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A Nation on the Line

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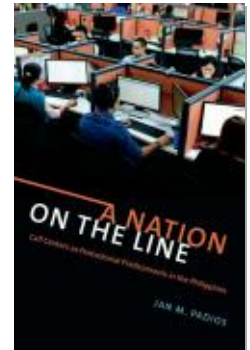
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CONCLUSION

October 2013. It was exactly nine in the morning when I passed through the revolving doors of an upscale business hotel about a mile from the White House and the National Mall in Washington, D.C. I had been invited there by a member of the Philippine consulate to attend a small breakfast forum to market the Philippines as a top-notch site for outsourcing back-office medical work, such as processing medical claims or providing human resource services. Organized in conjunction with the Philippine Board of Investments, the forum was attended by thirty-five to forty health care administrators and other professionals interested in outsourcing jobs from one of the newer niches on the global services chain—health information management—to the Philippines. Alongside scrambled eggs and Danish pastry, the audience was treated to a high-production promotional video that in modern graphics and bright colors told the story of the new Philippines—a story of robust economic growth and investment-grade status that in turn conveyed the promise of foreign capital’s security in the rehabilitated economy. The marketing presentations also emphasized more intangible forms of safety offered by the Filipino workers who might be tasked with handling not only private information about health care recipients in the United States but, in the case of actual phone contact with ill patients, sensitive interpersonal interactions as well. To this end, an American doctor and businessman who had successfully outsourced health care management to the Philippines testified to Filipinos’ “passion to engage” health care recipients and their entire families. Citing Filipinos’ ostensibly natural compassion, the speaker echoed earlier comments by a Philippine government official who had claimed that Filipino call center agents know

“how to smile when talking to you on the phone” and that such hospitable qualities define “what Filipinos are as a race.”

Roughly six years had passed since I set out to understand the intricacies of offshore outsourcing to the Philippines, which at the time of the forum was still holding steady as the world’s capital of call centers and still aspiring to move up the global value chain. I therefore immediately recognized the language of investment and partnership, as well as the discourse of Philippine exceptionalism and Filipino relatability, which circulated throughout the presentation. Indeed, more than any other public representation of the Philippine call center industry I had seen during my fieldwork, the message at the health information management event was the firmest in its declarations of the country’s newfound economic prowess, epitomized materially and symbolically in its first-time investment-grade rating. I sensed two kinds of hope swelling in that meeting. The first was for business deals that would bring more jobs to the Philippines and lower costs for U.S. companies, a hope affirmed in handshakes and the exchange of business cards between attendees. The second was less obvious but no less powerful: the hope that an ascending Philippines would give new meaning to the nation, its people, and their place in history. It was a yearning for particular forms of recognition by the United States and the world, of wanting to be seen not only as human but as human capital, and not only as friends in fellowship but as partners in business. Filipinos, the forum tried to make clear, were valuable investments, not cheap labor. It was the belief in a global economy that could move beyond the old colonial structures of power, the racial hierarchies, and the gendered systems of signification that had stifled Philippine growth and sullied the country’s reputation in the past. That this gathering took place in the U.S. national capital—the source of the imperial imprimatur—added urgency to this desire and amplified the audacity of the new narrative.

A Nation on the Line has endeavored to understand the risks, burdens, and fortunes attached to this narrative and aspiration, the new meanings to which they give rise, and the contradictions, tensions, and anxieties that emerge as the national story is retold. Following call center agents at work, at leisure, and within their relationships with family and one another, I have uncovered how these struggles manifest themselves as crises of social and cultural value, inciting anxiety and tension over the skills of Filipino citizens, their consumption, and their gender and sexual identities and

practices. The book has also been carefully attuned to the ways workers symbolically, ideologically, and materially negotiate this complex postindustrial and postcolonial terrain and in so doing challenge the representation of third-world workers as utterly supplicant to the forces of global capital. As my experience applying for an entry-level position at Vox Elite showed me, workers who received job offers pushed back against the terms of their employment as they asked for higher pay, better shifts, and the possibility of moving to different accounts. Moments such as these—along with my research participants' persistent hopes to resume their original career plans, as well as their off-script critiques of U.S. hegemony and American culture—undermine the assumption that the receivers of so-called American jobs are incapable of reflecting critically on the power relations and uneven material conditions that shape their lives. I encountered such assumptions many times throughout my fieldwork, even among call center industry leaders themselves, one of whom told me quite plainly “that Filipinos are happy to have any job as long as it provides for their family.” While I do not doubt the dedication to family that this statement suggests, I was struck by the way it obscured and excused the inequalities of globalization, casting Filipinos as responsive only to economic calculations and framing any job as a good job. In contrast to such superficial assessments of globalization, most of my research participants expressed a much more nuanced affective relation to their line of work: they were thankful for the industry while simultaneously preoccupied with their pasts and futures.

