ language “became . . . a lesson in none other than the continual, disciplined *objectification* of an intimate part of themselves.”¹⁵ The gap between native and nonnative English thus became a source of both anxiety (in the context of the call center labor process, which demands the use of American English) and amusement for many in the class. Filipino/American relatability could thus also open up ways of knowing the many dimensions of the postcolonial experience as well as ideological and ontological struggle.¹⁶

Throughout CC the story of America, and the lesson in how to relate to it, got revised in subtle ways. While the ostensible goal of the lesson on immigrant groups was to convey that harrowing economic conditions in people’s home countries compelled them toward the United States as the land of opportunity, by asking whether anyone in the class “*still* thought the U.S. was the land of milk and honey” Bella also cued us to think about how many immigrants’ expectations of upward social mobility were *not* met after they settled in the United States. Such narratives circulated throughout the classroom, as when a young man named Michael introduced himself on the first day of class as someone who wanted to work in a call center so he could provide assistance not to his family in the Philippines but his family in the United States. Later in the week, Michael explained that his father and stepmother owned a small bakery in Las Vegas, but he saw “how difficult it can be to make ends meet” in the United States. When one of the other trainees asked Michael whether he had plans to join them in the

United States, he shook his head and said that he'd rather stay home in the Philippines and work in a call center where, if people said racist things to him, he could at least hang up the phone at the end of his shift, whereas "in the U.S., you have to live with discrimination everywhere, all of the time." The one person who actually answered Bella's question about the perception of the United States as the land of milk and honey—by saying, "No, because now we have their [Americans'] jobs"—highlighted yet another reason that the trainees questioned the narrative of immigrant success in the United States. Although the comment reinforces the misguided characterization of U.S. outsourcing as solely a competition between workers of the first and third worlds (rather than the struggle between global capital and labor), it also suggested that the United States was no longer a place where people, especially middle-class Americans, could find and maintain stable, decent-paying jobs—an idea that the agents and I would directly confront in the figures of the American trainers from Elphin whose classrooms we entered the following week.

As I tried to process the lessons from CC, I also found my attention drawn to the way my own relationships with fellow trainees were playing out. Indeed, the struggle over how to relate to the United States seemed manifest in the very way that particular people in the training course related to me. While the majority of my fellow trainees paid me no particular attention—a fact that suggests that my presence as a Filipina American was somewhat unremarkable—I did become an object of attachment for three individuals who each cathected in me some aspect of the larger relations and imaginaries that I analyze in this book. As mentioned earlier, when CC first started, I chose a seat near the back middle of the room so as to observe the classroom space quite easily; seated next to me on the first day was Junior, the quiet guy with the droll affect. By the second day of class, however, a nineteen-year-old young man named Lester—the young man discovered sleeping during orientation—had displaced Junior as my seatmate. I had taken notice of Lester the day before but not yet spoken directly to him.

I found it curious that of all the people Lester could have chosen to sit next to, he chose me, but it soon became clear that he saw in me a one-woman audience for his seemingly endless stories of his talents and abilities. One day, he insisted on showing me a YouTube video of his performance during a mixed martial arts competition; another day, he explained

to me all of the things he had learned about car repair while working with one of his uncles, an auto mechanic, the previous summer. While it could have been that Lester simply wanted relief from the boredom he was experiencing in the class and didn't quite know how else to engage me in conversation, I sensed that his desire to impress me resulted from something more than tedium and social awkwardness. One night when Lester and I were walking together in a food market in search of "lunch," he overheard me speak Tagalog to one of the vendors and in response laughed directly at me for my American accent and imprecise pronunciation. The laughter was neither subtle nor friendly. It had the sting of ridicule, and I calmly let him know that he embarrassed and upset me. Still, I was not surprised that it was on the terrain of language and accent that Lester attempted to achieve some power and cultural superiority over me, for language was precisely the arena in which my own capacity to relate to Filipinoness was quite weak, not to mention the capacity of his that would be tested every night on the job. At that moment I could see more clearly the power struggle in which Lester had been interpellating me as a woman and a Filipina American: constantly seeking my recognition and approval of his many abilities, he seemed to jump at the opportunity to make his powers of judgment and derision felt and known.

