

“Narratives of Technological Globalization and Outsourced Call Centers in India: Droids,  
Mimic Machines, Automatons, and Bad 'Borgs”

By Annie Lowe

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## Abstract

Taking as a premise that contemporary communication and information technology-aided globalization is a world-making practice that relies on narratives to construct and transmit global imaginaries and relational identities, this project evaluates narrative discourses of Indian call centers serving clients and customers in the United States in order to analyze evolving hegemonic narratives of the “global” of late capitalism. In this project, I argue that constellations of local, national, and transnational hegemonies map outsourced Indian call centers into a position in capitalist geography at which vectors of the production of national, corporate, and racial identities converge in the technological production of power. Specifically, I look at assemblages of narratives corresponding to four tropes that metaphorize Indian tech workers as machines—the oriental droid, the mimic machine, the productive automaton, and the bad ’borg—how each metaphor is reinforced by labor processes in the call center, and how these are assimilated into new forms of subjugation to further extend and entrench participation in zero-sum economics across the globe.

Oriental droid narratives, I argue, reveal that characterizations of India and Indian customer service agents in American media draw on colonial tropes of animal and machine, bringing to light the continuity between these historical and contemporary discourses and that economic mechanisms established during European colonialism and first-world developmentalism direct technological globalization narratives wherein the sovereign is replaced by an oligarchy of elites in the United States and India hiding behind a fog called “market forces.” The trope of the mimic machine develops the postcolonial argument made in relation to the oriental droid to consider the telephonic mimicry enacted by Indian workers, such that, I contend, the virtual realm of the call is one of potential disruption to the binaric power

relationship projected in American media, yet constrained within a powerful and multi-scalar political economy that builds this resistance into a capitalist apparatus of nationalism, productivity, and knowledge work. The figure of the productive automaton, I claim, further illuminates the narrative disciplining of American and Indian workers and consumers, devaluing call center work as mechanical, menial, and unskilled and normalizing economic valuation to nationalize distinctions between the creative and enterprising *homo oeconomicus* and the robotic “back office” service worker. Narratives of the “bad ’borg” foreground hypernationalist rhetoric in response to technological vulnerability, which, I challenge, most explicitly discipline workers in India and the United States by reinforcing the segregation of global populations according to nationality and within the nation in order to operationalize those populations as rival constituencies in the knowledge economy, preventing independent cooperation or collaboration among workers transnationally and thus ultimately benefitting transnational business elites. The implications of these narratives ask under which conditions resistance and counter-narrative are realized, or, conversely, instrumentalized by transnational market mechanism, and how interventions that make alternatives to neoliberal globalization can be initiated.

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## Introduction

*In his 2005 book, The World is Flat, Thomas L. Friedman reports to readers his experience of Bangalore, otherwise known as India's Silicon Valley, where he traveled to film a documentary about call centers, The Other Side of Outsourcing. He writes, "No, this definitely wasn't Kansas. It didn't even seem like India. Was this the New World, the Old World, or the Next World?" (4).*

*India's National Association of Software and Service Companies (Nasscom) touts IT-BPO<sup>1</sup> industry's "Impact on India's Growth" on its website: "IT-BPO sector has become one of the most significant growth catalysts for the Indian economy. In addition to fuelling India's economy, this industry is also positively influencing the lives of its people through an active direct and indirect contribution to the various socio-economic parameters [...] The industry has helped India transform from a rural and agriculture-based economy to a knowledge based economy." <sup>2</sup>*

*On 22 October 2013, a post uploaded to Foxnews.com's opinion page "Fox Nation" asked "Are ObamaCare Call Centers Outsourced to India?" A three second YouTube video embedded in the post featured a man's voice saying, "Even if I were American, I am not supposed to tell you." The outraged post writer indicated this was a recorded response to a caller's inquiry.<sup>3</sup>*

*Anjali Bose, a young woman from Bengal, waits outside the boarding house where she lives in Bangalore just after daybreak. A company minivan soon pulls up and takes her to the headquarters of CCI, a call center training center, located in a modified condominium unit in a modern high rise. During her two week intensive training, her instructors have taken pains to neutralize her accent, working through Mother-tongue influence (MTI) problems like saying dewelop instead of develop. One of her friends already in the industry jokingly refers to his own perfected (and coveted!) "Droid" accent. She has been shown recordings of Friends and Seinfeld and given study guides so that she knows the difference between a foul ball in baseball and a personal foul in basketball. Today is her final day at the training center and her performance during a simulated customer service shift will determine whether she passes the course. When she puts on her hands-free headset, she will have to become Janey Busey of Rock City, Illinois. She has already searched for her "hometown" on GoogleEarth, and even found the house she lives in with her family, the Busey's.<sup>4</sup>*

*In mid-2011, class action lawsuits were filed against American Express and Bank of America for using offshore call centers to handle customer calls—and therefore make and receive electronic data transfers (EDT) concerning a customer's account—without notifying the*

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<sup>1</sup> Information Technology (IT) and Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO)

<sup>2</sup> Nasscom. "Impact on India's Growth." *Indian IT-BPO Industry*. 2013. Web. <http://www.nasscom.in/impact-indias-growth>

<sup>3</sup> Twitchy Staff. "Are ObamaCare Call Centers Outsourced to India?" *Fox Nation* at *Foxnews.com*. 21 Oct 2013. Web. [nation.foxnews.com](http://nation.foxnews.com)

<sup>4</sup> Summary culled from Mukherjee 230-241.

*callers that their inquiries and data were being handled overseas. Both suits were filed citing Constitutional grounds; neither was awarded.*<sup>5</sup>

These short narratives all clearly concern outsourced call center work from United States' companies, most expressly to India. Though rarely considered side by side, they all derive from and contribute to larger narratives—those of white supremacy and American exceptionalism, technology and global capital, and illicit contact and interaction with the Other. We might even detect the traces of the ontological metanarratives that connect them, the metaphysical and epistemological stories much of the “West” has told itself about itself for centuries, building empires and organizing daily life in accordance with impassioned interpretations of those origin stories. Jean-François Lyotard triumphantly announced the decline of grand narratives of legitimation over three decades ago, but if they've truly fallen from their hallowed role of legitimation, globalization and technology discourses seem wholly unaware. We are, as ever, world-making, which demands narratives to grant its organizing principles and define the relational identities of its actors.

The excerpts above are threads from an evolving hegemonic narrative of the “global” of late capitalism, with its animating forces of capital, digitization, and information. The bustling activity of world-making, the evolving narrative, the formation and transmission of global imaginaries all must be understood as processes, only ever congealing in momentary events before immediately resuming their continual activity. Like Google crawlers continuously mapping the internet into searchable data, narratives ceaselessly index experiential, emotional, and intellectual perception into information. Analyzing a given assemblage of local narratives in

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<sup>5</sup> Tillman, Zoe. “Bank of America sued for outsourcing customer service calls overseas.” *The National Law Journal*. 4 August 2011. Web.  
Byellin, Jeremy. “American Express sued over outsourced call centers and data privacy.” *Legal Solutions Blog*. 17 June 2011. Web.



view of its participation in hegemonic globalization narrative acknowledges “hegemony” as “a complex interlocking of political social, and cultural forces” (Williams 108), as well as “a lived system of meanings and values” (110). It follows that “hegemony can never be singular,” and is likewise a process, a significant component of which is story-telling that continues, enhances, defends, and perhaps even disrupts relationships of domination and subordination (112). A dominant narrative can be altered and challenged by counter-hegemonic narratives, even as alternatives and opposition are controlled, transformed, or incorporated toward hegemonic order (113). If, in Frederic Jameson’s amendment to Lyotard’s argument, we have witnessed not “the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now *unconscious* effectivity as a way of “thinking about” and acting in our current situation” (xii), then to unearth those from the passages above should be difficult, but nevertheless vital for understanding the ideologies guiding the continual construction and deconstruction of a grand global narrative in which relationships of power reinforce identity according to capitalist hegemonic function to incorporate ever-increasing areas of life into the normative disciplining of “good conduct.”<sup>6</sup> The task is worth the trouble: “What is at stake in rethinking and remembering the problematic of hegemony are the continuities and discontinuities in a struggle that reaches back into history yet each time confronts new configurations of power and the threat of new servitudes” (Venn 2007, 123).

Social narratives, whether a developing grand narrative of the global or the subnarrative of the offshore call center in India, are always somewhat incommensurable collisions of fictions

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<sup>6</sup> Like movement from sovereignty and the use of force in colonialism (narratives that justify rightful taking of what the colonizer wants) to biopolitics and governmentality (optimizing a population through the normalization of a set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that stabilize a particular assemblage of power relations and production), which deploys rearticulations of disciplinary power in order to maintain a control that isn’t apparently totalizing like in colonialism, but nevertheless organizes individuals in society. That this organization of individuals in and through a “global” marketplace (wherein labor, capital, good, and services alike are commoditized) relies on extraction and accumulation and the economy as a zero-sum game intimates its predication on the grand narrative of capitalism in its neoliberal reformation of liberalism (see Venn 2009, especially p. 225-26).

“where possible worlds are constantly reinvented in the contest for very real, present worlds” (Haraway 1989, 5). Ever changing alignments and realignments in constellations of hegemonies produce an assemblage of stories that are contradictory and sometimes confusing, characters are like shape-shifters as they fill different roles in concentric little narratives [*petit récit*]<sup>7</sup>, and “[t]he social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games” (Lyotard 40). Lyotard explains, “The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules” (40). In the case of call center discourse, the narrative fabric implements diverse components—like traditional colonial racism, economic development, American protectionism and technological superiority, and post-9/11 rhetoric of terror—and is woven into a position in capitalist geography at which vectors of the production of national, corporate, and racial identities converge in the technological production of power.

Though the Indian call center narrative, or archive, can never be told all at once and is rarely questioned, the knotted discourse belies its own contingencies, loose ends that begin to unravel and sometimes come together in counter-narratives told by the workers themselves, who are potentially the Lyotardian “paralogists” of business processing outsourcing (BPO). Often, though, these loose ends and the contorted narratives that seek to account for potential disruptions among artifactualities and actuvirtualities<sup>8</sup> are indicators of how hegemonic narratives instrumentalize difference and operationalize antagonisms. In the final sentences of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard suggests that while “the computerization of society” could be the “‘dream’ instrument for controlling and regulating” markets and knowledge in a path toward totalization and the use of terror, digital communication and information exchange “could

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<sup>7</sup> Local exchanges or conversations

<sup>8</sup> These terms, through which Derrida argues actuality is made in the age of media, are taken from *Echographies of Television*.

also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions” (67). Analyzing the call center as a case study shows these two possibilities of regulatory control and the subversive or liberatory moment coexist. We can see that call center agents’ experiences carry the potential to become living narratives of anti-capitalist resistance to the western global hierarchy, and contribute to a powerful critique of a worldview that draws on archives of Enlightenment-bred notions of human nature and hierarchies and European colonial racism. But these potential disruptions are constrained within a powerful larger political economy that instrumentalizes many of these narratives into a capitalist apparatus of nationalism, productivity, and knowledge work.

As a single form of outsourcing, Indian call centers may seem somewhat unremarkable in the overarching schema of a hegemonic narrative of globalization driven by the digitized information economy, but the unique conditions of voice-to-voice customer service between customers in America and workers in India present an important point of contact wherein the fantasy of western domination touches the ground. Though customers are unconscious of most forms of outsourced “back office” work that handle their information, according to one writer for *The Economist*, the problem presented by customer-facing call centers is that, “[c]ultural distance, however, is a bit harder to kill [when] company and customer are talking to each other on the telephone.”<sup>9</sup> The real-time interactions between Americans and Indians are a stage<sup>10</sup> for local, national, and corporatized constructions of globalization and participants’ relational identities within the narrative, constituting a “re-segregation of the people into competing constituencies,” within the nation-state and transnationally (Venn 2007, 121).

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<sup>9</sup> *The Economist*. “It’s Barbara calling. (growth of call centers).” 29 April 2000. Web

<sup>10</sup> Labor processes quite literally entail scripts, characters, and role play.

In his analysis of call center documentaries, Dale Hudson writes that while “call centers are an audible, if not visible, marker of ‘the new India’ in the United States,” client companies establish protocols so that “[c]all centers mask locations and synchronize temporalities to render their operation within digital networks and interfaces of globalization experientially seamless,” practices intended to efface contact with the Indian worker from experience and narrative (82). As part of their role in the global marketplace narrative, employees are asked to adopt “American” names, undergo accent and cultural training, and work shifts according to Eastern Standard Time to give customers the impression they are talking to service representatives in the United States. Additional techniques of controlling these interactions include implementing scripts for workers to follow and extensive workplace surveillance, like automated detectors that chart emotion through tonal shifts in voice, open floor plans equipped with security cameras, and biometric identification protocols.<sup>11</sup> Rhetoric of job loss, corporate social responsibility and customer service, security and terror, and profit and opportunity—some of which explicitly foment racist and nationalist hatred—are permeated with technological vocabulary, tools, and imaginaries in call center discourse, and thus organize labor practices in Indian call centers and the experience of the call on both ends of the phone line.

