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A Nation on the Line

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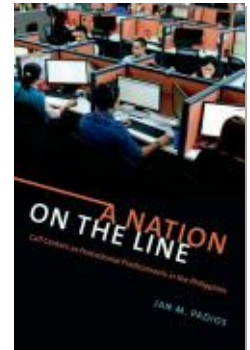
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QUEERING THE CALL CENTER

*Sexual Politics, HIV/AIDS,
and the Crisis of (Re)Production*

The late 2000s was an exciting time for BPO companies in the Philippines, as the growth of the offshore industry soared to new heights and the country was on the verge of overtaking India as the world's capital of call centers. In January 2010 this exuberance was tempered when representatives of the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) issued an unsettling report showing that the number of people testing positive for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) had risen dramatically since March 2009, with call center workers making up a substantial number of the new cases.¹ According to the nation's Department of Health (DOH), "young urban professionals or those of the working sector, particularly call center agents," were now being added to a list of "the kinds of people"—namely, "sex workers, gays and drug addicts"—who had become infected with HIV in the past few years.² The DOH report also showed that call center workers were carrying sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea and chlamydia in higher numbers than ever before. In its coverage of this news, the national media network ABS-CBN showed neither nuance nor tact, as its headline on January 27 read "HIV Cases Soar among Filipino Yuppies, Call Center Workers; Casual Sex, Orgies Are Seen as Possible Cause of the Problem."³

The proposition that young urban professionals accounted for a high percentage of the new cases of HIV in the Philippines cast a shadow on the sunrise industry, building on and strengthening the already existing association between call centers and forms of sexual and gender deviance in the public imagination. Indeed, since its emergence the call center industry in the Philippines has been socially and culturally constructed as a queer site that enables the exploration and expression of nonnormative

sexual and gender practices, including recreational, homosexual, and/or premarital relations, cross-dressing and other forms of gender-queer presentation, and sex work. In this context, where call center work was already linked with “at-risk” bodies, the news of rising HIV cases incited a number of alarmist responses by workers, government officials, and industry leaders. Some immediately endorsed greater surveillance within the workplace, demonstrating what Michael Tan has described as the *utak police*, or policing mentality, that has been part of HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns in the Philippines since the late 1980s.⁴ A doctor from the PGH’s Infectious Disease Treatment Complex, for example, suggested that the Philippine Department of Labor force BPO firms to implement mechanisms to monitor workers’ relationships—including the removal of unisex sleeping facilities and the installation of video cameras throughout offices—arguing that a lack of “ethical standards” within call centers could lead to “emotional stress, sexually transmitted diseases and *even* broken marriages.”⁵ However, the most prevalent response to the news involved a counterdiscourse that distanced the prized industry from the stigma of HIV by asserting that working in a call center has absolutely no relation to acquiring or being at risk for contracting the virus. In the contestation over the social and cultural value of call center work, the rise in HIV cases among call center agents was thus seen as a risk not only to people but to perceptions of the entire industry, as well as the industry’s ability to produce value and reproduce the nation-state.

This chapter examines the symbolic threat to the professional and productive image of Philippine call center workers represented by not only the rise in HIV cases but also the queering of call center work. Rather than trying to confirm or deny the medical evidence for HIV/AIDS among call center workers, I trace how this evidence and responses to it shaped the meaning of call center work, and how the bodies, sexual practices, and gender identities of call center workers—especially transwomen, *bakla*, and gay men—were marked as risks to the accumulation of capital, as well as to the reproductive order upheld by the Catholic Church and the heteronormative Filipino family.⁶ The chapter thus demonstrates how the moral panic about HIV heightened the already pervasive fear that call center work entails modes of transgression—educational, consumer, sexual—that would lead to a literal and figurative dead end for workers and the nation-

state. I argue, then, that the alarm about HIV signaled not only a medical concern but also deep anxiety about call centers as sites where deviant bodies put the nation at economic, cultural, and social risk. The interplay between disease, sexuality, religion, and the economy that I analyze in this chapter thus confirms that modernity is always and already imbricated with gendered and sexualized bodies and desires, which in turn become cultural sites of struggle for the nation, labor, and value.

Queering the Call Center

Perhaps more than any other disease in recent history, the meaning of HIV/AIDS has far exceeded the boundaries of scientific or medical discourse. Since the widespread perception of AIDS as a gay men's disease emerged in the 1980s, the epidemic has, as Paula Treichler has argued, "produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions," which she refers to as an "epidemic of signification."⁷ In other words, the study, diagnosis, treatment, and spread of HIV and AIDS around the world have consistently led to an outbreak of meanings (about, for example, homosexuality, drug use, or Africa) and the redrawing of social boundaries around *othered* groups who are labeled as being at high risk for contracting the virus and thus are subsequently subject to intense social stigma and control. In the Philippines such processes began around 1985, when the first case of HIV in the country was reported. While the virus has been most heavily identified with women sex workers, the signifying power of HIV in the Philippines is not limited to a single population or line of work. In the 1980s the dominant discourse around HIV focused on it as an illness that foreigners had brought to the Philippines, while in the 1990s, with the exponential rise in Filipino labor migration, the focus shifted to overseas Filipino workers carrying the virus back into the country. Underlying both of these discourses is an assumed link between exposure to HIV and exposure to the racial and national mixing enabled by globalization's demand for cross-border labor mobility. As Michael Tan points out, the development of export-processing zones and a tourist industry in the central Philippine city of Cebu in the early 1990s instigated intense fears about the spread of AIDS as a result of increasing numbers of sex workers and non-Filipino tourists in the city.⁸ Worries about contact between differently racialized

individuals in the midst of intense urban change constitute what Robin Root has called an “ethnoetiology” of HIV/AIDS—a cultural reason for the association of HIV risk with particular persons or places.⁹