The situation could not have been more different with Sammy, a gender-queer man with aspirations of becoming a female supermodel and moving to the United States. I had spoken to Sammy a few times during CC, as he usually joined the circle of smokers who became my primary social group during breaks.¹⁷ By the end of CC, however, Sammy, too, expressed a desire to be my desk mate—although, unlike Lester, Sammy asked me how I would feel about this arrangement beforehand. Sammy was also always eager to engage me in discussion, although the topics always revolved around life and culture in the United States, especially New York City, where I had lived since the late 1990s. Invariably, Sammy would use these conversations as opportunities to rehearse and confirm the cultural capital embedded in his knowledge of America, asking questions such as "Isn't it true that people in New York City have really nice cars?" This grammar of validation, in which Sammy established his psychic proximity to a place he had never visited physically, also allowed him to construct an imaginary space for his glamorous ambitions. One night, for example, Sammy expressed the desire to someday purchase the apartment that his celebrity idol Mariah Carey

owned, which led us to a conversation about real estate in New York City. In the last chapter of this book, I consider the ways that my relationship with Sammy was anchored in his desire to share with me his aspirations for gender reassignment and surgical alterations that would allow him to become a supermodel. Here I wish to point out that Sammy's adoration of New York City life and American celebrities reverberated in his treatment of me as someone who he clearly assumed always wanted "the best" of everything, even with regard to things as seemingly trivial as canned foods. One day during a lunch break, after I had removed a can of tuna fish from my bag, Sammy asked whether it was a particular American brand, which he had heard was "the best out there." To Sammy's mild disappointment, I had chosen a common Filipino brand.

The third person in the class who befriended me was Andy, a man my age who had worked aboard a U.S. cruise ship and therefore among Americans and other foreigners for several years. Andy was my neighbor by happenstance; he had simply chosen the seat across the aisle from me on my left. Throughout the training Andy was a constant source of witty remarks and self-deprecating humor; it became clear to me later that while these were natural aspects of his personality, they also helped him cope with the anxiety of being a married father of three young boys who was new to call center work and thus had a lot on the line. While I am tempted to say that my conversations with Andy felt the most organic—that is, as though there were fewer social stakes in the outcome of our interaction for him than for Lester and Sammy—I know that our affinity was preconditioned by the circuits of capital that had placed Andy within English-speaking spaces and thus made him able to converse with and relate to me quite easily.

The affective attachments that bound me to Andy, Sammy, and Lester were each informed by the structure of feeling that binds the Philippines to the United States: enamored of my social and cultural capital, Sammy admired and respected me; Lester saw me through the lenses of pride, rejection, and ridicule; and Andy's seemingly easy rapport with me was made possible by his experience as a transnational labor migrant. In this way, each relationship embodied a configuration of America/Americans in the Philippine imagination in the twenty-first century, a relationship underwritten by capitulation and critique. In the next section, I explore the interactions between the Vox Elite trainees and a different group of Americans—American trainers from the Elphin printer company.

Performing Knowledge Transfer

Elphin product training took place in a similar classroom as CC on the same dark and cool eighth-floor office space. As I entered the classroom that first night of training, the instructor, Tim Wheeler, was busy connecting an Elphin laptop to a digital projector. From a spot in the middle of the room, Sammy waved me over to his desk and then offered me the seat next to his. As soon as I sat down, Sammy anxiously asked me whether I had seen his crush, Paolo, arrive that night. He was worried that Paolo had left Vox Elite for another job, because he had heard Paolo saying something to that effect during the last day of CC. To Sammy's relief, Paolo walked into the room just as class was about to start. "I'll ask him about it later," he whispered wistfully.

Everyone was at attention when Tim, standing nearly six feet tall and wearing denim pants and an untucked short-sleeved button-down shirt, started to speak. Tim introduced himself as a trainer who had been working for Elphin for six and a half years. Some of the trainees nodded affirmatively when Tim described himself as lucky to have weathered the company's recent round of outsourcing and layoffs and confessed that he was "happy to have a job," a comment that marked him as an embodied contradiction of globalization. As one of the last people standing on a corporate path that led to downsizing and unemployment, an American trainer's job is essentially to make himself or herself obsolete by "collud[ing] in the effort to upload the contents of their brain" to offshore employees.¹⁸ As Tim stood at the head of class sharing these details of his life with us, I could not help but note the precarity he so clearly represented and was experiencing. Tim then went on to explain that it was his first time in the Philippines and only his second time outside of the United States; the first was when he conducted Elphin training in Germany two years earlier. Born and raised in Texas, Tim had relocated to Tallahassee, Florida, to work for Elphin; there he met his second wife, with whom he had a two-year-old daughter. There was a loud silence in the room when Tim told the class that he was divorced and had a ten-year-old son with his former wife. His casual proffering of these facts implied that he did not know that divorce is illegal in the Philippines and thus that his status as a remarried divorcé was rather foreign to many in the class.