Offshore call center agents, due in part to their contrived hiddenness yet constant transnational connectivity, are at the frontier of the backwater of high tech labor, of life and labor in the integrated circuit. The small but engaging body of scholarship on Indian offshore call centers approaches the phenomenon from varying critical perspectives, theorizing how the experience of labor affects the workers’ interpersonal relationships, identities, and well-being, as

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<sup>11</sup> See Poster, Winifred. “Emotion Detectors, Answering Machines, and E-Unions: Multi-Surveillances in the Global Interactive Service Industry.”

well as how Indian culture is affected as the ITES<sup>12</sup> industry continues to grow. Winifred R. Poster, in articles analyzing data and interviews collected during fieldwork, writes about the managerial and labor processes, how they are learned and enacted by employees, and workers' descriptions of how they perceive these. Reena Patel's book *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* interrogates how a generation of women negotiate working the graveyard shift in a cultural milieu that traditionally limits women's mobility on moral grounds. Kiran Mirchandani, in articles and her book *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy*, focuses on the injunction that call center workers pretend to be Americans on the phone, the training that prepares them, and the precariousness of the actual call. Claire Cowie's ethnographic study of an accent training agency for call centers in Bangalore investigates the conflicting meanings and executions of "neutral" accents demanded by American and British client corporations, and the implications of an ideal international or nationless English. Also focusing on compulsory role play, which she calls "impression management," Sumita Raghuram attempts to understand how workers cope by incorporating work and non-work identities to form hybrid identities. Shehzad Nadeem's *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing Is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves* explores the seeming universalization of American capital, business models and practices, culture, and expectations—at least as it appears from inside an outsourced ITES office building—and "the cycle of hope and disappointment that has come to define the globalization story" (11). Mahuya Pal and Patrice M. Buzzanell pose a "postcolonial critique of power-resistance dialectics among outsourced call center workers in India," analyzing data collected during focus groups and interviews to explore "how microresistance intersects with global capitalism in ways that both accommodate and

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<sup>12</sup> The Information Technology-Enabled Services moniker for services outsourcing enables the industry to take advantage of Indian legislation, like tax incentives, benefitting the IT sector.

rupture Western discourses” (199). A. Aneesh’s ethnographic study, reformulating Habermas’s theory of system and lifeworld, examines the “globalization of the lifeworld” as “felt, experienced, negotiated, and embodied” by India’s international call center agents (514). In “Thinking through the diaspora: Call centers, India, and a new politics of hybridity,” Raka Shome aims to re-theorize frameworks of diaspora and hybridity in her analysis of Indian call centers, through which the politics of race and colonialism are changed by neoliberal globalization. In *Answering the Call*, Rowe, Malhota, and Pérez, expand on these notions of diaspora and hybridity as they occur in virtually mediated US-India borderlands (3-4). A final notable contribution is Film and New Media studies scholar Dale Hudson’s intertextual analysis of several documentaries that take Indian call centers as subject matter in “Undesirable Bodies and Desirable Labor: Documenting the Globalization and Digitization of Transnational American Dreams in Indian Call Centers.”

In my project, I wish to build on their analyses to show how master categories of human, animal, and machine are referenced in narratives of Indian call centers in order to construct relational identities and hierarchies that subject individuals to the hegemonic governance of good conduct according to neoliberal values. That characterizations of India and Indian customer service agents in western media draw on colonial tropes of animal and machine, I argue, brings to light the continuity between these historical and contemporary discourses and how economic mechanisms established during European colonialism and first-world developmentalism are embedded in technological globalization narratives wherein the sovereign is replaced by an oligarchy of elites in the United States and India hiding behind a fog called “market forces.” Specifically, I look at narratives that metaphorize Indian tech workers as machines, how these metaphors are reinforced by labor processes in the call center, and how these are assimilated into

new forms of subjugation to further extend and entrench participation in zero-sum economics across the globe. From Adam Smith in the eighteenth century through Milton Friedman and the Chicago School in the twentieth to free market apologists today, the continued expansion of capitalism has been declared central to its optimal functioning and therefore the significance of its returns for humankind; the invisible hand must be given full dominion to solve the problems of the human race.<sup>13</sup> Yet, rather than a simple exportation of the American Dream around the world, international networks and local elites work to incorporate national and local interests, concerns, and identities into market sensibilities and promises. I contend that in call center interactions, national and individual (including as consumer or worker) identities forged from narratives of competition, exceptionalism, antagonism, and personal experience are spotlighted and intensified, meaning the actuality of call center labor and the call itself offers opportunities to destabilize those identities, as well as further entrench them in hegemonic power relationships. Finally, I wish to explore the implications that local, national, and transnational hegemonic *dispositifs*<sup>14</sup> have for thinking through the conditions under which counter-hegemonic potentials can be actualized.

In her book, Kiran Mirchandani poses the questions “How is the Indian customer service workforce imagined in the eyes of local elites and representatives of Western capital? Following Sara Ahmed, how does Indian culture ‘become appropriated into the imaginary globality of the colonizing nation?’” (74). Mirchandani argues that “a well-orchestrated public relations machinery”—including the Indian government and Indian governmental allied agency

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<sup>13</sup> The “invisible hand” is Adam Smith’s prime mover that ensures each individual’s quest for personal gain likewise works for the benefit of society. In his lecture “And then there was Market,” P. Sainath describes that market fundamentalism is based on the premise that the market is the solution to all the human race’s problems.

<sup>14</sup> I take the term *dispositif* from Michel Foucault (see *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*) and intend it to mean the various apparatuses, mechanisms, institutions, structures, and so on that aim to exercise power over persons in society. These are animated in order to bring about particular results.

NASSCOM, business media in India and the West, business elite, and even the call center workers themselves—works in concert to construct an image of Indians “as a model workforce for transnational service work” (74). Importantly, the key actors in this machinery affirm that groups use a variety of shared cultural and ideological particularities in hegemonic narratives, ultimately participating in the stabilization of value-extraction in this system of employment. Meanwhile, machine metaphors for outsourcing, and corporate operations generally, suggest objectivity and efficiency are properties of a monolithic paradigm of global capital. With degrees of complicity, the Indian customer service worker is projected into a position in the American corporate global labor and economy narrative by way of defining their service relationship to the “progressive West” through constructions of “traditional India” (74). Packaged to join the sunshine sector out of “an area of darkness,”<sup>15</sup> Mirchandani describes that “Indians are actively produced as ideal service workers who are educated, trainable, and progressive despite their location in a physical and cultural setting that is named as backward, polluted, and tradition-bound” (74). Indian politicians, business owners, and employees participate in segmenting the Indian nation into technologically productive Shining India, spotlighted for its purchase according to neoliberal corporate market value, and the pre-modern agrarian majority and impoverished masses that recede into the background.<sup>16</sup> In order to market their customer service workforce, Indian businesses combat images of India formed by European colonial imaginaries, populated with tigers and cobras and turbaned brown highwaymen, with assurances of India’s westernization in the form of infrastructure, technology, and educated employees trained in American—often termed “neutral”—accented English.

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<sup>15</sup> See Parry, p. 7. Also, V.S. Naipaul.

<sup>16</sup> Arundhati Roy writes, “I think of globalisation like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. The lobotomy in the west is that you stop seeing something and then, slowly, it's not possible to see it. It never existed and there is no possibility of an alternative” (qtd. in Bunting).



Though accessing a cheap and able workforce is justified as practical business logic, this enactment of colonial hierarchies determines commodifiable labor, belying what critics have argued is the underlying reanimation of a battery of colonial mechanisms of power.

Foregrounding postcolonial theory, Pal and Buzzanell “rely on Said’s *Orientalism* and Bhabha’s *hybridity* to understand power-resistance dialectics in the discourses of 65 Indian call center employees” they interviewed (200). They found Said’s and Bhabha’s works are relevant to employee discourses “because much of the interaction between the Western clients and Indian employees relies on (1) symbolic representations that foreground a hegemonic relationship between the West and non-West (Said, 1978), and (2) appropriation of Western identities by the Indian employees (Bhabha, 1994)” (200-01). Pal and Buzzanell focus their case study on workers’ local discursive practices of resistance as micropolitics, while considering Ngugi wa Thiongo’s argument “that transformation of the political mechanism of imperialism is not possible without changing its *legitimizing* narratives” (203, emphasis in original). Indeed, historicizing contemporary experiences in Indian call centers using Said’s and Bhabha’s theories reveals that narrative, language, and identity continue to serve as reciprocal animating forces in the American techno-imperial *dispositif*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Said and Bhabha subsequently highlight another significant characteristic of call center discourse—intense ambivalence. Said insists a common pairing is evident in both the “traditional Orientalist” and contemporary evocations of Orientalism, such that both “conceive of the difference between cultures, first, as creating a battlefield that separates them, and second, as inviting the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other” (47-48). The ambivalence is between, on the one hand, “the sense of Western power over the Orient [being] taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” generated by amplifying stereotypes of West/East in order to define the West through its differences from the imagined Orient (46). On the other hand, the cultural battlefield is an acknowledgement of a threat posed by the Orient, the always present insinuation of danger that undermines an assumed and immutable western superiority over the Orient—a vulnerable cultural permeability that materializes in the contact zone of the customer service call. Said indicates a prevailing strategy for dealing with this is by making the most threatening aspects of the Orient seem familiar, “a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things” (59). Bhabha, of course, explicitly defines colonial mimicry in terms of ambivalence. In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha writes that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*,” this *almost* producing an ambivalent slippage with the result that “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace”—“a difference that is almost total but not quite” (122). In both Said’s and Bhabha’s theories, the

Call center narratives in the United States and India are not only shaped by an imperial project infused with economic, moral, and national apparatuses of power, but are also shaped by the digital technology that facilitates offshore customer service work. Importantly, digital technology is itself fetishized and disseminated in innumerable narratives. Technology is a leitmotif for western power in the American globalization narrative, in addition to objects and processes that comprise call center workers' and customers' lived experiences. Globalization and technology narratives often conjure a discontinuity between "present" and "past," directing attention away from the ways the past informs and constructs a given present. Evoking this discontinuity takes globalization and technology for granted as stable and forward-facing phenomena, hiding that their discursive construction accesses problematic archives. For example, globalization and the global imaginary is presented as an exclusively digital technology-aided enterprise beginning in earnest during the latter half of the twentieth century, even though by 1914, European colonial dominion stretched over 85% of the earth's surface, affecting every continent—a global project in imagination and power.<sup>18</sup> Pretending that globalization is unprecedented ignores the Age of Discovery and European colonial empires that established the prevailing narratives of global discourse and imaginary in the West.

The terms "cyber-coolie" and "techno-coolie," used in reference to Indian "back-office" workers in IT and ITES sectors contracted by Western companies, evidence the racism and an imperialist worldview immanent in the hegemonic global narrative of outsourcing. Shehzad Nadeem insists a neologism like *cyber-coolie* is insightful because "[i]t conjoins the technologies

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imperial colonial project is wrought with "the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia," and for both, the expectation of an essential Western self, defined against and reflected in the Oriental colonial, deconstructs (Bhabha 131). As I will explore below, such ambivalence might contribute to an American customer's hostility toward an Indian worker over the telephone, a local reaction informed by popular discourse that features narratives alternating between narcissism, such as imagining the worker as a service-driven machine, and paranoia, evoked in the rhetoric of terror or protectionism and labor arbitrage.

<sup>18</sup> See *Orientalism*, pp. 41, 354n9.

and freedoms of globalization with traditional modes of subjection. (India is not a global leader in high-tech innovation, but in rote, back-office services.)” (58). Introduced into the English language by the British Raj, the slur “coolie” designates these workers as exploitable and racialized manual laborers.<sup>19</sup> The techno- and cyber- prefixes attach the Indian workers to the telecommunications technology that allows them access to wage-earning and ostensibly assures their subordination to Western clients and customers. *Cyber-coolie* engagements with telephones and computers are designated as manual, mechanical, and even slavish, while innovative programmers and designers in the West use their superior intelligence to control and create computerized devices. In this way, advertising Indians as ideal service teleworkers—cheap, efficient, and English-speaking—is similar to descriptions of the “nimble fingers of ‘Oriental’ women,” who began assembling the “Microprocessor Revolution” in Europe and the United States in the 1980s (Haraway 1991, 154).<sup>20</sup> Both cases narrativize a homogeneous, Orientalized work force predisposed to serve the West through a particular type of technology work because of assumed “natural” attributes. Expanding on Said’s scholarship, Greta Aiyu Niu, who writes about representation in science fiction, defines “techno-Orientalism” as “a practice of ascribing, erasing, and/or disavowing relationships between technology and Asian peoples and subjects,” that must be understood in terms of capitalism, and historical relationships and assumptions about Asian identities and technology (74). For India, a unique and complex coalescence of historical factors—like such presumably disparate events as British colonialism’s introduction of English-language learning, the Nehruvian image of a scientifically and technologically developed independent India, and the Y2K scare—contribute to its current position in the global information economy; yet, these factors are often ignored in favor of assuming Indian IT and

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<sup>19</sup> Today in India, *coolie* is “a term used to describe poorly paid baggage handlers at train stations” (Patel 41).