In the days following the release of the PGH and DOH reports in 2010, the Philippine media and medical establishment put forth the notion that call center workers’ generally risky and deviant lifestyles were to blame for their high risk. In subsequent reports and articles, call center workers’ risk for contracting HIV/AIDS was linked to having multiple sexual partners, having sex in the absence of romantic commitment, or even engaging in nonsexual vices such as drinking and smoking. One study, conducted by the University of the Philippines, showed that “a significant number of call center workers had contracted [sexually transmitted diseases] through non-romantic but regular sexual engagements known in the industry as FUBU, short for ‘F**ked [Fucked] Buddies.’”¹⁰ Paraphrasing Secretary of Health Esperanza Cabral, a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reporter wrote that “many employees in call centres were young people with unhealthy lifestyles that included such risk behaviour [as having multiple sexual partners and engaging in unprotected sex] as well as smoking, alcohol drinking and inadequate sleep.”¹¹ Ideas about call center workers’ risky behaviors generated by the medical establishment were further inflamed by the popular news media. The national news network ABS-CBN reported that “some of those infected said they got the illness after engaging in casual or group sex, which they discovered through social networking sites on the Internet.” Quoting simply “a doctor,” the same report stated, “There are a lot of sites right now that can organize orgies quickly. A lot of young people believe in casual sex.”¹²

The image of the call center industry as a site of sexual deviance was not new in 2010. Previously circulating discourses about the sexual culture of call center workers and their lifestyles in many ways primed the Philippine public for a panic about HIV. The earliest articulations of these discourses made implicit and explicit links between call center work and sex work, both of which necessitate the circulation of young laboring bodies in urban environments late at night. Making a pun on the word *call*, Filipino agents in the early days of the industry would sometimes humorously refer to themselves using a local term for sex workers—*call boys* or *call girls*. In this way, call center workers’ presence in public space at a time of day when people are normally in private settings, and social activity and labor

are thought to cease altogether, instigates anxieties about the convergence of bodies, sexuality, and commerce.¹³

Another articulation of this sexualized discourse linked call center work with the production of Internet pornography. Here, it was the *invisibility* of call center work that exacerbated public anxiety. Call center offices are often highly conspicuous as modern-looking environments in otherwise unkempt urban settings, but their high security and lack of signage tend to cloak these spaces in secrecy, making it possible to imagine that the bodies making up the large, young workforce are providing services of an erotic variety for a primarily non-Filipino audience. Alleged pornographic “cybersex dens,” for example, became the target of the Philippines’ National Bureau of Investigation, as did individual call center workers like Edwardson Base, who allegedly circulated pornographic images on the web. In July 2010 the Manila Police District arrested Base after he allegedly uploaded to Facebook a video of his ex-girlfriend and him having sex. Although Base was not arrested at work, and the article did not imply that he had made the video at work, the author of the story mentioned his employment as a call center agent—a curious choice that points to the proximity of the call center worker as a social identity to the threat of sexual imagery circulating in public and private space.

Like many forms of discourse, the sexualized imagery attached to the Philippine call center emerges from a complex interaction between powerful imaginaries and actually existing practices. Without extensive investigation of the hundreds of call centers in the Philippines, it is impossible to gauge the extent to which concerns about Filipinos’ involvement in the transnational sale of cybersex are based on real Internet pornography businesses, although in 2007 the National Bureau of Investigation did manage to infiltrate one such company, called American Chat Link, that was making and selling pornographic images.¹⁴ However, it is clear that the discourse draws attention to Philippine call centers and to call center workers’ assumed vulnerability to what Radha Hegde calls “global exposure”—fears that build on earlier concerns about the exposure of Filipino bodies that cross real and virtual borders for a living.¹⁵ Alongside other stories (such as an article in August 2010 about a local city councilor receiving reports that Internet cafés and call centers in his town had been transformed into “sex cybernets”), these representations of the IT-enabled transnational service world sexualize not only the laboring bodies of call center workers

and their workplaces but the entire technological, material, and corporeal assemblage in which the call center is embedded—what Hegde calls “a complex infrastructure connecting the flow of laboring bodies, electricity, roads, and transportation.”¹⁶ This discourse raised the question of what, exactly, call center workers are producing: economic value or sexual excess?

After the PGH and DOH reports were made public in 2010, other information and studies detailing the HIV risk factors of certain subsectors of the call center workforce circulated in the media. Some focused exclusively on male call center workers who have sex with other men, gay male call center workers, and workers who engage in casual and/or group sex. Yet it was not the primal fear of deviant sexuality alone that made the PGH and DOH reports newsworthy but the discovery of such deviance and risk within the BPO industry as a “professional” sector. Both the Philippine media and the medical establishment represented the newest upsurge in HIV cases as significant because it challenged the intertwined ideologies of class and sex that suggested that only poor Filipinos were susceptible to the virus. The imagined inverse correlation between class status and deviance was implied in the DOH report quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which implicitly excluded “sex workers, gays and drug addicts” from the category of “young urban professionals or those of the working sector,” even as it pointed to how the categories are being brought together under the umbrella of “at-risk.” Similarly, a number of reports highlight that many of the people recently diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in the country were “well educated,” as if this might surprise readers.¹⁷ While this description counters the belief that only less-educated or uneducated people are susceptible to HIV/AIDS, it also resonates with a description of call center workers as well-educated workers whose potential is limited by dead-end call center work. Such reports therefore suggest that *not only* does call center work devalue a middle- or upper-class education, but it will *also* put the workers at risk for HIV/AIDS.¹⁸