Once he had finished introducing himself, Tim immediately situated

our roles as call center agents within a larger corporate and consumer frame by saying, “You’ll be doing tech support for Elphin—yes. But your real job, your overarching goal, is to generate revenue for Elphin. As tech support, you are an extension of sales. People in sales only need to sell a product once, but tech support and customer service people, they sell the product and the company again and again, in how they handle the customers and their issues. This is crucial in a consumer-driven economy.” During that first day of product training, Tim spent ample time making the point that as agents we were there to serve consumers, who were “responsible for the company’s future, and therefore [our] future, too.” He explained that in a world where products were often quite similar, bad customer service would drive consumers to competing companies and that, for better or for worse, we should fear the ways that Americans “love to gripe to others about a bad customer service experience.” In this way, there could be no mistaking that we were workers tasked with instilling confidence in consumers about the products and the company, which we not only represented but, according to Tim, were “synonymous” with.

Then Tim launched into some introductory remarks that encapsulated his general approach to training. “Most Americans,” Tim declared, “see call centers as the person they have to call to get what they want. They’re thinkin,’ ‘Yes, I know my computer’s broken. I know what I need. Just give it to me.’ The truth is, you will see more problems in one week than a good IT administrator sees in a month, ’cause a good IT administrator sets things up so they won’t break.” Tim paused and then added, “I’m the kinda guy who’s into immediate gratification. If you’re anything like me, helping people makes you feel good.” At this point, I was struck by the rhetorical maneuvering in Tim’s choice of words. Tim clearly sought to empower us as new agents by elevating our troubleshooting skills above those of IT administrators; the latter might know a lot of things about computers, Tim implied, but we would *fix* problems, which came with a special kind of interpersonal satisfaction. Moreover, Tim’s comparison between technical support and IT implied that he understood the hierarchy of the value chain and wanted to neutralize or even subvert it. Right off the bat, then, Tim was helping to manage the ambiguity of skill and value attached to technical support while also continuing to erode the boundary between work and worker, as suggested by his slippery description of call centers as people.

Tim was also clearly doing some relational work. By creating a carica-

ture of American consumers as entitled know-it-alls, Tim seemed intent on diminishing them as a threat to us as future call center agents. He also established a willingness to identify with the trainees (“If you’re anything like me”) but also the authority to speak on behalf of “most Americans.” Throughout the product training that I experienced at Vox Elite, Tim concocted a fluid mix of confidence in the trainees, sarcasm about Americans, and instructional authority. Even in this brief opening monologue, it was clear that Tim could easily shift between the roles of customer, agent, and trainer, often changing his voice, accent, and body language to indicate when he was acting as one or another. This shifting of perspectives was a skill that enhanced his teaching not only by modeling empathy but also by affirming that emotional labor, as a performance, requires acting in a particular role.¹⁹ In this setting, Tim’s job was to give us the lines and stage directions appropriate to our roles as call center agents, as well as to teach us what to expect from the other customers in a technical support interaction. No matter what role he performed for us as a trainer, though, Tim always made clear that he related, or was trying to relate, to our challenges as agents. I believe that this disposition earned him fondness and respect among the trainees, much like how my research participants felt about their team leaders and other managers. At the same time, these relational ties always led back to Elphin. For Tim, agents and trainers were in it together on behalf of Elphin, whose identity we should all assume. We were labor for consumers, and thus for capital—not against them.

As we proceeded through training, I filled pages and pages of my notebook with technical information about Elphin printers, although the first week of product training was dedicated to learning about Elphin’s entire line of products as well as its particular protocol and script for technical support. We learned how to check on the warranty of a product and what parts of a printer could be easily replaced; we even went over computer hardware, from the chipset in a motherboard to voltage regulator modules. The information was dense and highly detailed, but when I asked others whether they were experiencing information overload or confusion, most just shrugged their shoulders and said some of the information was stuff they already knew, and the rest they could practice during nesting, the period of time when new agents take calls but are supervised and assisted by more senior agents or managers. Indeed, the affect during training sessions was one of boredom and benign mischief, as once again most