<sup>20</sup> See Fuentes, Annette and Barbara Ehrenreich

ITES workers' relationship with technology is static and natural, as is their relationship with western capital and culture. This techno-orientalism emerges in discursive formations that hide agents' location outside the United States, devalue their "back-office" work as menial and repetitive, and ultimately liken call center workers to the intelligent machines with which they engage.

Techno-orientalist narratives of Indian call centers and workers are tailored for the larger hegemonic construction of the global because they knit together archival materials concerning colonial racism, American exceptionalism, labor and capital with the rhetoric and processes of recent advances and applications of telematics. The dominant narrative seeks to regulate relationships of power among clients, workers, and customers, while managing national, racial, and corporate identities. This narrative constructs the Indian call center as an imagined place with imagined inhabitants in a western "globalized" worldview, a virtual image that, in turn, structures labor processes even as workers' experiences reveal its narrative inconsistencies. I wish to continue the work of disaggregating this hegemonic technological globalization master narrative by excising four techno-political figures in call center narratives that I am separating for analytical purposes, but are certainly all related and often intertwined: the oriental droid, the mimic machine, the productive automaton, and the bad 'borg. The droid, the mimic machine, and the automaton allow me to explore various narrative strains that represent the workers as mechanical entities diminished in terms of technology, intelligence, and industry. Significantly, however, the cyborg is the only figure that is not wholly reducible to machine, but signifies a supple interface of organism and machine, and thus a potentially powerful counter-hegemonic character and story-teller. I introduce the cyborg as a "bad 'borg" here because it enters the narrative as a menace to security and a hybrid self that is antithetical to the western unified

subject. From this entry point, I intend to reconsider the cyborg as a productive techno-political representation of potentially disruptive call center worker hybridity, agency, and experience. The oriental droid, the mimic machine, the productive automaton, and the bad 'borg, each focalizes the call center worker differently according to the central protagonist and political entanglements and possibilities in a given plot.

In the first chapter, I situate the droid as a contemporary figure in the context of Said's Orientalist genealogy. Drawing on scholarship of colonial discourse, its motivations, and its effects, we can contextualize the droid's emergence for the United States through traditional white supremacist modes of imagining the racial other. The discursive designation of first and third worlds divulges connections between Raj-era Orientalism and techno-orientalism, as the Indian tech sector is called upon to demonstrate assimilation into technological modernity while western protagonists report on India's simulation of western models of culture and development. By employing postcolonial criticism, I aim to show how techno-orientalist narratives achieve normative authority not just from historical practices and patterns, but Enlightenment notions of rationality and Cartesian dualism. This analysis argues that the colonial deployment of racism through ontological constructions of human-animal and nature-culture boundaries reanimate in techno-imperial constructions of human-machine and artificial-intelligence boundaries that discursively designate Indian IT and ITES cyber-coolies as inferior to white-as-Westerners in order to promote American workers' and consumers' good conduct according to neoliberal values. I contend that my interrogation of representations of Indian call center workers as droid-like humanoid servants to Westerners reveals how technological imaginaries rearticulate the construction of India, its nature, its culture, and the essence of its inhabitants in order to define the corresponding West and Westerner against it in a hegemonic global narrative.

Through the metaphors of the mimic machine and the mechanical automaton, in the second chapter I analyze two narrative conceits through which discourse in the United States seeks to incorporate Indian call center agents into a relationship of subordination to western customers and workers in response to more specific agitation and complaints. Intended to recall and reconceive of the Mimic Men to which Bhabha refers in his “Of Mimicry and Men,” the mimic machine trope focalizes the processes that seek to efface Indian agents from technological globalization narrative through compulsory simulation of an “American” identity while working. Because the “scopic drive” that colonial mimicry is predicated on is displaced in telephonic communication, I supplement Bhabha’s theory with the Turing test for machine intelligence, a surprising and disturbing analogy for the agent’s performance and customer’s assessment during the phone call. Bhabha’s colonial mimicry provides insight into the neo-imperial character and implications of agents’ role playing Americans and the recodification of ambivalence in globalization narrative. The Turing test leads us to rethink call center agents as identity interfaces that reflect a fictional American identity back to customers. This modifies the conception of neo-imperialism as techno-imperialism, supplementing the narrative neurosis of ambivalence with cyberphobic whiteness by which anxieties over “technology’s capacity to disembody humanity, to take bodies out of action” are containing and contained by the technologized Indian Other (Kevorkian 2). In this fantasy, the Indian services worker is subsumed and erased—into digitized vapor—leaving only the virtual projection of the worker’s pseudo-American identity as it exists in the space of the call. I argue that while the event of the call presents a virtual realm of potential for counter-narrative and resistance, this potential is constrained within a larger web of power structures that likewise force us to rethink the techno-imperial model of hegemony vis-à-

vis technologized global capitalism, a challenge that factory discourse surrounding the trope of the call center automaton brings to the fore.

While the mimic machine highlights and threatens to undermine hegemonic narratives of virtual automation, disembodiment and essential American identity and exceptionalism, the mechanical automaton showcases narrative of assembly-line automation. In the United States, popular discourse often conflates call center work and factory or sweatshop labor in order to quell indignation over job loss and protectionist arguments, representing Indian agents as mechanical, manual laborers. While this conflation draws attention to the material conditions of call center labor characterized by repetition, it also expresses anxieties about technologically automated work generally and domestic job loss in the United States. Rhetoric of call centers as “electronic sweatshops” uses the familiar offshoring narrative of factory production as a metonymic representation for call center work. In the United States, the “electronic sweatshop” can be evoked to reassure Americans that the outsourced jobs are undesirable and low-paying, and, as with textile outsourcing, the practice pays dividends to American consumers through lower costs to end-users. As “sweat” suggests, this represents call center labor as manual and even mind-numbing, which is echoed in popular concerns in India about this mode of technological employment that are likewise voiced through factory and sweatshop metaphors. Significantly, this narrative of manual, mechanical engagements with computers—work for which one is trained, not educated—joins with the stereotype that Indians are good at *rote* technology work, supporting the notion that their intelligence is artificial compared to that of western technological innovators. In these representations, the Indian teleworker is herself programmed to mechanically engage with a telecommunications machine through artificial, not augmented, intelligence, while the American software designer’s intelligence and creativity grant

him superiority over the machine and a special knowledge of it. In a global narrative of late capitalism emanating from the United States, Indian workers are metaphorized as cogs in the machine while Americans are powerful controllers of capital and its machinery. Through this narrative, the human-machine binary of capitalist production works to warrant that Indian workers are the ones mechanized and not American workers or consumers, though they similarly engage with technology as a means of production.<sup>21</sup> Finally, I look at how connotations of factory and call center in Indian discourse function to devalue customer service work in favor of technology work that would prove more lucrative for India in the global knowledge economy.

In the coda, I address American fears about access and vulnerability in the virtual network that imagine the Indian droid as a potentially bad 'borg. Threats of identity theft and cyberterror code the bad 'borg as a paramount figure of biopolitical paranoia and intensify hypernationalist rivalry. The emergence of call center workers' Occidental narratives, which invert the Orientalist power relationships, often follow capitalist and nationalist paradigms and thus indicate how nation, culture, and development in Shining India likewise assemble hegemonic technological globalization narrative that operationalizes hypernationalism. The implications of these narratives ask under which conditions resistance and counter-narrative are realized, or, conversely, instrumentalized by transnational market mechanism, and how interventions that make alternatives to neoliberal globalization can be initiated.

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<sup>21</sup> The role of the technologically-consumed Other is analogous to the role of the literal prison in Foucault's "Truth and Juridical Forms" or, more abstractly and to a lesser degree, delinquency as enclosed and controlled illegality in his *Discipline and Punish*. In the former essay, according to Foucault, the prison serves a symbolic, exemplary function: prison is an acceptable institution because it's set up on the same basis of supervision and examination as control, but it also serves to prove that you aren't in prison because it is separated from the other institutions as it is meant only for those who have committed a violation of the law (85). Traces of this functionality extend to the characterization of the technological Other like the call center agent, whose existence is acceptable because the agent's use of telecommunications technologies is deemed normal and generally non-aggressive, but who also serves to quell technophobia about technology and technology work in the United States by designating non-white, foreign Others who are subsumed by technology and technological power while acting as the prison-body that contains it. American consumers and laborers can thus assure themselves by differentiation that they exist outside of technology and control it, as compared to those who are entrapped by technology and controlled by it.



## Chapter 1: Oriental Droid-Coolies

The award-winning 2006 American movie *Outsourced* is about an American salesman, Todd Anderson, who travels to India in order to train his sales department's Indian "replacements" to talk in American-accented English and sell US customers patriotic kitsch from a call center in Bombay. Later adapted for television in 2010, the film's unabashedly racist representations of India and Indian people are a case study of how colonial-era stereotypes become technologized and continue to pervade popular American discourse about India, generally, and call centers, specifically. *Outsourced's* plot follows the generic convention of a colonial travelogue. As sitar music plays in the background, a white, Western protagonist is sent to govern and civilize a group of Indians; he encounters dismal infrastructure, disgusting and bowel-wrenching cuisine, and otherwise unhygienic and backwards traditions; he meets Indian men, who, because goofy, obsequiously deferential, and idiotic, serve as foils to Anderson's western business-like masculinity; and, young women who timidly watch Anderson as he lectures about "Minutes per Incident" (MPI) benchmarks and hamburgers. One beautiful sari-clad employee, Asha, who manages to be both seductively demure and brazenly coquettish, catches Anderson's eye. With Asha's help, Anderson dabbles in "going native" before fulfilling his post and returning States-side. He consummates his passion for the exotic Asha, embraces Indian culture by frolicking with Puro, his second-in-command, during the festival of Holi, and learns to coexist with the occasional sacred cow. Anderson's climactic feat of derring-do and his foray into the mysterious ways of India, however, is his mastery of *jugaad*<sup>22</sup> as he improvises an unorthodox technical solution (taking the necessary equipment to the building's roof and running the calls in the open air) so that the team can continue operation when the call center is flooded

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<sup>22</sup> "Jughaad" is a Hindi-Urdu term meaning innovation with limited resources, similar to American English's "jury rigged," "jerry built," or "MacGyver-ed."

and the electricity is out in the building, his ingenuity compensating for India's poor infrastructure. The romantic comedy weaves together discourses of development, colonialism, economy, and technology in order to "not only captur[e] the spirit of a new India, but also of a newly globalized world."<sup>23</sup>

Billed as a romantic comedy about cross-cultural understanding, *Outsourced* makes abundantly clear that globalization narratives "are always immersed in history and never innocent" (Escobar 20). Anderson journeys into the subcontinent in the manner of the colonial European participant observer, an authoritative protagonist going "out there" to observe and intervene upon India (as an object) from the outside (Escobar 7-8, see also Mitchell 1988). Or, in the manner of a British administrator in colonial India, Anderson's knowledge and good sense make him appear as a catalyst in a situation he oversees, his "going native" is bookended by his departure from and return to the United States, reassuring his position as a "non-participant[] in a social order which [he] formally dominate[s]" (Parry 1, 54). Anderson, however, is not merely the Raj-era administrator who "in India has no home, and he leaves no memory,"<sup>24</sup> but in a Forsterian style, India's primitivism and her irrational natural forces help Anderson learn simple "truths about man's nature which the West has suppressed, liberating his potential for sensuous and transcendent experiences" (8, see also 58).<sup>25</sup> While Kipling's Kim is more good-natured than Todd Anderson, like Kim, Anderson must also move among Indians and establish relationships in order to fulfill his role in the Great Game of globalized outsourcing during his time in that

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<sup>23</sup> "Outsourced the Movie" official website, "Corporate Training" page, ShadowCatcher Entertainment. 2010. Web. Accessed 27 January 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Sir William Wilson Hunter's 1896 *The Old Missionary*, qtd in Parry 3.