The complexities of my research participants' understandings and experiences of call center work also shed light on the many obstacles to union organizing in the Philippine call center industry, a subject I have saved until last in part because, unfortunately, so little has been achieved in this regard. While challenges to unionization and collective organizing can of course be traced to companies that actively discourage or outright ban such activity among workers—which describes most if not all BPO firms I knew of—they are also linked to the kinds of contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities I have detailed throughout the book. For one, the transient nature of call center employment undermines the long-term efforts and solidarity building that a strong and effective union requires; as a problem manifest in sectors all over the world, worker transience reveals how postindustrial work patterns are not only antithetical to unionization but embraced by management precisely because of the way short-term work

contracts and contingent labor undermine and prevent union efforts. Second, the affective attachment and camaraderie among workers had, at least at the time of my research, only strengthened workers' identification with corporate culture, rather than leading to large-scale resistance against capital; add to this the hyperproductivity, emphasis on individual performance, and opportunities for personal discovery and development that are part of call center culture, and it is not difficult to see that, as two researchers have noted with regard to the lack of labor organizing in Philippine call centers, "the internalization of discourses of rule within individual life strategies . . . is preventing the establishment of unions and other collective action structures" in the nation.¹ Finally, for many workers, the class character of call center work—while ambiguous and unstable, as I have pointed out throughout the book—makes unionization and its various activities, such as striking and picketing, seem inappropriate to their status as professionals and not workers. In fact, many call center employees reserve the latter term for those working in agriculture or blue-collar jobs. By using the term *call center worker* throughout this book, I am in many ways challenging this perception in the hopes that a specifically worker consciousness among Filipinos might be enhanced.

Instead of unionization, efforts have been made to address call center workers' issues and protect their rights through nongovernmental organizations, such as the BPO Workers' Organization, formed in 2012. Focused on the physical repercussions of call center work (especially damage to workers' vocal and auditory systems, the health complications associated with overnight work, and HIV risk), the organization's efforts make abundantly clear that the labor on which postindustrial work increasingly relies is never completely virtual or immaterial but always and already embodied. As the last two chapters of the book highlighted, postindustrial work cultures have introduced new ways in which the risks and fortunes of globalization are rendered in and through the body, via the aesthetic pleasures of fashion and consumption, on one hand, and the visibility and intimacy of queer bodies, on the other. Moreover, as waking and sleeping along with the rising and setting of the sun becomes yet another privilege denied people in the developing world, it is clear that any attempt to address working conditions in the twenty-first century must critique how the subsumption of labor and capital accumulation are increasingly organized to exploit

the human body's temporal and biological systems, and thus not just labor alone but whole systems for sustaining life.²

In the future, advocates, activists, and scholars alike may also find that the affective demands and psychological repercussions of offshore work have intensified in ways that require more attention to capital's colonization of the human psyche. In the last few years, we have already seen how the maintenance of the Internet as a safe space requires the arduous labor of monitoring websites for violent and offensive images, such as depictions of beheadings and bestiality (work that Sarah Roberts dubs "commercial content moderation"), and thus has deleterious emotional effects on the thousands of Filipino workers who do it.³ The emergence of such work is just the beginning of a potential seismic shift in the global landscape of back-office and customer service, in which more and more of the basic tasks currently handled by the likes of Filipino call center agents are automated, leaving the more complex communicative and relational tasks to people (although such tasks are undergoing automation, as well). With this ever-finer breakdown and relegation of service labor to machines, new hierarchies of affective labor will certainly emerge to mark the distinction between high-quality, high-value jobs that preserve human well-being—such as the offshore medical consultation alluded to at the beginning of the chapter—and those that push the limits of workers' humanity.⁴ If the present is any indication, the more harrowing labor will remain and proliferate in the Philippines, while industry leaders and the state work to pull the country up the affective value chain.

By placing the contradictions of labor, culture, and value at the forefront of the analysis, *A Nation on the Line* has also revealed how Filipino call center agents embody the predicaments of the postcolonial Philippines, and thus how the boundaries between their struggles and those of the nation-state are often blurred. The possibility that offshore outsourcing and neoliberal globalization might lead only to short-term prosperity rather than long-term development was manifest in the disparagement of call center workers for their attraction to so-called easy money, casual relationships, and conspicuous consumption. In needing to assert the value of their relational skills while also presenting themselves as capable of more cognitive labor, call center agents enact the nation's struggle to both revalorize feminized Filipino affective labor and attain masculinized economic