of us just surfed the web, played games, or chatted with friends online in between the moments when we scribbled down notes from Tim's PowerPoint presentations. Perhaps the energy in the class would have changed if we had actual printers to look at and learn from, but these never manifested during my time in training. It seemed we were expected to learn and internalize the information put before us but with nothing material to attach it to. To me, the tedium I experienced cut straight to a contradiction about call center work that I had often sensed but not quite put my finger on until I underwent Elphin's product training. On the one hand, call center work and technical support jobs in particular had a rather hip cachet in the Philippines, linked as they were to technology, youth, and high wages. On the other hand, the things we came to learn, while perhaps exciting to tech aficionados, were relatively uninteresting to most people, in part, I believe, because this knowledge merely helped reproduce the mundane material culture of office life in workplaces far away. The job might have some sparkle, but the products in question were encased in plastic chassis and performed limited and banal functions.

Woven into our daily instruction on processors and toners, however, were more lessons on the United States and relating to Americans. "Knowledge transfer," it seemed, could involve much more than technical information. Throughout product training, the majority of Tim's scripting and stage directions were geared toward assuring agents that they could overcome the challenges of interacting with American customers. To do so, Tim relied heavily on the trope of Americans as unintelligent, a strategy used in other offshore call centers as well.²⁰ During the second week of product training, for example, Tim explained that there are times when customers are reluctant to troubleshoot a technical problem with a call center agent or even hostile to the idea of doing so. When I asked why that might be, Tim responded, "Well, let's see . . . ignorance, fear, and general stupidity!" which earned big laughs from the class. Tim then parlayed these comments into a discussion of call control. "Every call is a conversation with a goal," Tim told us. "And conversations that have a good goal also need a good leader." Tim emphasized that technical support representatives must see themselves as doctors, since the latter take control of conversations with patients by asking them key questions to diagnose a problem and then chart out a plan of action. Technical support representatives, that is, must adopt an attitude of leadership, in which confidence is key.

Tim's explanation revealed how encouraging agents to think of themselves as doctors with diagnostic authority was foundational to the emotional structures upholding Elphin's bottom line. Agents *had* to take control of conversations with customers; otherwise, valuable service time could be lost, replacement parts sent in error, or actual on-the-ground Elphin workers dispatched to offices unnecessarily. But in thinking of themselves this way, agents were also learning to negotiate the uneven social relations and cultural capital on which offshore call center work was premised. In other words, by learning to think of themselves as experts on even the most esoteric matters, they could redefine what counted as valuable knowledge, thereby resisting their subordination to the almighty customer. Even Tim's discussion of "educated customers" played on the discourse of stupid Americans and of agents as empowered experts. "Some of the people that you speak with will be educated people; they are working in offices, a lot of them. But keep in mind that there are two kinds of educated people: those who are smart enough to know what they don't know, and those who think they know everything." With this comment, Tim expressed his belief that how well Americans recognized their own ignorance was the real measure of their supposedly superior education. No matter what kind of customer an agent was speaking to, however, the agent would ultimately be the party with more knowledge. As I observed Tim use relational labor to help the class build this emotional structure, it became clear why people in the industry would later come to embrace the idea of the call center agent as a subject-matter expert.

Yet there were cracks in the emotional edifice. For one, the discourse of American unintelligence downplayed the material privilege that made customer service and technical support call centers possible in the first place. Many of these material differences manifested in agents' unfamiliarity with the products they would be servicing or with customers' "first-world problems" with those products. Lauren Joy, a fellow Vox Elite trainee who had prior experience working in technical support, explained, "Actually, there would be times that I don't know how to empathize with the customer because I don't know the things that they are asking about. Like problems with DSL [a Digital Subscriber Line]. I don't even have Internet in my house"—which was unfortunate given her interest in web design, an activity she had to pursue in Internet cafés or at the homes of friends or relatives who did have Internet access. Such differences were sometimes lost

on Tim. In a passing remark during one of our lessons, he made it clear that he thought everyone in the class had a washing machine and dryer in their homes, which from my experience I knew to be far from true. In another situation he unsuccessfully tried to start a conversation with some trainees about local restaurants—a type of discussion that presumed cosmopolitan knowledge of how to evaluate food as a cultural commodity—apparently unaware that most trainees brought food from home or did not participate in restaurant culture in the way Tim and the other trainers did.