<sup>25</sup> "The monkey pulls the turnip," a kama sutra position Anderson finds in a book and Asha immediately insists is impossible, constitutes a running joke between the two characters. Benita Parry writes of British colonialists' attitudes of titillation and revulsion toward Indian sexuality: "The Tantric tradition [...] was frequently invoked by the British as evidence of Indians' earthly depravity and intimacy with the forces of darkness" (3-4).

mysterious *area of darkness*.<sup>26</sup> Tropes adapted from British colonial metanarrative combine fluidly with western-centric narratives of globalization, development, and foreign labor to construct the call center plot. Significantly, even though Anderson's team of Indian workers is able to reduce their MPI to the benchmark needed to keep the call center in business, the American corporate boss informs them the sales positions have been outsourced *further* east to China. The boss explains matter-of-factly, "China's the new India—20 heads for the price of one," echoing his early pragmatism for outsourcing all online or over-the-phone operations to India and sending Anderson packing—"eight heads for the price of one." The boss's repellent no-nonsense remarks designate the oriental workers as cheap, plentiful, and interchangeable as he devalues their labor as unskilled (he needs heads in headsets to answer phones).

While cost-cutting, bottom lines, and efficiency figure prominently, and often exclusively, when American companies are called upon to answer for outsourcing, statements that legitimize business practices as empirically or statistically scientific contribute to hegemonic narrative devaluation of India's subordinate relationship to the United States in the emerging "global." The dollar to rupee (INR) exchange rate has hovered right around 60 over the past year, falling from about 50 INR to a dollar five years ago (Bloomberg). Isolating outsourcing into a numbers game makes businesses' claims to higher profit margins and increased efficiency seem self-evident when workers can be paid from one fourth to one tenth of the wages a worker in the United States would receive.<sup>27</sup> In 2004 N. Gregory Mankiw, the head of President George W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers, attempted to assure Americans that outsourcing is just another indicator of the United States' economic prowess, insisting "outsourcing is just a new way of doing international trade," which means that it's "a good

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<sup>26</sup> *An Area of Darkness: An Experience of Young India* (1964) is V.S. Naipaul's account of his first visit to India.

<sup>27</sup> See Gordon, Joanne or Kolakowski, Nick or Poster, Winifred 2007, p. 291.

thing” for the national economy (qtd in Drezner).<sup>28</sup> When executives like IBM’s equate globalization with “going where there’s low-cost labor, low-cost competition” (ibid), it may send a chill of fear down the spines of American workers in the IT sector, but in a culture that has cultivated the equivalency of dollar value with desirability, low-cost means low-value and low-desirability. Mirchandani records one worker’s reflection on how being categorized as “low-cost” translated over the phone: “They would be like ‘Indian people, cheap people. Working for less than what we earn in a day.’ And all that crap” (2012, 66). In this worker’s description, customers scale down macroeconomic claims to microeconomic ones while adding vitriolic abuse.

Invoking these economic “facts” can function as forgetful violence in the technologized global narrative, suggesting a discontinuity between a company’s present progression and historical relationships among groups of people when it is convenient to do so. Similarly, current popular accounts of our ongoing technological age often insist it’s patently different from any preceding time. Proclamations that deny the historical embeddedness of our present help to, using Jameson’s illustration, move racist or pauperizing master-narratives of white-as-western supremacy or economic liberalism underground and out of view though they continue to bear powerfully on how people think about and act in our current “global” situation. Notions of American exceptionalism, especially as they inform a conception of the United States’ technocratic ascendancy, produce the call center and other forms of knowledge-based outsourcing as sites of antinomic confrontation between that insistence on exclusive

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<sup>28</sup>The free-trade analogy is strategic because it reminds customers of the anxiety over jobs moving to Mexico following NAFTA. Twenty years later NAFTA is more or less an economic “fact,” and outcry over lost manufacturing jobs has lessened. Vashistha and Vashistha’s *The Offshore Nation*, a handbook for American companies of all sizes looking to outsource, offers talking points for handling internal and external backlash. Citing the unstoppable force of globalization, the authors claim outsourcing services is a *fait accompli* and a positive change (31). Outsourcing is positive for companies and workers in the United States because it frees up capital to create more value-add (read: prestigious and better-paying) jobs at home, which then means otherwise displaced workers can “move up in the value chain,” or move on “to newer technologies that are more client-intimate” (27).

technological expertise and acknowledging that expertise in the Other who is already participating conspicuously in the knowledge economy. The tech industry in the United States actively and continually differentiates itself from competing sectors in non-western countries through the rhetoric of innovation and creativity I analyze below, but as companies and business elites in America benefit from outsourcing, much of the actual risks and effects of this competition are transferred to the technology worker. The antinomic *dispositif*<sup>29</sup> of globalization requires western workers to continually adapt themselves by acquiring new, increasingly value-added skills vis-à-vis those no longer judged valuable because outsource-able. With increasingly world-wide telecommunications connectivity, the zero-sum game of the global economy is not, in the last instance, played among nations or even necessarily among corporations, but among workers often segregated into competing constituencies along geopolitical lines. Accordingly, the paranoia generated by the constant threat that one's job will be outsourced to India is harnessed such that it becomes generative of worker productivity and flexibility.

Narratives strategically control outsourcing paranoia by accessing historical colonial tropes that familiarize the Indian call center agent as an imperial subject, and Indian expertise as artificial. Colonial narratives characterized Indian natives as childishly simple-minded and “vestiges of a primordial, dark, and instinctual past,” when defined against the civilized Western humanist subject imbued with divine reason and sovereignty over lesser beings and colonized lands. Iterations of this oppositional relationship in the technology sector envision hordes of

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<sup>29</sup> Roberto Esposito describes what he terms the “immunitary paradigm” of biopolitics as “occur[ing] through an antinomic *dispositif* that proceeds via the activation of the contrary” (59). I use the phrase here to indicate that, by activating the threat of financial and employment insecurity representationally embodied by the Indian tech worker, American workers are encouraged to enact—indeed, construct from the ground up, so to speak—an American sensibility and identity that can be defined as opposite to that of the Indian worker and thus obtain *greater* assurance of job and financial security. The American workers thus discipline themselves to be increasingly productive and “vital” to a corporation while turning their anxieties and fears on the image of the Indian worker as enemy and away from the corporation as enemy. The American worker would blame the system, but the system is “fact,” and Indians’ “cheapness” is targeted as responsible for the economic fact of the global labor system.

Indian workers tirelessly performing rote tasks in front of computer screens, as if the workers themselves are running programmed sequences, while western professionals are creating the next great technology to improve the lives of humans, controllers of our technological future. Indian outsourcees are the back office “automation”<sup>30</sup> to American outsourcer’s store-front innovation. Couze Venn writes of the continuity between colonial and postmodern governmentality based in a framework of capitalist accumulation and wealth extraction:

“From a postcolonial standpoint, approaches to power that underline its postmodern reconfiguration as hybrid assemblages remind one that imperial governance, for more than two centuries, already deployed such heterogeneous tactics in its reconstitution of subaltern and subjugated populations into discrete and differentiated entities to be managed to maximize the extraction of surplus value.” (2007, 121)

Techno-oriental representations of automated Indians implement traditional narrative devices, homogenizing and dehumanizing Others in order to essentialize a uniform and knowable Indian that is dualistically subordinated to westerners. Twenty-first-century articulations of (human) American against (automated) Indian access human/animal and human/machine dualisms, disseminations of the Cartesian dualism, embedded in observations and representations of India and Indian call center workers in a white-as-western hegemonic narrative of the global. These master-narratives are absorbed and operationalized to naturalize hegemonic value hierarchies in the technological globalization of late capitalism. As capitalism goes worldwide to impose the same system across the globe, difference is mobilized and rearticulated to construct relationships between competing constituencies. I intend to show that, in an era of techno-imperialism, the

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<sup>30</sup> Timothy Ferriss, author of *The Four Hour Workweek* and a proponent of individual outsourcing (also called “offchoring”), claims his extensively outsourced life is in a stage of “full automation,” and speaks of the tasks he outsources and those who complete them as existing “in the world of automation.” Ferriss writes about “full automation” on his blog, a teaser enticing readers to purchase his book.

vast archives of liberal humanism, orientalism, and developmentalism provide the subtext for narratives that reconstitute the Indian BPO worker as a sort of *homo technicus*<sup>31</sup> against which an image of the privileged *homo oeconomicus* can be articulated in terms of the political economy of technological globalization.

During European colonialism, the English characterized Indians as variously uncivilized, incompetent, incapable of telling the truth, and immoral, but yet dilatory and deferential (Said 2003a, 338). These were considered racial traits, natural to the native Indian and in direct opposition and subordination to the British. In *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves*, Shezhad Nadeem quotes American managers' and executives' rearticulations of these "racial traits." One executive tells Nadeem that "the Indians by nature are kind of submissive" (139). Another U.S.-based manager informed the author that "they have an inability to say no," offering the example that, compared to his team in Phoenix, teams in Bangalore and Chennai are "working 12 to 16 hours a day because they can't say no" (140). Nadeem includes a voluble rant on workers' immaturity and petty squabbles offered by a native Indian executive, for whom such childishness "signifies the lack of an ethical compass," whereas employees' "maturity level" is higher in the U.S. (141). Postcolonial critics have extensively documented how historical characterizations such as these defined colonized groups against the post-Enlightenment liberal humanist subject in narratives of Western patriarchal dominance. But, when call center founder Mark Scheyer insists that Indian workers need to be "reacculturated" to effectively work in an American business environment serving American customers, he frames the comment as a managerial observation, not a culturally value-driven

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<sup>31</sup> I use the term "*homo technicus*" to denote the human that lives and works with technology rather than "*homo technologicus*" because the Greek root "ology" would denote study and therefore knowledge. In my analysis the knowledge, creativity, and rationality that goes into technological innovation belongs to the realm of *homo oeconomicus*. The *homo technicus* is made and determined by technology just as much as he or she thrives with it.

remark (145). Postcolonial ecocritic Val Plumwood categorizes such ethnocentric and self-privileging strategies under the project of “hegemonic centrism” (cited in Huggan and Tiffin 4). Historically, when defining the liberal humanist subject as properly human, this “western definition of humanity depended—and still depends—on the presence of the ‘not-human’: the uncivilized, the animal and animalistic” (5). And so European colonialism labeled the cultures it sought to colonize as “‘primitive,’ less rational, and closer to children, animals<sup>32</sup> and nature,” to reinforce a rationalist dualism in which the western rational man is indelibly separated from non-western beings (Plumwood 2003, 53). In outsourcing narratives Indians are characterized as naturally submissive, immature, lacking a sense of responsibility or ownership, and unable to speak up for themselves, traits that are defined as opposite to those of Western employees.

Citing Said’s *Orientalism*, Plumwood explains that because of this supposed backwardness or primitiveness, colonized people like the Indians “were seen as exemplifying an earlier and more animal stage of human development” due to a “deficit in rationality” that “invites rational conquest and reordering by those taken to best exemplify reason—namely, elite white males of European descent and culture” (2003, 52). Philip Mason indicates this racial hierarchy meant that many British officials “certainly believed there was something in their composition that distinguished them from the people they ruled” such that “the district officer and his family were one kind of human being, the people of his district another” (qtd. in Parry 51). In the colonial master-narrative, the rationality of the western human subject was edified by and defined against those deemed irrational, therefore granting western dominion over groups of people belonging to a “‘barbarian’ non-human or semi-human sphere” (Plumwood 2003, 53). This difference in kind granted European colonialism the status of a divine right and mission of

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<sup>32</sup> According to such a schema, the animal, because instinctual rather than rational like “Man,” enjoys a mechanical biology and form of life, a fleshy machine with plenty of wiring issues and a bug-y operating system.



rational man to spread progress in the form of controlling and, to the extent it is possible, correcting the stunted nature of natives.<sup>33</sup> The call center executives' and managers' attitudes of authoritative superiority over Indians is complemented by popular representations of offshore Indian tech laborers in the United States. Authority is granted to the western "creative class" of professionals over a racialized "service class" of Indian workers, who are represented as a more primitive or underdeveloped species of western business person, or as the machines of automation or production not fully belonging to the human sphere.<sup>34</sup> In 2004, *Wired's* editor in chief, Chris Anderson, reassured his readers, fearful their jobs will be outsourced, that "the Indian machine" would never supplant American IT professionals, because Indians and computers share a common limit—"their inability to replace us." Yes, he concedes, "India's outsourcing industry thrums with potential and power, as if it were itself a machine," and "the speed at which India's tech industry is learning new skills is breathtaking," a perspective from which "India looks like an artificial intelligence, the superbrain that never arrived *in silico*." Anderson, however, offers a strategy to use the "semi-human" machine(s) in India for production, that is after all what machines are good for, and keep the R&D in the United States where advanced minds can lead us into the future. "Send the maintenance to India," he suggests, and a substantial chunk of firms' budgets will be "freed up to come up with the next breakthrough app," for "true innovation." Anderson's is a straightforward message: "The result: more workers focused on real innovation. What comes after services? Creativity."