However, other reports in the Philippine media raised the question of whether call center workers might already be commercial sex workers. One study suggested that up to “twenty percent of male call center workers are commercial sex workers while 14 percent of them give payment in exchange for sex.”¹⁹ My research informants spoke to this possible continuum between call center work and sex work as well.²⁰ My interview with An-

toinette, a young single mother and Call Control employee of eight years, began with her recounting a very recent conversation with two of her gay male coworkers about prostitution as an alternative to call center work. Antoinette represented the exchange as facetious although not entirely outlandish: “They said to me, ‘Day [*Inday*, or “girl”], I really don’t know what I’m going to do if there’s no BPO industry here in Bacolod.’ Then one of my friends asked me what my job would be if I didn’t work in a call center, and I said, ‘Well, maybe I’ll be a *pok pok* [slang for *prostitute*].’ I was kidding! But I did ask myself where would I end up, and I thought maybe I would be jobless or working in a mall or Jollibee or here at McDonald’s.” When I asked Antoinette how her friends responded to their own question, she commented, “Well, they said that because they are gay, they may end up jobless or booking something for, you know, a gay thingy [commercial exchange]? That’s very rampant nowadays here in Bacolod.”

The sexualization of call center work is therefore also linked to broader changes in sexual culture among Filipino youth—changes that are apparent among call center workers given that the workforce is primarily composed of young people. As other scholars have noted, both premarital sex and cohabitation are increasing in this demographic, especially among those living in urban settings, with cohabitation replacing the more traditional practice of *tanang*, or elopement, and premarital sex contravening the sexual regulations of the Catholic Church.²¹ In this context, the call center, as a gathering place for large numbers of young people in an environment that directly encourages socializing and indirectly enables intimacy, becomes a place to meet potential sexual partners. My informant Stephanie, whom I interviewed along with Enrique, her live-in boyfriend of about six years, explained that it’s easier to get romantically involved while working in a call center because most of the employees are “of the same age group, and it’s easy to develop a serious relationship with someone because of the proximity. You’ll always be together at night, and of course you go out after work, so people basically get closer, and their relationship gets deeper.” A comic strip about call center work captures these intimate details of call center life (Figure 5.1).²² In it, the character Clover—a young, gay call center agent—excitedly alerts his female coworker Cathy to the possibility that their respective chances of finding a new boyfriend will vastly improve because the company they work for is about to hire a new batch of employees. Created by a Filipina call center agent, the cartoon illustrates call center



Figure 5.1 Callwork comic strip creator Hazel Manzano illustrates how call centers create opportunities for social, sexual, or romantic encounters between coworkers. (Copyright Hazel Manzano)

employees' perception of their workplace as one where they can seek and find sexual partners with relative ease.

Because of the frequency of intimate relationships between call center employees, many of my research participants spoke of their working environment as a threat to previously monogamous or long-term relationships. Enrique confirmed this: "Actually, there's a reputation about being a BPO [worker] because couples go into side relationships. . . . It's because you're always together, you spend more time with these people that you are working with and you're not spending time with your husband or your wife. Sometimes a lot of relationships get ruined. So that's one reputation that call centers have." In turn, this leads to a social reputation in which call centers are seen as workplaces where people engage in multiple casual relationships. A Call Control employee named Ellie corroborated this by similarly describing how call center work brings together people of the same age who are undergoing the same experience for long stretches of time during the night "when hormones might be higher." Ellie went on to suggest that young women seeking marriage were unlikely to find such a partner in the call center industry, "since it's like the people who work there are looking for casual relationships."

Call Centers and the Culture of Death

When my research participants talked about the challenges that call center work poses to the reproduction of long-term relationships, they used the very same language to describe their relationships as they did for the

job itself. Call center work is often understood as a temporary or dead-end job, just as many of the potential relationships forged within the industry are assumed to be; the job is thought of as easy to get, which parallels the supposed availability of sex among call center workers; and the job is considered unstable, just as it presumably destabilizes relationships. Even the figure of the call center hopper—someone who readily quits call center jobs in search of better or different opportunities—signifies a type of promiscuity. Together, these ideas reinforce skepticism about the ability of the industry to socially reproduce the nation: just as call center jobs are thought to be contingent and temporary, so too are the relationships forged within them.

In addition to being associated with sex work, pornography, and casual sex, the call center industry in the Philippines is also increasingly linked to diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, owing in part to the industry's unique policy of not discriminating against gay, lesbian, and cross-dressing workers in recruitment and promotion, which gives the impression that call centers are open environments where gender and sexual diversity is accepted and valorized.²³ In one of many conversations with my fellow Vox Elite trainee Sammy—whose goals were to have male-to-female sexual reassignment surgery with the money he saved from call center work and then move on to a career in professional modeling—he explained why he had left the medical field and started working in a call center, despite being trained as a nurse and having parents who were both doctors.²⁴ As we were standing together on the second floor of the parking garage where we took our breaks during training, Sammy explained that working in a hospital meant restricting his gender expression; the example Sammy gave was having to keep his hair cut short. “They wanted me to be professional, but it wasn’t open,” Sammy explained. “But I like it here [at Vox Elite]. It’s so *me*. I can be open.” Evoking the paradox of professionalism and perversity established by the sexualized and queer discourses surrounding Philippine call centers, Sammy went on to say, “Sometimes being a professional and being open don’t match, but here, yes, they do.”