These moments of friction were more than cultural clashes that a little diversity training could prevent. Rather, they pointed straight to the tensions and anxiety over race, nation, labor, and value that I came to see as defining the call center experience for many of my participants. Such moments also revealed how working as an offshore call center agent involved a double class subordination, in which third-world, racialized agents were cast as cheap labor servicing products for people living in a material world that the agents themselves could not readily access. The attempt to see oneself as equally powerful to, or even more powerful than, those one is serving—what Rachel Sherman calls the desire “to construct powerful selves”—thus allows workers to subjectively overcome inequalities of power and privilege while also leaving uneven social relations intact.²¹ This is not to suggest that agents’ empowerment is *merely* psychological or in their heads. To the extent that agents can harness this affective strength to control calls and perform well on the job in general, empowerment has material value for the company and personal value for the agent. Yet there is no doubt that it is a contradictory form of agency, one that emerges because the political-economic terrain on which call center work is situated is always and already so uneven. While representing Americans as unintelligent might help instill confidence in the new agents, it also often served as an agent’s *only* coping mechanism in the face of various types of insults and injuries they would experience during service calls, including customer racism. During one class session, we listened to a recorded call handled by an Elphin call center agent based in Tallahassee. The agent sounded like a young man, and the caller like a middle-aged woman; both sounded like white, native English speakers. After the agent completed the opening part of the call flow, the caller remarked, “Oh, good. It seems like whenever I call Elphin I seem to get a foreigner,” a comment the agent did not verbally acknowledge. When Tim heard this portion of the call, he

went to the classroom's board and wrote "bigoted Cx [customer]." When the call was over, he said the following: "About talking to people in foreign countries: a lot of Americans are fine with it. You won't get this a lot. But in some areas, like the Rust Belt, people are sensitive to outsourcing. And some, through generations of idiocy, have a very ethnocentric view of the world. In the call we just listened to, the agent did the best thing possible: he ignored the comment. If it's any consolation, people with those attitudes aren't tolerated back home. Please accept my apologies for those calls. My grandmother still refers to African Americans by the *N*-word."

While Tim recognized that historical and regionalized experiences of deindustrialization might instigate a customer's antagonism when speaking with a Filipino agent, he once again evoked the notion of idiocy as a way to frame these challenges. In this way, Tim's response also functioned as a lesson in a worldview that sees individual ignorance and stupidity—rather than white supremacy or structural racism—as the basis of racist actions and beliefs, while also imagining that the worst articulations of racism, while still alive today, are simply old-fashioned or anachronistic. Tim also painted an erroneous picture of a United States in which racism is not only not tolerated but largely nonexistent, except among families or social groups who pass ignorance from generation to generation like a bad but ultimately benign genetic abnormality. Finally, by offering the agents a preemptive apology for the racist encounters he believed they would experience, Tim performed both penitence for American racism and the hope that agents would learn to disavow it. I would later learn about the larger impact of this kind of cultural training when I interviewed a Filipina communication and cultural trainer from Call Control named Vivica in 2013. Referring to callers who insisted on speaking with an American customer service representative, Vivica explained that "we shouldn't generalize or stereotype the Americans based on how they talk to you and respond to you, because the people who are calling in are just a small percentage of Americans." When I asked whether Vivica could pinpoint when and where she learned to think this way, she cited a learning module during her own training experience, leading me to believe that, over time, informal methods like Tim's had come to be institutionalized and reproduced in call center training.

There were times, too, when Tim revealed the boundaries of his political beliefs. When explaining that Elphin had recently revised their war-

ranties to refer to “acts of nature” rather than “acts of God,” Tim said in an irritated voice, “PC [political correctness] in the States has gone completely rampant. There are phrases we don’t use because they might offend someone’s delicate sensibilities.” Indeed, the further off-script Tim went, the more his and the other trainers’ political inclinations showed. One of the most striking of these moments occurred one night when several training classes were combined, and thus all four American trainers—three white men and one black man, all in their twenties with the exception of Tim—were standing at the head of the class. As everyone was settling into the somewhat cramped new arrangement, the trainers introduced themselves and then offered to answer any questions the trainees had for them. My sense is that the trainers, thinking of themselves as authoritative sources on the first world who could satisfy third-world curiosity, did not expect the first question—which came from Sammy—to be what they thought of “President Barack Obama’s economic stimulus package.” In response, Tim announced his identity as a libertarian and then opined that TARP, or the Troubled Asset Relief Program, was a bailout “of stupid people” (by which he meant the U.S. banks) who did not deserve to be rescued. Quinn, perhaps the youngest trainer in the group, then added his two cents about the U.S. economic recession in particular. “As someone who looks at things as an outsider,” Quinn proudly remarked, “I see people as a bunch of lemmings. So some idiot analyst on Wall Street says we’re in a recession, and then everyone stops spending and pulls their money out of the bank.” Another trainer, Nick, then chimed in by saying that “the bailout was dumb” because it meant that the United States had to borrow money from other countries, to which Quinn responded that the situation was made all the worse because for years “the U.S. has lent money to third-world countries who never paid us back.” Avi, the black trainer, was the only one of the four who did not take part in the conversation.