prowess and technological advancement, thereby affirming the latter as having the highest status and value. Just as an agent finds newfound autonomy, possessions, and productivity a source of both exhilaration and anxiety, the national feeling of frenzy and hope about call centers is coupled with fear and apprehension about what the future holds for the nation. Drawing out and interrogating this meaning-making process is important for understanding how identities—who people are as citizens, children, parents, partners, and workers—are shaped by new national narratives and a shifting symbolic economy. What struck me about the health information management forum in Washington, D.C., was not only the refrain about Philippine ascendancy but also the suggestion that compassion and care are key components of the nation as a brand. This begs the questions: What are the responsibilities and entitlements of citizens in conforming to the Philippines' brand name? What becomes of national belonging when measured against "staying on" or "adding value" to the brand? And what happens to those who, like many poor and indigenous people, cannot add value in the ways defined by the global marketplace? These are more than speculative questions. The neoliberal corporate restructuring that, along with state support, led to the transfer of knowledge and jobs to the Philippines also strengthened economic processes that distribute wealth upward, producing a crisis of inequality that only exacerbates the already wide gulf between the privileged and the poor in the country. Striving to be on the winning side of this divide, young Filipinos have embraced the ethos of productivity and entrepreneurialism and the discourses of global partnership and human capital. Yet, as I discussed in chapter 4, while call center work may offer opportunities for mobility for those on the margins of the middle class, the call center industry as a whole has always been tipped in favor of those workers with already existing social, cultural, and financial capital. Of the four dozen or so call center employees I directly interviewed for this project, only seven—those with the most elite educational backgrounds and greatest material resources—have left the call center industry to successfully pursue professional careers of their choice. The rest have either remained in the industry—able to partake in its spoils but still unable to move to firmer economic ground—or resigned from call center companies and taken up home-based IT-related jobs, such as cleaning up marketing data, which they find through online labor markets and which pay at hourly or piecemeal rates. As in the nineteenth century, homework in

the twenty-first century has become an increasingly popular choice among women, for whom the jobs offer the chance to earn income, care for a family, and attend to domestic work, in turn confirming that homework has not receded with economic restructuring but proceeds alongside or in conjunction with it.⁵ The story of the Philippines 2.0, it seems, cannot totally overwrite the past.

Finally, understanding the everyday experiences of call center workers in the Philippines also demonstrates how, for many, work is not just a means to a material end. In creating and sustaining modes of consciousness, identities, and cultures of everyday life, work can also constitute a way of knowing the self, understanding the nation, and envisioning the future; as work changes, is destabilized, or disappears, people and politics change as well. Of course, the stakes of these matters are not limited to Filipinos alone. Writing this conclusion just one month after Donald Trump's confirmation as the forty-fifth president of the United States, I am powerfully reminded of how neoliberal globalization has undermined the American narrative in which whiteness, citizenship, education, and hard work lead easily to good jobs, class mobility, and a sense of security and superiority. Having derived their identities and life meanings from work and the narratives attached it, many who feel betrayed by the shifting story have turned to a defense of nativism and a public reinvigoration of white nationalism to recuperate the narrative of white America's greatness.⁶ Such circumstances force us to ask, not how one fulfills the national dream or how we can bring back the story of the past, but who such national narratives of progress and growth were written for, what living up to these narratives means, and what consequences we face when the story changes, ends, or receives a dangerous new narrator.

Indeed, just eight months after the election of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte—a man whose “radical informality” and offensive bravado have been likened to Trump's—the story of the Philippine nation-state has already shifted toward what Julio Teehankee identifies as a *masa* (of-the-people) nationalist narrative based simultaneously on a repudiation of U.S. hegemony on the international scene and a brutal crackdown on drug dealers and users at home in the domestic arena.⁷ Echoing the revival of nationalist sentiments throughout Asia—which perhaps cannot be separated from the region's increasing global economic power—Duterte in October 2016 announced his “separation” from the United States and his

ideological realignment with China, demonstrating that his brand of nationalism continues to evoke the gendered and familial narrative that defined U.S.-Philippine relations for much of the twentieth century. Moreover, in what could be perceived as an acknowledgment of the frustrations of call center workers forced to talk to American consumers night after night, Duterte in that same speech publicly described Americans as “loud, sometimes rowdy,” their voices as “not adjusted to civility.”⁸ Bringing into sharp relief some of the primary themes of this book, Duterte’s use of the term *separation* and his critique of the quality of American speech made evident the way postcolonial structures of power are understood in affective and relational terms, even as they are being boldly revised.

Observers also note that despite his of-the-people platform, Duterte’s support has come overwhelmingly from the middle and elite classes—the same classes who have benefited from the Philippine call center industry’s ties to U.S. capital. Thus, while Duterte’s expressions of resentment toward and rejection of the United States incited some fears that the industry would weaken or be dismantled altogether, it is more likely that the president’s nationalist fervor, like the nationalist sentiments among call center industry leaders, will remain comfortably nested within a neoliberal economic frame, delivering profits and bragging rights to the Philippine elite. After all, Duterte announced a separation, not a divorce, from the United States. Thus while call centers are already a flash point for the nation’s postcolonial struggles of labor, culture, and value, in the near future they may become an even more sensitive litmus test of the Philippines’ postcolonial predicaments, inviting new narratives to make sense of the country’s struggles—narratives that will remind us that the postcolonial nation, as an unfinished discussion about the meaning of freedom and progress, is always on the line.