The *Wired* editor's diatribe against Indian workers in the outsourced tech industry explicitly uses the master-narrative of an immutable boundary between human and machine to

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<sup>33</sup> Regarding this justification, Said writes in *Orientalism* that, "To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact" (39).

<sup>34</sup> See Kevorkian's *Color Monitors* for a discussion of creative and service class as it applies to race and IT in America (42).

define the American tech industry professional against the monolithic sub-human Indian machine. Traditional language of animalistic primitivism—immaturity, childishness, lacking a rational understanding of self-responsibility, blind submission—is implemented into narratives of Indian call center workers, while punctuated with metaphors and analogies that denigrate Indians with tech-sector jobs as mechanical simulacra of western computer whizzes, limited to copying, manufacturing, and performing maintenance. In “The New Face of the Silicon Age,” the featured *Wired* article that Anderson’s accompanies, Daniel H. Pink combines characterizations of cultural underdevelopment and immaturity with mechanical production to report on Indian firms. He sets out to explain the stakes of outsourcing, signaling to readers that his is an authoritative retelling of the globalization narrative: “This is a story about the global economy. It’s about two countries and one profession—and how weirdly upside down the future has begun to look from opposite sides of the globe [...] But it’s also about free markets, new politics, and ancient wisdom—which means it’s ultimately about faith.” Pink asks Americans to have faith, faith that they are indeed exceptional and, in accord with his editor, that Indians may appear to be hot on the heels of Silicon Valley technocrats, but they are ultimately merely resources. The evocation of faith bears a strange kinship with the missionary zeal of British colonialists, while explicitly acknowledging the threat that the global appears to have gone topsy-turvy, “weirdly upside down” and off-track from the prescribed hegemonic world order.

Like the British who were often intrigued by, and even complimentary of, Oriental civilizations,<sup>35</sup> Pink is not too reticent to admit that the Indian workers he meets in Navi-Mumbai are quite capable coders. Pink ingratiate readers to one of his interviewees, Aparna Jairam, by including her meditative recitations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu holy book that has fascinated

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<sup>35</sup> Particularly, the caste-system was a system of strict social hierarchy appreciated by the British and even codified into law under British colonial rule (Said in Kipling, 342, see also Moorhouse’s *India Britannica*).

westerners for centuries even as it helped to reinforce Indians' depravity. Impressive as Jairam's, and other Indians', memorization of the ancient text may be, when he visits the software company Patni, "another global menace," Pink ruminates that "[t]here's something adolescent about Patni—indeed, about many Indian IT firms. They're growing quickly, but they still don't quite seem like full-fledged adults." After playing on the familiar trope of immaturity, even churlishness, Pink moves into the narrative of the machine-people, for whom "English is the killer app" that gives them the outsourcing boost over China. Compared to Anderson's American tech firms producing the next breakthrough app, the Indians Pink describes are themselves smart machines running an app—one centuries old and developed in the West.<sup>36</sup> From here, the narrative of the western innovator over and against the Indian machine nearly writes itself, reimagining colonial assertions of Orientals' intellectual and moral degeneracy that reflexively ensured British superiority: "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (Said 1979, 40). The focus moves from animality to mechanicality as Indian workers "fabricate, maintain, test, or upgrade," what Americans originally "imagined and invented." Americans, likewise, have the aptitudes required for commercial success, "imagination, empathy, and the ability to forge relationships." Anyone who's seen *Bladerunner* knows that androids explicitly lack capabilities for the latter two. Rather than IT programmers "cranking code" or effectively run their English app in conversational correspondence, westerners are becoming IT *designers*, synthesizing a range of skills that qualify them as more "than a commodity that can be replicated in India." Thus the hegemonic narrative of the technologized global imagines a hierarchy between the United States and India, enforced

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<sup>36</sup> Once again, characteristic of technological globalization narratives that disavow links between our presents and our histories, the English language in India is represented as an incident either spontaneously arising or newly important in the "global," not a tradition with a fraught colonial history.

through “vocabulary, imagery, rhetoric, and figures with which to say it” (41)—the master-narratives of western humans defined against animal and machine Others.<sup>37</sup>

Pink speaks from his First-World privileged point-of-view to represent India’s so-called Third-World economic, cultural, infrastructural underdevelopment. This development discourse, wherein the global West is defined against the global Rest and individual nation’s progress is charted on an axis of how well it can imitate western development while its “shortcomings” are magnified and admonished, takes up colonial master-narratives by disguising them as economic science or western benevolence. Arturo Escobar writes that development discourse is a “form of hegemonic representation” that successfully recodifies colonial-style relationships of power through “the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as universal, preconstituted subjects, based on the privilege of the representers; the exercise of power over the Third World made possible by this discursive homogenization [...]; and the colonization and domination of the natural and human ecologies and economies of the Third World” (53). Pink reservedly admires Patni’s headquarters, but “the contrast between the inside and outside [of the building] is stark.” He writes that Patni’s “interior is Silicon Valley circa 1999 [...] But when I glance out an office window, just beyond the sidewalk I see a family living in a makeshift dwelling of plywood and tattered plastic.” The representation of poverty prefaces a section in which Pink paternally criticizes underdeveloped Patni’s “adolescence” and its status as a “relative pipsqueak” in terms of revenue (\$188 million in 2002, compared to US-based EDS which took in \$21.5 billion that year). In this way, representations of India “reproduc[e] endlessly the separation between

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<sup>37</sup> Said writes, “The period of immense advance in the institutions and content of Orientalism coincides exactly with the period of unparalleled European expansion” (1979, 41). We are currently experiencing an unprecedented spread of global capitalism and financialization of economies, concurrent with exponential increases in computing power and abilities. As with Orientalism and European expansion, while capitalism and technology spread their governance to more lives and more aspects of those lives, hegemonic discourse is keeping pace by recodifying and, in some cases, introducing racialized, gendered, and ideological hierarchies to support dominant structures.

reformers [westerners] and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European” (Escobar 53-54).

Silicon Valley is held up as the model of technological development against which Bangalore, Mumbai, Gurgaon, and Hyderabad are measured. Pink describes entering the Millenium Business Park, home to several tech companies’ campuses, as “tumb[ing] through a wormhole and land[ing] in northern Virginia or Silicon Valley.” Astonished by the affluence and cleanliness, he writes, “I look around to see if a film crew is shooting a commercial.” Meanwhile, in the United States, New Jersey State Senator Shirley Turner warns Pink that “If we keep going in this direction, we’ll have just two classes in our society—the very, very rich and the very, very poor. We’re going to look like some of the countries we’re outsourcing to” (qtd. in Pink). Senator Turner uses the West versus the Rest dichotomy to insist that economic disparity is something that happens “over there” and to strengthen her political stance with the threat that outsourcing will plunge America into the darkness of underdevelopment in which we imagine countries like India. Like colonial discourse, hegemonic narratives of development divide the world into the ‘reality’ of the West and ‘representations’ of the Third World, the westerner represents the Third World to other westerners, as Senator Turner does, but also the Third World attempts to become like the First World, to copy, model, or replicate the originality of the First World. Comparisons between Indian technopoles and Silicon Valley, and Senator Turner’s warnings, are part of the globalization narrative that requires Third World countries to mimic the First World as a precondition for their acceptance into the “global economy.” Escobar writes that Bhabha’s colonial ambivalence is reconstituted, as “[d]evelopment relies on this perpetual

recognition and disavowal of difference, a feature identified by Bhabha (1990) as inherent to discrimination” (54).

*In his 2005 book, The World is Flat, Thomas L. Friedman reports to readers his experience of Bangalore, otherwise known as India’s Silicon Valley, where he traveled to film a documentary about call centers, The Other Side of Outsourcing. He writes, “No, this definitely wasn’t Kansas. It didn’t even seem like India. Was this the New World, the Old World, or the Next World?” (4).*

Situating contemporary discourse about call center workers as droids in a framework informed by colonialism and developmentalism highlights the continued pervasiveness of white-as-western supremacist ideology as well as the ambivalence inherent in this regime of representation. As the First-World observer, Friedman’s reflection that the high-tech Bangalore he witnessed “didn’t even seem like India” contrasts the city with colonial and Third-World accounts of India and sets up his conceit of a self-described “Columbus-like journey of exploration” (4). He splits India into the “backward, polluted, and tradition-bound” India that is apparently nowhere to be found and the progressive and technologized Indian city that lay before him (Mirchandani 2012, 74). The claim to a static image of what “seems” like India evokes the legacy of historical colonial narratives of Oriental India and contemporary narratives of “Third World” India, an archive that informs techno-orientalist constructions of Indians in globalization discourse in order to bolster western identity by defining India’s Otherness. Throughout these discourses, India and its people have been constructed as the negative image of the West, a contrast that reflexively reinforced Western identity. Thus, India is backward and different because the West is appropriately forward-facing and normal. But, the ever-inscrutable India is exotic and novel in Friedman’s description.<sup>38</sup> The Bangalore he represents to his reader has embraced Western standards of development and commerce—differentiating it from the “Old” world tradition and the “Third” world—but is yet not quite identifiable as American, as “New

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<sup>38</sup> “The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West’s contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in—or fear of—novelty” (Said 1979, 59).

World,” and is instead a mysterious and promising “Next World.” This enthusiastic portrait serves Friedman’s thesis, which advocates the liberatory future of democratized technology even as it betrays the white-as-western supremacy master-narrative’s “continuing but now *unconscious* effectivity as a way of ‘thinking about’ and acting” in this “Next World” India. Tellingly, Friedman explains that his “journey out” is not in search of spices and jewels, but to understand “India’s riches” today—people working in the IT sector—and why they “were taking our work, why they had become such an important pool for the outsourcing of service and information technology work” (4). In a word, Friedman is not a European colonialist looking for baubles,<sup>39</sup> but a rational American optioning futures in what late capitalism now deems is India’s most valuable natural resource—it’s Western-employable technological workforce.

For that workforce to enter into the global economy, colonial and Third-World “imaginative geographies” of India are reworked to allow for Indians as technology and technology-enabled service providers in the globalization narrative.<sup>40</sup> India’s local business elite, who own and manage call centers, confront colonial and developmentalist Orientalist imaginaries of India when establishing business relationships with western clients, actually marketing an image of the customer service agents that “rests on a reification of India as traditional and backward, and the West as progressive and modern” (73). Call center managers that Mirchandani spoke with referenced images of exotic animals and jungle metaphors that permeated European travelogues of India. One manager explains that some clients still think India is “pre-modern” by Western standards, “a place where bullock carts are around and snakes

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<sup>39</sup> Itself a ridiculous representation of Columbus’s motivations and actions in the “Indies” as well as misrepresentative of colonialism in India.

<sup>40</sup> Said writes in *Orientalism*, “For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and the difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). The Indian call center’s distance and difference from potential US client companies needs to be reconstituted as closer to America in terms of infrastructure, technological knowledge, and English conversation, but still different and distant in its non-threatening position of service and the rupee to dollar exchange.

are around” (2012, 74). A second manager discusses clients’ apprehensions about India, “You walk into India, you see elephants, you see cobras walking on the road, you have tigers... You’re outsourcing the important part of your business, your customer service. So we take care of the apprehension in terms of technology, in terms of infrastructure, in terms of people, in terms of training” (74-75). Mirchandani notes that the references to wildlife draw a parallel between the dangers faced by western colonialists and those faced by western companies looking for customer service solutions abroad, an analogy that can work in the managers’ favor because “Managers easily argue that both fears are unfounded; just as tigers do not roam the streets, Indian workers are skilled service providers” (75). This equivalency expresses important continuities between colonial narratives and neo-imperial capitalist narratives in business transactions. Both use sensational descriptions of the environment to characterize and serve metonymically for India’s essential character and its inhabitants. Colonial narratives described mega fauna and flora to characterize an Oriental India whose inhabitants were exotic, even animalistic, and primed to become civilized by Europeans; contemporary capitalist narratives describe technology, industry, and infrastructure to characterize a techno-Oriental India whose inhabitants are technologically adroit, entrepreneurial, and primed to enter the global narrative only through corridors of service to Western corporations. Call center owners and managers use the dichotomy between traditional backwardness and technological progress to separate the Indian IT sector, with its global market purchase, from the unproductive India, the agrarian and the impoverished. Furthermore, just as cobras and tigers represented colonial-era fears of India, technology, competition, and its “riches”—people working in IT and ITES industries—represent “global”-era fears of, and fascinations with, India. These fears are diminished by reconstructing the “imaginary geography” of India that intensifies the United States’ sense of itself “by



dramatizing the distance and the difference” between Indian spaces that are figuratively closer to and farther away from American places in the technological global. This segregating “imaginary geography” circulates in India to designate and hierarchize the IT and ITES sectors as nationally valuable, and the majority of India as dead weight.