The exchange demonstrated not only a common misunderstanding or lack of knowledge about the destructive reality of loans and structural adjustment in third-world countries but also the ease with which a discussion of the failure of the U.S. financial system and the volatility of the economy could be rerouted to a vilification of the poor and nonwhite. Moreover, watching this display of white male derision—an affective position predicated on entitlement to some fictional outsider status through which one smugly judges the behavior and intelligence of others—I was struck by

how the performance of America that we were witnessing was tied to the particular intersection of class, masculinity, and whiteness that these men occupied. It was not difficult to hear in their comments the same rancor and tone that I heard from aggrieved white men in the United States—men dissatisfied, sometimes dangerously so, with the economic shifts that had dried up blue-collar work and the social changes that were making America increasingly less white. The complex social positioning of the trainers was confirmed one evening during one of our lunch breaks at one in the morning, sometime near the end of the first week of product training. I was standing around with Andy, Lester, and a woman named Ginger as they smoked, when Tim and Nick joined us. Ginger was explaining to the group that she was working in a call center because she had not yet finished college—she was getting a degree in education—and therefore couldn't get another decent-paying job. Upon hearing this, Tim let out a sad laugh and said that because neither he nor Nick had graduated from college, "we'd be screwed here." Nick went on to say that a lot of his friends didn't have college degrees either and that they "worked in factories or military jobs, and so college wasn't something they necessarily considered doing, at least not right away."

Rewriting the Nation

I cannot say for certain whether this discrepancy in education reinforced or undermined Nick's and Tim's sense of accomplishment and value as white American men. What I can say, however, is that seeing these young men in the very place that symbolized the precarity of the American economy, alongside young Filipinos struggling to elevate the Philippines' place on a value chain, brought to light the way that globalization was changing the national narratives and social scripts through which Americans and Filipinos alike derived their identities and sense of purpose. My fieldwork at Vox Elite thus made clear to me that for Filipinos in the twenty-first century, learning to relate to Americans involved much more than understanding the significance of St. Patrick's Day or the meaning of English-language idioms. It also clearly revealed that nations, as imagined entities, are unevenly co-constructed through transnational processes that ascribe meaning to everything from race and geography to speech and accent,

and that individualized senses of race, gender, and class identity could be reconfigured through material and symbolic reconfigurations of national economies.

Out of research money and out of time, I left Vox Elite training in June 2009 and returned to the United States just one week shy of the account's nesting period, when agents took live calls for the first time. Back in New York City, I looked for opportunities to interview Americans who had gone to the Philippines to work with or train Filipino call center agents. One such person was Jessica Daly, a white woman my age who was pursuing her undergraduate degree after having worked for nearly a decade in the private sector. I close this chapter with a brief discussion of my interview with Jessica in order to reiterate the transnational racial and class complexities of the Philippines' sunrise industry and thus the fragility of the dominant narratives about global partnership among structurally unequal nations.

In the early 2000s, Jessica was working for a large manufacturer in northeastern Indiana, a part of the Rust Belt, when the company decided to have one of its largest accounts handled by BPO workers in Manila. Jessica was one of a handful of employees asked to travel to the Philippines to train the new hires and oversee the transition, which she recalls was not a popular proposition among her coworkers:

First things first, people at the company did not want to go train their replacements. The second thing was that they were so ignorant of the Philippines. People were asking, "Do they even have electricity over there?" or saying things like, "It's a third-world country," "You're going to die over there," or "They hate Americans." Some people didn't even know what the Philippines were. Anyhow, I was young, I was twenty-four or twenty-five at the time, and I wanted to go. I had never traveled outside of the U.S., but my father was in the navy, and he had actually been to Manila—Subic Bay—years ago, so I had heard stories about the Philippines and other places.