I point out the call center industry's nondiscrimination policy and its perceived openness not to celebrate the spread of liberal Western forms of sexual and gender-based rights to the supposedly “backward” global south. Southeast Asian countries have long produced sex/gender systems that are in fact more fluid and complex in their understanding of gender and sexu-

ality than tends to be acknowledged within dominant culture in the West, even as queer groups and/or women in those countries experience oppression and violence that should be condemned. Moreover, despite the recognition of call centers as workplaces welcoming to all people, gay call center agents certainly face violence and hostility from coworkers. An incident that occurred between Sammy and Lester before the start of training at Vox Elite one night made this crystal clear. At the time I was sitting at my desk surfing the web, while others around me were either doing the same or talking with each other. Then Sammy entered the room, visibly upset. He explained aloud that he had taken a cab to work but that the driver had passed the Vox Elite building several times, even though Sammy had instructed him to stop. Lester, who had been sitting behind me the entire time, then asked Sammy, “Why didn’t you offer to suck his dick so he would stop the car?,” to which Sammy quickly responded, “What do you know about sucking dick?” There was some laughter in the room—mostly from some of the straight men—but for the most part tension took over. Angered by Sammy’s retort, Patrick stormed out of the room, muttering, “I’m going to kill all the gays.”

Instead of dwelling on the question of how triumphant Western sex/gender systems and politics are in the Philippines, I instead wish to highlight how the call center industry has become a flash point in the changing sexual politics in the Philippines more broadly, in part through these employment policies. The panic over HIV and call center workers, for example, took place in the final years leading up to the passage of the nation’s first reproductive rights bill, one of the most formidable challenges to the Catholic Church in Philippine history.²⁵ In addition to instituting measures to help prevent and manage HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the Reproductive Health Act made sex education mandatory throughout the country, required government health clinics to provide condoms and other contraceptive devices to the public, and supported a national media campaign about family planning and reproductive health.²⁶

It is in the context of the Philippines’ shifting sexual culture and politics, which are moving toward more secular approaches to sex and partnership, that we should understand the significance of the call center industry as an ostensibly open environment whose high wages, normalization of sexual and gender diversity, and cosmopolitanism pose a threat

to the country's hegemonic socioreligious order. Reflecting the historical relationship between capitalism, family, and sexual identity, a number of my research participants described call center work as allowing them to eschew the normative life that their parents prescribed for them, and the workplace in particular as allowing them to be forthcoming about their sexual identities.²⁷ Such talk imbues the call center with the power to significantly improve an individual's life, tying together corporate mobility and personal liberation. In a *Spiff* magazine article titled "Becoming: A Transgender's Story," Brenda Alegre weaves together a narrative about discovering her gender identity, taking hormone replacement therapy, and moving up the corporate ladder within the Philippine call center industry. Aside from her description of her first call center job as "not easy," Brenda is positive about the industry, writing that "the environment was cool and young, people were really friendly, and very dynamic. I didn't feel discriminated against, I felt at home."²⁸ At thirty years of age, Brenda was a human resources manager, had earned a master's degree in psychology, and had plans to pursue a PhD.

A conversation I had with Joel Partido, Vox Elite's vice president of human resources, clearly articulates how the sexual and queer contours of the industry pose a problem for the guardians of conventional morality in the Philippines. During the interview I asked Joel to describe his sense of how the parents of young people who choose to work in a call center feel about call center work and the industry. My question was motivated by my knowledge of how many young people in the Philippines are influenced by their parents' opinions about their work, even early into their careers or at least for their first job after college. Joel responded by explaining that a Philippine call center's success depends on its acceptance in the community:

So, in communities where [Vox Elite is the] first player or so, the first call center in that community or province, let's say, it's harder to break ground, because you have to develop the whole community, and because of that there's a cost involved . . . But of course [there are] a few who would know just enough information to make themselves really [fearful of the industry]. Because sometimes they view—and to some extent there's some truth in it—that we are an industry where people

who have loose morals [are running] around and [doing] drugs and alcohol [*laughing*]. So, when your hiring requirements allow a very diverse set of new employees, well, I would say you have a variety of . . . sexual orientations [*laughing*] or preferences, which run from the right to the left . . . [Y]ou put together a very young workforce, hormones kicking at night, you just have the right formula for building a nuclear bomb [*laughing*].

Although I generally found him to be a queer-positive person, Joel's metaphor of a call center as a ticking sexual time bomb echoed the alarmist tone of the ABS-CBN article that cites orgies and casual sex as the cause of HIV transmission among call center workers. Yet Joel's description of call centers as workplaces where individuals seek out and engage in a variety of sexual practices offered a much more complex picture of the call center, its role in the production of sexual identities and practices in the contemporary Philippines, and the social and cultural upheaval this represents. For example, Joel's move from the term *parents* to *community* suggests that the stakes of the call center industry are rooted in questions of social reproduction, both of the family and the nation. Parents don't want their children going into this work, Joel suggests, because the kinds of activities they would be involved in there would violate the sexual and gender order upheld by the Catholic Church, which, in communion with the Filipino family, condemns all forms of sexual identity and sexual practice except heterosexuality and procreation within the context of marriage. Premarital sex, however, is merely one aspect of what the Catholic Church in the Philippines sees as a "culture of death" threatening the sanctity of the Filipino family, where *death* is an acronym denoting divorce, euthanasia, abortion, transsexuality, and homosexuality, or simply anything that "leads to an endemic disregard for the procreative value of the sexual act."²⁹

As Brenda's story of her gender transition suggests, it is difficult to separate call centers' openness to workers with nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities from the broader idea of the call center as a gateway to a life not bound to the conventional organization of social reproduction more broadly. Deirdre, a twenty-year-old agent from the southern Philippines whom I met and observed during her first week taking calls at Pyramid Processing, illustrates this point. On my third or fourth

day as an observer on the production floor, I noticed that Deirdre had started answering the phones using the name Myra. When I asked her why, she told me that Myra was the name of her daughter, who had died ten days after she was born. Deirdre had become pregnant with Myra by a man she knew in her hometown. Deirdre's situation was particularly problematic because of her father's position as a high-ranking figure in the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ). After Deirdre gave birth and the baby died, her father was eager to restore the gender and sexual order disrupted by his daughter and insisted that she marry the man she currently called her boyfriend, whom she did not really love. "I came to Manila to get away from my family and boyfriend. I came here for my freedom!" Deirdre exclaimed. By this time, two close friends of Deirdre's had joined the conversation, although it was clear that they had heard the story before. One of them asked, "D, you have to be happy. Will you be happy with him?" "No," Deirdre replied, "I will be happy with you. Let's all get married!" Deirdre's off-the-cuff call for a plural marriage of coworker-friends demonstrates the emotional fulfillment and support she finds among a "family" of coworkers, in contrast to the biological kinship network or the family her father was pushing her to establish.