Accounts of Indian call centers published by American presses confront this task of setting the “scene” of an Indian city against a narrative backdrop of representations of mysterious and barbaric colonial India and impoverished and inhumane Third-World India. Like Pink’s description of the Patni headquarters above, such accounts emphasize the “only in India” juxtaposition of Western-looking technology parks, with their clean aesthetics and reliable connectivity, and the India of bazaars, slums, sacred cows, and sitar music that extends up to, but never inside, the gates of the high-tech facilities. In their piece for *Forbes*, Chris Walker and Morgan Hartley write that “India’s ‘garden city’ [Bangalore] is surrounded by gated tech campuses like Wipro and Infosys that rival the size and splendor of those in the Silicon Valley, complete with cappuccino bars, movie theatres, and golf cart lanes.” Following the colonial model, descriptions of Indian cities as hodge-podge reproductions of Silicon Valley provide American readers with a comparison in which the United States is the locus of innovation, creativity, and even aesthetics, whereas the legitimacy of India’s IT sector relies on its ability to follow and copy the Western model. Manuel Castells observes that an effect of the informational economy is a restructuring of the Third World “on the basis of the differential ability of countries and economic agents to link up with informational processes and to compete in the global economy” (92). Castells’s statement draws on the quasi-scientific status of development that places the impetus on countries to plug into an established global economy, but in the globalization narrative that differential ability is also a differential capacity to westernize and

provide labor, goods, and services, that are commodifiable for the west. Pal and Buzzanell point out that “imperialist patterns of neoliberalism” annex call center work in the Third World through “the construction of outsourcing industry as an opportunity leading to prosperity in Third World nations” (199). The “rhetoric of benevolence” is complemented by a rhetoric of diminution that belittles India’s developmental successes, or attributes them to foreign (western) intervention and aid.

The rhetoric of diminution—“India still has a long way to go”<sup>41</sup>—is a crucial component for dramatizing the distance and difference between Silicon Valley and imperfect or even misguided Indian imitations. Andrew Marantz, writing for *Mother Jones* magazine, describes Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi, as a “non-city,” built “by a corporation, for corporations.” Marantz describes “no sidewalks, convenience stores, or public parks—only stray cows foraging in the sun-baked dirt between office towers.” Marantz recounts a call center employee’s explanation as to why they aren’t allowed to leave the facility gates during work hours—“‘Out there it’s India, man,’ he said, gesturing through the gate to where a goat was urinating in the street. ‘We go outside, and when we go back in, we bring India in with us.’” Through the lens of these American writers, India’s ability to compete is couched in how much like the United States it can become, always almost, but not quite, like the West. The impulse to describe these places in terms of their likenesses and differences to America is, on the one hand, a byproduct of seemingly unavoidable ethnocentrism. On the other hand, however, the above descriptions serve as a contemporary iteration Said’s eponymous Orientalism, given that they bear the peculiar characteristic of “setting itself [the United States] off against the Orient [India] as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (1979, 3). Stuart Hall correlates that this method of comparing and contrasting “the West” with “the Rest” is as much an attempt to define an

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<sup>41</sup> From Pink’s article in *Wired*.

unknowable Other as it is to strengthen a Western identity. Said explains that, because the boundary is an imagined demarcation, “as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (1979, 5). In the imaginative geography of the globalization narrative, the contours of what is appropriately American, especially in the technological abstract, are drawn with respect to what is represented as India. Once a dark and mysterious subcontinent, according to western constructs, India’s IT and ITES sectors are the back office, a black box in technological globalization narrative.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to technology, the designer is white/American, the fabricator is brown/Indian, the tech support is brown/Indian, and the user is white/American. Visible, normal, and in positions of power with respect to manufacture and maintenance, Americans see themselves in the world, while the Indian is in a black box of representation, a place in which American-like skylines run up against dirt roads and unorganized masses that until recently fully occupied the American imaginary of a Third World India.

These descriptions, functioning as Western-centric commentaries on Indian architecture, aesthetics, and culture, follow a colonial model that authorizes the writers to provide insights into the essence of India via the (urban) landscape, particularly in order to reinforce the West against it. Huggan and Tiffin, writing about the intersections of environment and colonialism, argue that narratives of technical, cultural, and human underdevelopment were used to justify European invasion and colonialism, as well, “understanding non-European lands and the people and

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<sup>42</sup> Most closely, I take the term “black box” from Martin Kevorkian’s *Color Monitors: The Black Face of Technology in America*, but I also wish to invoke Bruno Latour’s use of the term, borrowed from cybernetics, as it relates to politics, scientific ‘fact,’ and technological progress: “The word black box is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex. In its place they draw a little box about which they need to know nothing but input and output [...] only their input and output count” (*Science in Action* 2-3). Latour’s take on the “black box” emphasizes the techno-orientalist strategy of disavowing the intimacy with which Indian workers engage with technology and facilitate Americans’ consumption and engagements with technology.

animals that inhabited them as ‘spaces,’ ‘unused, underused or empty’” (5, quoted phrases from Plumwood 2003, 53). Productivity as a marker of progress and modernity is gauged according to a western paradigms of usefulness and waste, a value system only intensified by late “global” capitalism. The above narratives, recounting an India post-westernization, focus on the erasure of an imagined indigenous Indian space in favor of reproducing western places like Silicon Valley. Marantz’s Gurgaon is a kind of techno-wasteland, uncivilized and backwards because of the conspicuous absence of western amenities like sidewalks, convenience stores, and city parks. The city space is underused—or underdeveloped—because stray cows, for which an appropriate western usage would be livestock, roam the dirt spaces between office towers, likewise empty spaces which ought to have been used for the above amenities or at least paved. He accounts for two Indias: within the facility gates exists a progressive corporatized and economically westernized India, and outside the gates traditional India endures where cows, decreed sacred by a backwards religion, move freely in the city, rendering Gurgaon almost like a Silicon Valley or Redmond, but dramatizing the extent to which it is not quite<sup>43</sup>. For Marantz, Gurgaon’s westernization is ersatz, and thus it is a non-city because non-western. Marantz’s discomfiture over the inappropriate aesthetics and irrational organization of dystopic Gurgaon contrasts Friedman’s gleeful science fiction-esque account of Next World Bangalore. Friedman relates a city scape populated with imposing buildings housing Microsoft, IBM, Goldman Sachs, and others, in which “some of the traffic signs were also sponsored by Texas Instruments, and the Pizza Hut billboard on the way over showed a steaming pizza, under the headline ‘Gigabites of Taste!’” (3). In his representational narrative, Bangalore is likewise similar to West, but not quite recognizable as New World and is instead a Next World. Notably, though Friedman and

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<sup>43</sup> Mimicry

Marantz establish India as variously exotic and backward, in both cases technological capitalism has taken over.

In the globalizing move from atoms to bits,<sup>44</sup> the United States' sense of originary identity is bolstered by narratives of Indian geographies and identities subsumed by a technological determinism, while the strength of America's rational humanism enables it to rise above and control the power of computational processing. The rhetoric of diminution strategically dichotomizes technology as an effect of the West that affects the rest: "Technology is something that *comes* from the West and does something *to* other people in other places, such as the 'Third World'—a framework which, even when well-intentioned, denies both agency and contemporaneity to the 'other'" (McQuitty 255). Attendant to this formulation is the designation of technology as something the West can make, own, and send forth, while, for the non-West, it wields a deterministic power that directs and shapes. Rather than merely moving from the West to the rest of the world, in this narrative technology exists differently for westerners and non-westerners because they are imagined as two different orders of humans with different forms of life. The notion that the western liberal humanist subject is both the prime mover in the material world as well as a superior being, endowed with a purpose and meaning, is the ontological metanarrative legitimizing white-as-western supremacy and subjectivity for centuries. As referenced above, Said, Plumwood, Huggan and Tiffin, and postcolonial scholars and theorists, generally, have shown how colonial representations of white Europeans' racial Others drew on a strong ontological metanarrative of anthropocentrism that organizes the perceivable world according to an Aristotelian chain of being. The schema ordered entities according to their relative "perfection," for which god, perfect in spirit and unbound by the material trappings of the world, formed the pinnacle. From Aristotle's bifurcation of *zoē* and *bios*—separating man as

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<sup>44</sup> See Negroponte's *Being Digital*

the political animal—through Linnaeus’s grouping of humans in “Anthropomorpha,”<sup>45</sup> to Agamben’s articulation that humans are those who control the categorization “human” at a given time and place, definitions of man have been analyzed by scholars of the humanities and social sciences chiefly as modes of differentiation among biological forms on the basis of rationality and morality versus animality. I believe it is likewise important to analyze discourses of Western Man and animality with the understanding that the western narratives of distinction between man and animal is, and has been, coarticulated with narratives of distinction between man and machine. The same dualistic narratives of legitimation are evoked to assert man/animal and man/machine binaries. Writing about biological classification and species boundaries, Haraway claims, “[p]rimatology is about the life history of a taxonomic order that includes people. Especially western people produce stories about primates while simultaneously telling stories about the relations of nature and culture, animal and human, body and mind, origin and future” (1989, 5). Similarly, western stories about mechanical technology call upon and help reinforce these dualisms and codify certain narratives of their interrelation.<sup>46</sup> That both sets of stories borrow from the vocabulary and imagery of the other should not be dismissed as coincidence. While postcolonial theorists like Plumwood reference the treatment of colonized nature and animals as machines or automata (55)—evoking non-human status in order to mechanize these as means and not ends in themselves<sup>47</sup>—I have been unable to find a studied sketch tracing western understandings of Man’s congruent separation from animals *and* machines as expressed in colonial racism. The congruencies, overlap, and reciprocity between master-narratives seeking

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<sup>45</sup> The tautological but disturbingly destabilizing “manlike” or “with human form.”

<sup>46</sup> For example, McQuire writes that in contemplating our twenty-first-century technological and biological forms of life, the “threshold lays bare something that is implied in every historical iteration of technology: defining the technological not only activates the border between nature and culture, but goes to the heart of what it means to be human” (255).

<sup>47</sup> Violation of Kant’s categorical imperative for the treatment of humans

to define the boundaries between humans-and-animals and humans-and-machines are vital for rehistoricizing globalization narratives. Insofar as these complementary and mutually constitutive discourses bring to bear on contemporary tropes of outsourced Indian call center workers, I will briefly trace key instances in which animals and machines, together, have served as foils for the western liberal humanist subject over the past four centuries.

*“From this aspect the body is regarded as a machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better arranged, and possessing in itself movements which are much more admirable, than any of those which can be invented by man. Here I specially stopped to show that if there had been such machines, possessing the organs and outward form of a monkey or some other animal without reason, we should not have had any means of ascertaining that they were not of the same nature as those animals.”<sup>48</sup>*

Regarded as the progenitor of modern philosophy, Descartes’s conception of the fundamental dualism between mind and body relies on a distinction between divine rationality/free will and the biological organism understood as a complex mechanism. Referencing popular automata<sup>49</sup>, or moving machines, Descartes’s illustrates the human body as a machine “made by the hands of God,” and therefore infinitely more complex than any man-made mechanism (“Animals are Machines” §I). For Descartes, the distinctions between “men and brutes,” and humans and “machines which bore a resemblance to our body and imitated our actions”—the latter of both are *automata mechanica*—are derived from exactly the same tests, of which there are two: capacity for infinitely productive speech or sign use<sup>50</sup> and capacity for infinitely productive intelligent response to stimuli, such that *knowledge* and not merely conditioned or instinctive response is enacted<sup>51</sup> (§I). Notably, Descartes’s conception of what we

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<sup>48</sup> Renée Descartes, “Animals are Machines”

<sup>49</sup> Descartes himself built automata, though not to be physiologically simulative (Riskin 101).

<sup>50</sup> Descartes specifies that to pass this test, the entity “arranges its speech in various ways, in order to reply appropriately to everything; that may be said in its presence, as even the lowest type of man can do” (§I).

<sup>51</sup> A full reproduction of Descartes’s explanation is beneficial: “And the second difference is, that although machines can perform certain things as well as or perhaps better than any of us can do, they infallibly fall short in others, by the which means we may discover that they did not act out of knowledge, but only from the disposition of their organs. For while reason is a universal instrument which can serve for all contingencies, these organs have need of

might anachronistically term “artificial intelligence”—actions that suggest human intelligence, but are not specifically proper to humans because they can be synthesized, replicated, or enacted by non-humans—includes the entire realm of behavior he deigns attributable to non-human animals, and extended to machines. Animals and machines share the same cybernetic circuitry, a commonality against which humans are dualistically set apart.