Jessica's description of her coworkers' attitudes about Filipinos reveals the racist and xenophobic discourses in which offshore outsourcing from the United States has been historically embedded—a backdrop for understanding the possible worlds from which the Elphin trainers them-

selves might have hailed. Although Jessica levels a critique against her coworkers, it is complicated by her own entanglement in the history of U.S. militarism in the Asian Pacific, which in turn has given rise to new intersections of tourism and capitalism that she as an American trainer represents. Jessica's description of the chance to go to the Philippines as in part a travel opportunity thus echoes Tim's marking of his stay in Manila as just one more addition to his collection of international experiences.²²

In our interview, Jessica went on to detail the ways her fellow white American trainers and managers talked about Filipino trainees in their private conversations: "You know, white people have no problem talking to another white person and using racial slurs. It's like this hidden society between whites when they feel they can talk shit about other people."

I told Jessica that I had long been aware of the private show of racism among white people. Understanding that she was making a contrast between herself and her former coworkers and managers, I asked Jessica how she dealt with such situations.

It was very hard, because I became friends with a lot of the Filipinos. And some of the Filipinos came here to the U.S. to get a better understanding of the job. So when they were here, I heard my American coworkers saying awful things—and keep in mind people knew that there were layoffs coming and that they had to help with the transition. It was a hostile environment. So you would hear these snide remarks like "They don't wash their hands when they go to the bathroom." Or "They smell." Or "Why do they always walk together?" "They are so weird." "What's wrong with them?" "They share their food." All of these little remarks. "They all look the same." "I don't understand them." "Why can't they speak English?" And of course when it came time for them to sit down with the Filipino trainees, there was none of that. Though I will say that while I didn't say anything like that, I didn't do anything to stop it.

In her description of this experience, Jessica exposes the racism of her former coworkers, locating it in both whiteness in general but also aggrieved whiteness in particular, demonstrating the way white Americans' anger about structural changes in the economy is not just displaced onto the bodies of nonwhite workers but can be linked to, and constitute, a form

of racism. Jessica's descriptions also made me shudder to think about the way that Filipino call center agents are trained to ignore customer racism while so much private racism is being maintained around them. Unlike for the majority of her coworkers, however, Jessica's cultural capital and her prospects for class mobility made it possible for her to relate to Filipinos in a more affirmative manner. "I think having traveled all around the U.S. and my father being so cultured, I wanted to get to know them, not ridicule them," she explained. "Also," she said, "I didn't care if I was losing my job. I was young. I knew I could get another good job. It wasn't like I had worked there my whole life. I think that's what ultimately kept me motivated; I didn't feel the same hostility or tension as the other people. And my productivity increased, while theirs went down."

Later in our conversation, Jessica described an American manager from the company named Darren, who had traveled to the Philippines with her and also established a different relationship with Filipino trainees. Jessica described him as "very much engaged and a friendly guy." But what bothered Jessica about Darren was that "he enjoyed flaunting the fact that he had a lot of money." This led to a conversation about the relative value of Darren's salary in the Philippines, and the refractions of class identity that such a salary created for American trainers. "Darren was making maybe \$38,000 a year here, maybe a little more," Jessica explained, "which is really nothing. But over there, in the Philippines, you perceive things differently. Because he stayed in a house and had a driver and a lot of cash and could spend anything on dinner, he acted like he was rich, and a lot of the Filipinos treated him like that, too. They really admired him . . . I mean, he *was* really nice, like I said, but I think the fact that he had money had something to do with that [admiration]."

Jessica's description of Darren hints at the way that, for many tourists or businesspeople who travel to developing countries, the racialized economic hierarchies among nations allow middle- or lower-middle-class Americans to feel a greater sense of wealth and superiority than they would in the United States. As Steven Gregory succinctly puts it, for these first-world subjects "hierarchy feels good."²³ In this transnational context of wealth differentials, Filipino/American relatability thus also provides a class framework in which Americans can experience elevated social status relative to Filipinos. Once again, however, these feelings are compli-

cated and potentially destabilized by the realization that one of the sources of Americans' status—corporate jobs—is becoming available to Filipino people who often have relatively higher educational credentials than the trainers themselves. Neither Darren nor Jessica had been to college when they went to the Philippines as trainers, but, as Jessica observed, “every one of the people we were training in the Philippines had a college degree. It’s really amazing how many degrees they have.”