Given the ideological impact of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, Joel's phrase "loose morals" thus refers to workers' engagement in nonprocreative and/or premarital sexual activities that destabilize the rigid sexual control exercised by religious and familial authority figures. The advice column for the call center industry's now-defunct lifestyle magazine *Spiff* speaks indirectly to these shifts, as it featured regular stories about unmarried heterosexual couples, extramarital affairs, and same-sex relationships among call center workers. In one, a young man who is engaged to a woman finds that he is attracted to another man and then has sex with him; in another, a young woman has sex with a married male coworker and becomes pregnant by the man, who then refuses to acknowledge her and the child. Yet another worker asks for advice about what to do when her romantic relationship with a male coworker is threatened by a female coworker's dangerous infatuation with her. While it is impossible to determine the veracity of these undeniably sensationalized stories, *as stories* they narrate and thus provide evidence of the various social locations of workers who engage in queer intimacies, nonmonogamous relationships, or nonprocreative sex outside the confines of marriage.³⁰

A particularly memorable interview with Lucy, a former call center worker who was pregnant with her first child during our meeting, also spoke to this sexual culture. Lucy started the interview by asking me whether I would be posing any personal questions because, as she went on to explain, “there are a lot of those kinds of questions when it comes to call centers. You know, call center workers are perceived as being very sexually . . . active.” Lucy elaborated on her statement by describing how, within the first few days of training for the call center job she had in Manila, her eyes were opened to same-sex and recreational opposite-sex relationships, neither of which she had been exposed to in Bacolod. Like a lot of companies, the one that Lucy worked for took the new hires on an overnight retreat to a local resort. As the first day of the trip drew to a close and the organized bonding activities ended, Lucy noticed people pairing off for sex and other forms of physical intimacy. Lucy also described her experience of call center work as making her aware of gender nonconformity: “In Manila,” she explained, “it’s a lot more open. . . . There would be girls who look like boys, and boys that look like girls, but with same-sex partners. And you can’t tell that . . . that they are the same [sex].”

It is particularly telling that Deirdre’s story, as both she and her friends understand and articulate it, juxtaposes concepts such as *love*, *freedom*, *happiness*, and *mobility* to familial obligation and marriage. The conflict that many workers experience between their bids for freedom in general, and same-sex relations in particular, and the sanctions their parents place on that freedom is evidence of the contradictory status of the family within capitalism. As an economic system that compels individuals to sell their labor, capitalism can free people from the confines of the family as a unit of production, making it possible for individuals to construct lives, and thus identities, outside of heterosexual norms.³¹ Call centers are precisely the kinds of workplaces that allow some young people to achieve a measure of financial and thus affective autonomy from their families. However, as the tension in each of the stories above suggests, organizing one’s life around love and affection for other people, or around one’s own individual happiness, rather than familial duty, is not easy. Despite the ways in which capitalist relations weaken the material foundation of family life, the family has been and continues to be elevated to a position of ideological privilege.

Visible and Invisible Bodies

Fears that call centers were breeding grounds for HIV built on and reinforced the already existing anxiety that call centers were dens of vice, sexual transgression, and disease that destabilized the heteronormative order of Philippine society even as they allegedly stabilized the economic well-being of individual households and the national economy more broadly. The paradox of the call center industry's economic value and professionalism and its perceived underlying perversion revolved in particular around male call center workers who have sex with other men.³² While attention to the latter may have been justified epidemiologically, it is striking that such attention arose at a time when support for nonheteronormative sexual practices and identities was gaining ground in the Philippines' sexual culture and politics.³³ Just as a diverse range of people found unparalleled social and economic opportunities within an industry considered vital to the national economy, the industry became stigmatized by its association with a growing epidemic. As a result, the emergence of HIV-related concerns around male call center workers who have sex with men amplified the already heightened visibility of gay men in general in the call center environment. In a manner that echoes how gay men in the United States have been characterized as especially good at tasks that utilize aesthetic acumen (such as interior decorating or fashion and apparel design), young gay men, transwomen, and bakla in the Philippines are perceived as uniquely gifted at call center work. This perception revolves around the notion that such individuals are particularly good at relating to other people: "They are good at building relationships with the customer," says Charlene, a former operations manager of eight years. "Gays are quite chatty. It's easy for them to make the customer warm up, even if initially the customer was really irate." Mel, an agent who identifies as gay, saw his sexuality as giving him a particular benefit over others: "Well, I think for my personal experience, being 'gay' in this industry, you are more at an advantage because when you are gay you can more easily adapt to the environment, because you are flexible, you have an open mind in how you deal with things, and maybe intellect-wise, maybe gays, maybe not all but most of them are intellectually much better compared to straight girls or guys." Antoinette, whose remarks about sex work were quoted above, described how she and her coworkers called gays "performers," because "they know how to manage

their metrics.” This echoed comments made by Gary, a Call Control team leader for a sales-based account, about the gay agents he had worked with over the years: “Most of the time, with gays in the team, it’s fun. Because they keep the team motivated. Since they are very loud and perky, as a team leader, you can use it to your advantage. Gays like to compete. They really want to be on top, they want to prove themselves.” Such comments point to a process of sexual segregation and division of labor within the Philippine call center industry in which transwomen in particular constitute a “purple-collar” segment of the workforce that is “often expected to produce queer value through their performance of a specifically Filipino queerness, a lightheartedness that yields comfort among workplace teams.”³⁴ Charlene also made it a point to say, “It’s actually more fun to work with gay people. . . . They can be particularly loud. That’s one of the stress relievers we have on the job.” Araceli Manchavez, another call center manager, echoed Charlene’s comments. “We love cross-dressers,” she explained. “They are fun because of the colorful language they use.”