From this seventeenth-century Turing test follow a number of conclusions. The test “shows that they [animals] have no reason at all, and that it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, just as a clock, which is only composed of wheels and weights” (§I). Also, though the human soul must be closely united to the body “in order to have sensations and appetites similar to our own, and thus to form a true man,” the human soul is *proven* to be “in its nature entirely independent of the body,” and, consequentially, immortal (§I). Finally, the entire tangle of human, animal, and machine can be explained and legitimated by splitting the soul (understood as the animating force of the physiological mechanism), and so “there are *two* different principles causing our motions: one is purely mechanical and corporeal [...] and can be called the corporeal soul<sup>52</sup>; the other is the incorporeal mind,<sup>53</sup> the soul which I have defined as a thinking substance” (§III).<sup>54</sup> A final distinction is made, so that animals are designated “natural automata” and machines are “artificial ones” (§III).

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some special adaption for every particular action. From this it follows that it is morally impossible that there should be sufficient diversity in any machine to allow it to act in all the events of life in the same way as our reason causes us to act” (§I).

<sup>52</sup> Res extensa

<sup>53</sup> Res cogitans

<sup>54</sup> Descartes’s, of course, was not the last or only word on the matter of establishing man as a unity of material corporeal substance and immaterial thinking substance. Locke’s 1690 *Essay concerning Human Understanding* scandalously suggested “We have the ideas of *matter* and *thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or not” (4.3.6). Materialist Julien Offray de La Mettrie, in *L’Homme Machine* (Man a Machine), claims the insistence on an immaterial mind, as if observable or material, is ludicrous because “Man is so complicated a machine that it is impossible to get a clear idea of the machine beforehand, and hence impossible to define it.” La Mettrie’s writings caused considerable outrage when translated to English in 1751. The vehement rejoinders to these essays indicate the trend of rejecting the suggestion of “thinking matter” in England on Christian ideological grounds (see Ann Thompson’s “Animals, Humans, Machines and Thinking Matter, 1690-1707”).



The higher-order reason that distinguishes human rational thinking and free will from instinctual physiology for Descartes is extended to the socio-political body in Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes opens his tome with an analogy connecting god's metaphysical power of animation to humans' machines: "Nature (the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World) is by the *Art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal" ([1]). Hobbes reasons that, while automata can indeed be said to have artificial life designed by man, "*Art* goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, *Man*. For by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Common-wealth, or State, (in latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended" ([1]). For the common-wealth, "Man" is both artificer and matter that makes up the artifice; the State is a second-order cybernetic system. The system mechanism differentiates between subjects, the "Body Politique" of united men, and objects, the "Externall Body" perceived by man ([1], [3]). Presently, in his "Second Treatise," Locke defines the subject elements of the system as Men, to whom God had given the World in common and the reason to make use of it by designating his private property (§25 and §26). The objects that make up the commons are those things that become appropriated as property (§28).

Hobbes's characterization of the State as a complex machine is later applied to the British Empire. Sharing wisdom garnered during his time in British India in "The Government of Subject Races," Lord Cromer warns against the dangers of over-centralizing Imperial control or excessively individuating governance in any one Indian locale, in order "To ensure the harmonious working of the different parts of the machine" (35). Said writes that Cromer "envisions a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great

embracing machine [...] What the machine's branches feed into it in the East—human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you—is processed by the machine, then converted into more power” (Said 1979, 44). The seventeenth-century common-wealth, a mechanism animated by the concerted cooperative existence of individuals to ensure the protection of negative liberty, is refigured as nineteenth-century Empire, a mechanism animated by production to ensure the positive growth of a central Western power and authority. According to the productive machine model of commercial imperialism,<sup>55</sup> humans, animals, objects, and environment become resources for production<sup>56</sup> that must be made useful to the colonial power by implementing them into the machine (44). The Indians, as a “subject race” taken as a homogeneous group and therefore identical in mechanism and essential nature, become an object of study and optimization for western specialists. In order for India to be processed into the commercial imperial machine, British authorities sought to understand and assimilate Indian people, animals, and land as resources for modern production.

It is this mission to optimize and assimilate Indians that motivated Macaulay's infamous “Minute on Education” in 1853. I find Macaulay's discourse of usefulness—economic, political, and intellectual—to be a particularly interesting narrative of legitimation, as it integrates the market-mechanism paradigm of empire alongside England's cultural exceptionalism.<sup>57</sup> Moralistic and aesthetic arguments about the superiority of English language learning over Sanscrit or Arabic puff up a core pragmatic argument about the imperial education program in

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<sup>55</sup> “The entire English connection with India, with all that had sprung from it, was the direct product of commercial imperialism” (Thornton 108, see also Parry 27-28n).

<sup>56</sup> Progress, development, and modernization are all driven by production.

<sup>57</sup> Macaulay on the use of British funds to teach students Sanscrit and Arabic: “They have wasted the best years of life in learning what procures for them neither bread nor respect. Surely we might with advantage have saved the cost of making these persons useless and miserable” [par. 23]. Here, Macaulay explicitly communicates an understanding of the direct connections among English knowledge, intellectual prestige, and usefulness in terms of economic value in the colonial Indian economy.

India's return-on-investment.<sup>58</sup> Macaulay's mission for the education of Indian people, stated in the most quoted passage from his "Minute," is to render the natives useful branches of the British colonial machine that they may turn the most advanced of India's human material into a productive force in the Western marketplace and symbolic economy:

"We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, —a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population." [par. 34]

Macaulay's educated Indians are endowed with an artificial intelligence that enables them to transmit knowledge and develop symbolic capital, refining and enriching their native languages with western words, thereby elevating the Indian people above their barbaric habits of the flesh and instilling the value of western utility. The ambiguity of "them" in the final phrase "to render them by degrees fit vehicles," for which the most obvious antecedent is "vernacular dialects" but can yet be read as referring to members of "that class [of Indians]," represents those salvageable parts of Indian culture as tools for spreading values of intellectual productivity. Though their native science and literature indicate Indians could not have created such greatness and knowledge as Europeans, he insists their natural mind can be brought under control and improved upon—programmed—to carry out and even comprehend western directives. This imagined Indian, elevated above the native masses through educated imitation of western rational Man, retains its purchase in the American imagination and is projected onto Indian IT and ITES workers.

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<sup>58</sup> "On all such subjects the state of the market is the detective test" [par. 21].

The emergence of the literate Indian during the Raj-era was treated with the same tinge of disdain observable in western attitudes toward educated Indians in the tech-sector, wary of Indians developing a sense of equality or superiority. Parry catalogues several Britons' marked preference for provincial villagers to cosmopolitan and learned Indians, also favoring the supposedly strong and surly Muslims to passive and supine Hindus (50). Sir James Dunlop Smith<sup>59</sup> included in his diaries excerpts from Indians' letters to him because written in English and in a style he found comical, an example that "the omnipresent Anglo-Indian habit of deriding the interim style which western-educated Indians were evolving was a racist instinct against manners which they saw as a travesty of their own national characteristics" (Parry 50). Just as the colonial Anglicized Indian was perceived as an affront to the Britons' "natural" and proprietary English-ness—a psychosis Bhabha expounds on in his "Of Mimicry and Men," which I take up in Chapter 2—the techno-savvy and westernized Indian IT or ITES worker is derided by Americans as under-evolved technologically. Since information technology is designated as a western innovation, product, and idea, reports from and about India are peppered with representations of Indian technology as inchoate, inappropriate, and limited, and Indian technology workers as suitable as an extension of the utility of technology, but ill-suited to create or really contribute to the future of technology—"But never—not once—does anybody mention innovation, creativity, or changing the world" (Pink). In hegemonic narratives of Western Europe and the United States today, to be non-western is to be "at best a follower, a lazy consumer who, as Naipaul says somewhere, can use but could never have invented the telephone" (Said 1994, 304). Thus, concerning technology, India is presently conceived of as productive through Indians' abilities to use western computers, coding languages, telephones by

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<sup>59</sup> Smith left for India in 1878 as a soldier, and served in the subcontinent as a military official and civilian for twenty-two years (Parry 325n117).

training and memorization while it remains somewhat inconceivable that Indians create proprietary software or have a national space program.<sup>60, 61</sup> In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when educated and westernized Indians took a logical step and claimed equality, the British officials were shocked and scandalized (Parry 50). Then, as now, the Indian's prescribed role in the narrative is one of dependence (animal) and utility (machine).

In hegemonic narratives, Western knowledge, culture, technology, and the English language, because of their obvious superiority to those of India, subordinate and control the native Indian's nature, imbuing her with artificial intelligence. Indians interacting with western clients and customers are asked to constantly demonstrate their westernization in performative labor that Mirchandani calls "authenticity work." She gives Indian call center workers the appellation "phone clones" because of this injunction to recreate an imagined western identity as closely as possible. In view of the above narratives on Western conceptions of humans, animals, and machines, however, I wish to rethink the "clone" metaphor. Importantly, in westernization and globalization narratives, the Indian's corporeal mechanism, the hardware, is significantly unchanged—he or she remains "Indian in blood and colour"—but their operating system is enhanced according to the western tastes, opinions, morals, and intellect deemed necessary for productive labor and commerce. The ideal Indian call center worker executes Western cognition and functioning, but her racialized biological form and environmental milieu prevent her from achieving western enlightenment as both *res cogitan* and *res extensa*. A simulacrum of the

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<sup>60</sup> See "Indian Software: Techno-coolies No More." *The Economist* 8 May 2003. *The Economist*. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

<sup>61</sup> See "Why India's Mars Mission Is So Much Cheaper Than NASA's." *The Two-Way: Breaking News from NPR*. NPR.org. 5 Nov. 2013. Web. 12 Jan. 2014.  
Gowen, Annie. "India to launch Mars mission as international space race grows more competitive." *Asia & Pacific. Washington Post*. 3 Nov. 2013. Web. 12 Jan. 2014.

western liberal humanist subject, but not exact or authentic due to bio-mechanical defect, in hegemonic globalization narrative, the call center worker is metaphorized as android.

The contemporary narratives above refigure the familiar representational technique of the intellectually subordinate Other in the trope of the Indian customer service droid, optimized for encouraging attitudes and behaviors that benefit neoliberal hegemony. This representational technique denies structural causes of inequality and absolves corporations of protectionists' accusations, legitimized through what Venn identifies is the "grand narrative" of economic liberalism, that unencumbered generation of wealth enables it to be shared or "trickled down" for the collective good, and the neoliberal corollary that the poor bear the responsibility for their own condition "because of their backwardness, underdevelopment or their inadequacies as economic subjects" (2009, 208). Instead of justifying the exploitation of purely physical labor or land and natural resource extraction, for which colonial discourse's animalistic simpleton served well, business processing outsourcing justifies the exploitation of the computational, intelligence, and communicative capabilities of the Indian labor force. Befitting western culture's ongoing fear and obsession with humanoid robotics, and incumbent threats to the definitive western humanist subject by intelligent machines, hegemonic technological globalization narrative constructs Indian call center workers as droids. The customer service droid responds to technophobic and xenophobic fears of Others taking over, and attempts to secure American exceptionalism in the narrative by representing Indians' useful and harmless "droid-like" characteristics. In this narrative Indian droids are dependent on the United States for instruction and resources, their utility is chiefly employed in easing the burden on American companies and customers, their capacity for personal and intellectual growth and ambition is stunted, and their imitations of Americans are humorously flawed. These attributes are then subject to the western

observer's novel enjoyment and derisive contempt. Said writes, "The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in—or fear of—novelty" (59). As a techno-imperial project, the android Asiatic joins other stereotyped colonial figures intended to devalue, dehumanize, exploit, and subjugate Others in a hegemonic master narrative. This justifies the business practices of a transnational netocratic oligarchy, including elites in the United States and India, and reinforces a spirit of competition and adaptation among a transnational tech-sector workforce while assuring the threat to economic security is too minimal to discourage consumer spending or divert investment and confidence away from American firms.