In citing these moments from my fieldwork, I am less interested in determining the empirical value of these statements—that is, whether or not gay male call center agents actually achieve better scorecards than their coworkers—than I am in understanding the conditions that make it possible for gay male identity to be more visible and receive increased attention vis-à-vis call center work and, ultimately, how this relates to the perception of their risk for HIV. Known or seen for their performances on the job, but also for the cultivation of conviviality, a hyperengagement in social relations (a.k.a. “dramatics”), and a tendency to be job-hoppers, gay, trans, or bakla workers are all the more present and visible in the workplace. One way of understanding the hypervisibility of gay men in the call center world is by considering how, as I previously described, Philippine call centers constitute social factories with liberal hiring policies and therefore encourage (although not always) the expression of individual personalities and identities. “The environment really encourages people to come out with what’s real,” Charlene added, following up on her comments about gay men’s supposed talent for customer service. Sharon, a lesbian who had particularly laudatory things to say about Call Control’s diversity policies, described call centers as “the only corporate world in which I worked wherein you can be who you are.”³⁵ There is, however, an important irony to this claim that call centers encourage expressions of greater authenticity.

Authenticity is a particularly slippery concept within the call center context. As a type of service work that demands emotional labor, call centers require what Arlie Hochschild, using the language of theater, identifies as “deep acting,” which is geared toward the production of ostensibly authentic feelings.³⁶ While Hochschild’s work points to the particularly troublesome repercussions of deep acting for the participants at the center of her study, I found something of the opposite among the people I observed and interviewed: the invisibility of call center agents and their relatively short interactions with customers often translate into a greater freedom to “be whoever you want”; they therefore experience some aspects of the acting requirement as enjoyable. When I asked Mel whether he felt his identity would be as accepted in other kinds of workplaces, he responded, “I think the BPO [industry] is more likely the safest field that you can work in, especially if you have gender issues.” I asked him to elaborate on the word *safe*, to which he replied, “I would explain it as there is not much discrimination, compared to other fields. Let’s say you are a nurse, and you have a patient which is a guy, and what if he [finds] out that you are a gay then maybe he will be conscious of you assisting him . . . or dressing him. But in the BPO industry, when you are talking to a person over the phone, maybe you sound like a girl but you are a guy, but it doesn’t really matter, as long as you can resolve their issue and you are nice to them. I mean, they don’t really care.” Indeed, it is striking that Mel’s example of a workplace where his sexuality might not be accepted is one that requires intense physical contact between people. Visibility and invisibility are thus contradictory conditions informing the experience of gay call center agents, who are perceived as both pillars of service and potential carriers of disease. For gay, bakla, trans, and cross-dressing Filipino men, who have been socialized in some ways to cultivate what Fenella Cannell has described as the imitative skills of bakla, anonymity presents a vital opportunity, not to be real, but to act.³⁷ Charlene explained this as gay agents having a “flamboyance that they wouldn’t be able to [use] with normal Filipinos, like if you’re just talking with your friend . . . you have a different persona when you’re on the phone,” while another person simply described it as a proclivity to imitate. Thus, while the corporate culture and hiring policies seem to offer the opportunity to present an authentic self among one’s coworkers, the anonymity of the voice-based interaction provides the opportunity to be not inauthentic, but perhaps an authentic version of another self.

Queer Confessions

Returning now to the question of HIV risk, we can see how issues of visibility and invisibility played out in agents' responses to the panic. If the AIDS epidemic constitutes a crisis of signification, it also instigates an epistemological crisis.³⁸ Coupled with the information about rising numbers of HIV cases, the national news coverage reproduced intense uncertainty, on the part of call center workers, public officials, the media, and members of the public, about how to understand the ostensible links, if any, among call centers, sex, and HIV/AIDS. In such a climate, what had already been characterized as call center workers' morally questionable lifestyles became much more strongly associated with disease and death, both biological and religious. Furthermore, the Philippine media coverage of the DOH and PGH reports demonstrates how the construction of call center workers as a possible new high-risk category hinges on hegemonic associations of the transmission of disease with sexual transgression and social vice in general rather than the particular modes of sexual contact that are likely to transmit the virus between people. Nowhere in the picture of workers rushing to have "orgies" does the ABS-CBN article refer to protected or unprotected sex—at least not until the very end of the article, and even there the phrase *unsafe sex* is not clearly defined. In this way, the Philippine media and medical establishment did nothing to significantly alter the way the public understood the physical transmission of HIV.³⁹

As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, the most immediate response by call center workers and industry leaders to the news of rising HIV rates was to swing the pendulum in the other direction by denying any link between call centers and HIV. An op-ed column by longtime HIV/AIDS activist Bong Austero of the *Manila Standard Today* illustrates the difficulty and irony inherent in such attempts.⁴⁰ In the column Austero describes how, following the release of the DOH statistics, his colleagues in the call center industry called him to inquire about the "veracity" of the information. "As in the past," Austero writes, "my friends were in full defense mode citing all kinds of possible explanations for the glitch in the statistics." Austero writes:

My friends wanted to know if there was a possibility that more call center agents tested positive for HIV because the call center industry

happened to be the industry with the most number of employees whose demographic profile fit the global profile of those most vulnerable for HIV infection: Young (between the ages of 15–39), sexually active, productive (i.e. with money to spend). . . . My friends also theorized that the call center industry’s liberal recruitment and hiring policies . . . probably account for the high incidence of HIV infections among call center agents. Call centers are supposedly more open to hiring candidates who are more outgoing, more sexually active, more open-minded and prone to experimentation. In short, my friends were saying that the [HIV] phenomenon is not really borne out of factors that are inherent to the call center industry—it’s just that the industry hosts people who are probably more vulnerable to HIV infection.

Ironically, in arguing that there is nothing inherent to call center work that exposes workers to HIV risk, Austero’s interlocutors describe many of the social factors that allow for the correlation between call centers and the rising number of HIV cases among young Filipino people. For his part, Austero argues that in refusing to link HIV with the workplace in any respect, his critical colleagues also implicitly reject programs that “address the distinct needs of people living with HIV/AIDS at work.” Austero elaborates, “It is unfortunate that . . . the call center industry seems to have been singled out as a breeding ground for HIV/AIDS. . . . At any rate, the challenge now is putting in place effective HIV/AIDS prevention and education programs. This includes HIV/AIDS in the workplace programs because whether we like it or not, we’ll have to start learning to manage a workplace that has become a little more challenging than ever before.”

Austero’s op-ed piece points to the difficulty in addressing a highly stigmatized epidemic as it intersects with an industry seen as both economically promising and morally threatening. Such a struggle was perhaps most apparent through the figure of “Joseph Ryan.” In February 2010 a video of a young Filipino call center worker confessing his HIV-positive status was uploaded to YouTube by the workers’ activist group AKMA-PTM (Aksyon Magsasaka Partido Tinig ng Masa, or Farmers’ Movement—Voice of the Masses). The twenty-year-old, referring to himself by the pseudonym “Joseph Ryan,” appears in complete disguise: a dark baseball cap shields his eyes, while a cloth and a hospital mask cover the rest of his face and his

ears. Ryan speaks, however, with a clear, ostensibly unaltered voice. Expressing himself in Taglish, he says the following:

*Ako po si Joseph Ryan. I am a call center agent, and I am . . . I am HIV positive. I have decided to come out in public to clarify the rumor that working at a call center leads to acquiring HIV. Nakuha ko po ang aking sakit sa isang tao na nakilala ko sa isang street party sa Quezon City. Hindi po siya taga-call center. [Audible sobbing.] Siya po'y nagtatabaha sa isang hospital sa may Bulacan. I acquired HIV because I did not practice safe sex. I thought since I was young and healthy, hindi ako tatalaban ng kahit na anong sakit. And dahil din siguro ito sa aking carelessness. I wish to apologize to my parents, my friends at sa mga teammates ko sa call center. Patawarin nyo po sana ako. Ako ay nananawagan sa mga tao o sa publiko, huwag nyo po sana kaming husgahan sa pagiging call center agents just because you see us smoking and hanging around Ortigas. Alam ba ninyong we are a huge contributor sa Philippine economy. And there are already 500,000 agents today. I am now undergoing treatment. Once I regain my strength, I will try to live a normal life again so that I can support my family. And to my fellow call center agents, please, please, be protected and please practice safe sex. Maraming salamat po.*⁴¹

I am Joseph Ryan. I am a call center agent, and I am . . . I am HIV positive. I have decided to come out in public to clarify the rumor that working at a call center leads to acquiring HIV. I contracted the disease from someone I met at a street party in Quezon City. This person is not from a call center. [Audible sobbing.] This person works in a hospital in Bulacan. I acquired HIV because I did not practice safe sex. I thought since I was young and healthy, I would be immune to any kind of disease. I suppose this is also due to my carelessness. I wish to apologize to my parents, my friends, and my teammates at the call center. Please forgive me. I would like to appeal to the public: please do not judge us for being call center agents, just because you see us smoking and hanging around Ortigas. Please know that we are huge contributors to the Philippine economy. And there are already 500,000 agents today. I am now undergoing treatment. Once I regain my strength, I will try to live a normal life again so that I can support my family. And to my fellow

call center agents, please, please, be protected and please practice safe sex. Thank you very much.⁴²

As is the case for call center workers in the Philippines more generally, Ryan's appearance takes on a conspicuous invisibility, alerting viewers to how young Filipino bodies are at the center of public concerns about the culture of the call center industry in the Philippines. Ryan's reference to call center workers "smoking and hanging around Ortigas"—a commercial and entertainment hub where young people congregate at night and on weekends—speaks implicitly to this discourse. Indeed, we might read Ryan's plea for the public to suspend their judgment of call center agents hanging around Ortigas as pointing not only to the visibility of sexualized, queer, or otherwise nonnormative bodies within urban space, and thus their vulnerability to censure, but to an expansive discourse of call centers as sites of social and sexual transgression. Ryan's formidable attempts to obscure his own body underscore the context and significance of his plea.

However, despite his shame, Ryan's "coming out in public" is key to dispelling misinformation about call centers and HIV. Ryan transmits this message by implicitly disentangling the proliferating perceptions of the social identities of call center workers as well as the vague information disseminated about how one contracts HIV. As the media and medical reports suggest, the cultural construction of call center workers as a possible new high-risk category hinged on associations linking the transmission of disease with social and sexual transgression in general rather than unprotected sex in particular. The comments posted about the Ryan video, although not many, more than underscored the strength and persistence of these misperceptions, as well as the public's vitriol. Over a year later, one viewer wrote, "Fuck off! *basta may AIDS ka, dahil katangahan at kalandian mo kaya ganyan!!!!* (Fuck off! If you have AIDS, it's because of stupidity and promiscuity!!!!)" Around the same time, another commenter expressed skepticism about Ryan's story and spoke explicitly about his or her beliefs about Filipino call center workers:

How did he know *na dun sa nurse n naka-sex nya nanggaling yun AIDS nya? namatay nb sa AIDS yung nurse? o sinabi n sa kanya n me AIDS cya? naku kailangan msagot yang tanung ko n yan or else ang stigma sa mga call agents ay ganun p rin sa isipan ko . . .*

How did he know that the nurse he had sexual relations with was the source of his HIV/AIDS? Did that nurse already die of AIDS? Or did that nurse inform him that he has AIDS? These questions need to be answered, or else I won't change my mind about the stigma about call center agents . . .

Ryan's public address differs from previous responses by the media by distinguishing call center agents' identities as workers from their sexual practices and identities. Ryan makes clear that he acquired HIV by having unsafe, unprotected sex (although he, too, stops short of explicitly defining the terms *safe* and *protected*). Furthermore, by not stating the gender of the person or persons with whom he had unprotected sex, Ryan avoids any associations among his acquisition of HIV, his sexual activity, and his sexual identity. Describing the "someone" (*isang tao*) he met at a street party, Ryan explains that "*this* person is not from a call center" and that "*this* person works in a hospital." Thus, Ryan's use of gender-neutral language (which is in part inevitable given the lack of gendered pronouns in Filipino languages, but is also due to his seemingly deliberate word choice) performs three acts: distancing HIV/AIDS from sexual identity, distancing nonnormative sexual identity from call centers, and distancing his own identity from sexual-object choice. Such efforts are redoubled in Ryan's figurative mapping of his exposure to HIV. Ryan first explains that he acquired the virus from someone he met at a party in Quezon City, not at work, and that the person was not a call center agent but someone who worked at a hospital in Bulacan, a province outside of Manila. Ryan's mapping thus figuratively distances the person from whom he acquired HIV from Manila as the epicenter of the Philippine call center industry, a configuration consistent with his desire to distance HIV risk from call center work and to locate it in unprotected sex. Ryan's mapping of his sexual activity also mirrors that of another HIV-positive call center agent named Humphrey. In an interview with ABS-CBN, Humphrey explained, "The activities that would give me the virus . . . is personal activities. . . . I do them outside work, outside the house, I do them . . . on my personal time"—that is, not during time spent in sleeping quarters or behind other closed doors at the call center where he works.⁴³

Although Ryan's testimony opens up the possibility of understanding HIV transmission in ways that demystify nonnormative Filipino bodies,

it walks the line between a commitment to warning his viewers about the perils of unsafe sex and a desire to clear the call center industry of its sexualized stigma. In its form, the video illustrates the contradiction in which Ryan seems to be caught. How does one justify the visibility of bodies and practices that seem to disrupt a heteronormative religious order and the hyperproductive operations of the global marketplace? Ryan demands that his body be seen as working for the nation, while the dishonor he associates with HIV demands his disguise. Indeed, Ryan's confession is as much about his HIV-positive status as it is about the impossibility of being a worker whose identity is culturally constructed as both an agent of Philippine modernity and the literal embodiment of the industry's supposed disorder and disease. It is important, then, that Ryan locates the unsafe sex and the virus with a hospital worker and thus in the medical field. This detail of Ryan's confession is especially meaningful when viewed within the locally and culturally constructed framework in which Filipino labor in medicine—especially nursing—is more highly valued than Filipino labor in outsourcing, as I discussed in chapter 1. By reminding his viewers that people employed by hospitals can also be carriers of HIV, Ryan challenges the superlative value attached to nursing work and attempts to recuperate the lost symbolic value of call center labor vis-à-vis rising HIV rates.

By using his confession to remind listeners of call center workers' economic contributions to the Philippine economy, Ryan addresses these national and transnational predicaments through his affect in particular. Ryan expresses shame and dishonor; literally cries out to parents, friends, coworkers, and the public; and issues an apology, yet he never makes clear what his anonymous apology is for, allowing the form of the confession to stand in for content. Instead, he contrasts his unhealthy and weakened body with the economic health of the nation that his labor helps secure, suggesting that the virus he carries, along with his "careless" actions, disgrace the nation as a whole. Indeed, Ryan's use of Taglish suggests that despite the potential global reach of YouTube, the video is primarily intended for Filipino audiences. If we read the nonnormativity of Ryan's body and his sexual transgressions as that which are *other* to the nation, then his anonymity does not diminish the strength of the apology but reinforces it. Having transformed the confession into a space of abjection, Ryan then seeks the possibility of redemption by sermonizing on the economic

strength of the global workforce of which he is a part, and which he vows to rejoin once he regains his strength.

I want to offer a final reading of Ryan's confession as evoking and forging familial bonds between call center workers. In Ryan's message he specifically lists his teammates alongside his parents and friends as the targets of his pathos and regret, while he links his intention to rejoin the workforce to becoming once again an economically viable member of his family. Ryan thus constructs a continuum between his cultivation of familial relationships at home and at work, relationships that he sees as ruptured by his transgressions and repaired by his medical treatment. Coupled with the desire to distance HIV risk from the call center industry, the discourse of the family as the site of redemption and healing suggests that the call center family—workers with affective ties to one another—absorbs and resolves the nationalist anxieties regarding the contradiction of an industry that produces profit and supposed perversity. Ryan's confession thus succeeds in absolving the call center industry and the Philippine state from connections to queer identities and the supposed problems these identities entail—an act that preserves the image of the call center industry as the nation's savior. Ryan's video thus attempts to resolve the contradictions between professionalism and perversity posed by the link between HIV and call centers, by implying that although individual workers and their "families" will bear the shame, it is worth it for the economic contribution they make to the nation.