## Chapter 2: Mimic Machines and Productive Automatons

*“The call centre has become the symbol of India's newly globalised workforce: while traditional India sleeps, a dynamic young cohort of highly skilled, articulate professionals works through the night, functioning on US time under made-up American aliases, pretending familiarity with a culture and climate they've never actually experienced, earning salaries that were undreamt of by their elders (but a fraction of what an American would make) and enjoying a lifestyle that's a cocktail of premature affluence and ersatz westernisation transplanted to an Indian setting.”*<sup>62</sup>

Shashi Tharoor, the Indian Minister of State for Human Resource Development, published a column in *The Times of India* in response to Chetan Baghat's portrayal of call center work as robbing India of its most productive generation in service work to the West in Baghat's novel *One Night @ the Call Center*, a representation Tharoor's "elitist" friend repeated to him, claiming "all we're doing is providing coolie labour carrying the excess baggage of globalization that's too clunky for the West to bother to lift." Tharoor retorts that Indians perform vital tasks that are hardly menial, writing, "If what India is doing is providing coolie labour, then today the coolies are scheduling the trains." Tharoor, and his friend, are contributing to a specific debate in India over the professional status and economic return of western-contracted call center labor. Their neglect of the techno- or cyber- prefix popularly used for ITES workers reflects the column's topical emphasis on the notion that call centers are "soul-destroying sweatshops." In this narrative, the techno- or cyber-*coolie* is likened to manual laborer, and the type of work is compared to factory or sweatshop manufacturing. In India, this narrative is most often employed in arguments that young Indians should be working on developing *Indian* technology that will bring more profitable returns to the nation in the global marketplace. Although Tharoor argues "coolie" is an inappropriate representation for workers, his closing argument echoes the above

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<sup>62</sup> Shashi Tharoor in "The coolies are scheduling the trains." The contemporary meaning of *coolie* is important for understanding Tharoor's metaphor here. As a reminder, it is "a term used to describe poorly paid baggage handlers at train stations" (Patel 41).



refrain, stating, “The next stage must be for Indians to develop such services for our own market.”

Emphasizing “coolie” thus spotlights certain aspects of the nature of call center work—physically draining and repetitive labor—just as the addition of “techno-” or “cyber-” brings other features to the fore. *Techno-* or *cyber-coolie* directs one’s attention toward the communications technology that enables offshore call center work, and the enactment of labor in and across a virtual technological space. “Techno-coolie,” like the work itself, brings together these two components in the narrative; however, which component is underscored in the narrative correlates to the hegemonic function of the role the agent is to play. In this way, the two foregrounded structural components of telecommunications and physical labor conditions both point to possible sites of resistance and counter-narratives.

I use the images of mimic machine and productive automaton to focus on two narrative strains that are concerned with particular aspects, expectations, and controversies of call center labor and correspond to the two components signified by “techno-coolie.” The mimic machine, so named by combining Bhabha’s term “mimicry” and Turing’s “thinking machine,” relates to the category of narratives and narrated identities accorded to call center agents pretending to be American. These discourses and processes fix on the virtuality of the global marketplace and marketplace interactions; the virtual space of the call is a site of identity management and is rigorously controlled and monitored by call center and client company management in order to effect the proper informational and emotional exchanges among workers and customers, evaluated in terms of satisfaction productivity and immediate or potential economic return. On the other hand, the image of the productive automaton surfaces in representations of call center workers in narratives directed toward the artifactuality of outsourced labor as embodied

production. These narratives often relate customer service outsourcing to traditional offshore manufacturing, analogizing call centers to factories or sweatshops. In both the United States and India, this trope devalues workers' labor as unskilled and manual, imposing the value system of the knowledge economy to make call center work seem undesirable and interpose a symbolic distance between it and lucrative technological production, especially those forms associated with the West. The figure of the productive automaton is operationalized to demean labor as menial, repetitive, and even physically unhealthy with the intention of promoting hegemonic economic goals.

Isolating the event of the call allows me to interrogate its virtuality as a realm of potential, in which Bhabha's theorization of mimicry and resistance points to possibilities for agency that disrupts exploitation and American hegemonic globalization narrative. The contradictions in dominant national, racial, and corporate narratives posed by the call are potential sites for exposure, but limited by the powerful hegemonic conditions under which the event of the call is produced—conditions that the artefactual, or material, circumstances leading to factory and sweatshop analogies help us to understand. Though mimicry and successfully passing as intelligent and capable by western standards works for the agent by subverting perceived racial and economic power dynamics between customer and worker, the complexity of the larger relationship of the call to its conditions of emergence and continued operation reveals the insufficiency of considering the moment of the call in terms of easy categories like American, Indian, or even definitive class distinctions. I argue that potential for resistance and counter-narrative are constrained by a larger web of power structures through which the counter-hegemonic is (re)articulated in compliance with hegemonic disciplining of “good conduct” in globalized late capitalism.

## Mimic Machines

A key component of, and point of contention in, call center work in India is the often compulsory use of a made-up “American” identity while talking to American customers on the phone. The construction and reception of these virtually interfaced identities—that is, the narratives that inform, surround, and result from the projected relationship between parties on either end of the line—offer insight into the hegemonic function of the operationalized identities in the construction of the global. These likewise highlight how particular anxieties about technology and technology work are manifested and managed. The fantasy and fear of telephonic disembodiment functions to transmogrify the Indian worker into a flickering signifier in narratives and the phone call itself. During the call, American customers’ fears about the intimate vulnerabilities and global connectivity technology presents can become intensified and projected onto the Indian call center worker. Furthermore, the local narrative of the phone call underscores the virtual components of all identity enactments as contingent and relational rather than essential. The recognition of multiple and contingent identities enacted by a person is antithetical to the western liberal humanist subject, a unitary rational being, introducing potential disruption of hegemonic grand narrative into the virtuality of the call.

Call center agents’ experiences, and the cultural and labor processes that shape them, thus comprise sites of potential rupture in the hegemonic globalization narrative. Rearticulating the Habermasian thesis of system and lifeworld, A. Aneesh contends that “cultural and geographic integrations are felt, experienced, negotiated, and embodied by call center agents” in the “*globalization of the lifeworld*” (514, emphasis in original). In the “modern world” of late global capitalism, the symbolically structured lifeworld<sup>63</sup> is “colonized” by the “system<sup>64</sup> imperatives of

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<sup>63</sup> Aneesh writes, “In the lifeworld perspective, society emerges as a symbolically structured space of social interaction, understanding, and experience, responsible for three processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization” (515).

functional integration” imposed by the global (515). Call centers signify the emergence of “practices of globalization” characterized by real time interaction with the injunction that “in order for global processes to integrate culturally and geographically remote locations, there must be a certain neutralization of differences” (516). Aneesh is particularly critical of call center practices that require Indians to simulate American identities while there “is no pressure on American or British cultures, in action-theoretic terms, for communicative adaptation”; the “one-way characteristic of cultural adaptation” is symptomatic of hegemonic globalization (525). The global system model integrates the Indian call center agent as a machine-like end-user product, and “problems” such as a worker’s need for a social life or the body’s circadian rhythms are deflected from the system of employment and absorbed by the individual workers as part of the job (Poster 2007, 294). Call centers require agents to take courses meant to debug their English-speaking accents of mother tongue influences (MTI) purported to act as noise and interference in communications operations, and reorient their “hard wired” internal clocks to the international clock that runs on Eastern Standard Time.

Aneesh’s understanding of call center processes within a global system model is attentive to the economic and technical<sup>65</sup> communication narrative arguments used by American businesses to justify a global hierarchical order in the marketplace and explain the need for Indians to speak like Americans in order to ensure seamless integration and functioning in the system. The system model of globalization bears marked resemblance to the mechanistic model of the British Empire, and is similarly organized by a symbolic structuration as well as a systemic “logic,” yet to think of the economic system and cultural lifeworld dualistically and therefore separable is dangerous. Aneesh’s attention to the interplay between a global economic

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<sup>64</sup> Aneesh writes, “In the systems perspective, however, society is a set of self-regulating systems where actions are coordinated through functional interconnections of action consequences” (515).

<sup>65</sup> For description of cultural and linguistic differences as “purely technical issues,” see Nadeem p. 57.

system and a culturally constructed lifeworld, indicates that lives are implemented into an increasingly self-referential global capitalist system. In this way, late capitalism has built expansively on the singular logic Timothy Mitchell has shown we inherited from the nineteenth century (1). In *Rule of Experts*, Mitchell shows that the ascendancy in the 1800s of the universal principle of reason, which is held to indicate that economic forms flow from the spread of rational calculation and freedom, combined with the turmoil percolating around the world wars, provided (and provides) the preconditions for the economy to emerge as a new object—that “can be understood as a set of practices that puts in place a new politics of calculation” (7)—in the twentieth century (5). Relatedly, while “network,” “system,” and “communication” are constructed in the global narrative as definitive and empirical entities, they are shaped by an ideological apparatus Donna Haraway calls “the informatics of domination” (1991). Indian simulation of American identities during call center work is the result of a multivalent strategy. The event of the call often eludes the simplistic dynamic in which the customer enters into a relationship of domination with the worker, which a worker’s identity play can aid in disrupting. Situated within larger relationships among workers, customers, corporations, and business elites in India, however, reveals that every successful identity simulation enacted during a call is likewise a moment of instrumentalization of the worker for constructing hegemonic globalization.

In the virtual imaginary of the globalization narrative, much like the British imperial narrative, the United States’ relationship with “developing countries” like India and others in the “global south” is one of governance and not reliance. White-as-western supremacy gives rise to the illusion of American insularity in the globalization narrative and conceals that the United States owes much of its pecuniary success to colonial economic events, such as the exclusion of

India from the Gold Standard to guarantee unequal exchange (Venn 2009, 201). According to this dominant fiction, the United States beneficently helps others developmentally, economically, and technologically, but does not rely on others. As the self-ordained preeminent global force, “might is right” is legitimized by the delusion that whatever is good for the United States is good for the human race, giving the invisible hand of liberalist progress a particular national character.<sup>66</sup> In the global narrative, “American domination is insular,” and its exceptionalism places it at a safe vantage point above the rest of the world (Said 1994, 289). Thus, while American companies leverage socio-technical connectivity, dependency on the Other cannot be acknowledged (see Plumwood 56). In the Western imaginary, call center agents in India are figured at the periphery of informational knowledge and capital, far from technocratic metropolises like Cupertino. Such an imaginary ignores non-Western workers’ and professionals’ central roles in the information economy and technological development. American corporations, and therefore customers, rely on millions of agents in the so-called developing world to help users access, operate, and maintenance the products and services they purchase. If Americans’ relationship with call center workers is recognized as one of reliance, rather than annoyance or antagonism, such recognition could potentially puncture the cultivated sense of singular dominance in the knowledge economy. The threat posed by the possibility that customers’ awareness of relationality and reliance among themselves and those in the so-called Third World, and certainly the awareness of the conditions of instrumentalization and exploitation enacted by corporations on a transnational scale, could mobilize anxieties that would potentially disrupt hegemonic national and transnational regimes of power, and are thus discursively redirected toward unawareness and competition instead of connection with the Other.

Anxieties over this discontinuity in hegemonic globalization narrative manifest in

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<sup>66</sup> See V.G. Kiernan, p. 127. See also, Said 1994, p. 287.

American protectionism rhetoric, which corporations try to diffuse by implementing protocols intended to make customers feel as if they are talking to fellow Americans over the phone, or at the very least, to hide where the call is coming from. Role playing an American persona works in concert with industry and popular media representations of Indian workers in the information technology enabled services (ITES) as machine-like, and therefore automated and unskilled when compared to the superior American consumer. When the call center agent simulates a particular American identity, that identity is not only produced on an individual scale, but also projects an image of the American client corporation and constructs the American consumer's identity in a discrete and insular position in the global network. In this way, the professionalization of role play in call centers evidences a "confluence between capitalist and nationalist goals" (Mirchandani 2004, 361) irreducible to a distinctive market system and ideologically-driven lifeworld that are indistinguishable as individual components in the globalization narrative. Of the practices and processes of call center labor, scholars find the injunction to simulate American identities to be the most disturbing, as it bears an uncomfortable resemblance to what Bhabha terms "colonial mimicry."

This form of "mimicry," also referred to as "role play,"<sup>67</sup> "aping the West,"<sup>68</sup> "national identity management,"<sup>69</sup> "impression management,"<sup>70</sup> and "authenticity work,"<sup>71</sup> generates both interest and uneasiness for writers of scholarly and popular accounts of Indian call centers serving the West. Friedman and Mark Landler of *The New York Times* are among those amused by call center workers' performances. Friedman, after joking that the inside of the "call center is a cross between a co-ed college frat house and a phone bank raising money for the local public

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<sup>67</sup> Shome, p. 113

<sup>68</sup> Pal and Buzzanell, p. 199

<sup>69</sup> Poster 2007, p. 271

<sup>70</sup> Raghuram, p. 1471

<sup>71</sup> Mirchandani 2011, p.1

TV station,” asks readers to read his transcription of several call center conversations, “if you can imagine this, in the voice of someone with an Indian accent trying to imitate an American or a Brit” (21-22). Commenting on one operator’s introduction as Jerry, he writes parenthetically, “The Indian call center operators adopt Western names of their own choosing. The idea, of course, is to make their American or European customers feel more comfortable. Most of the young Indians I talked to about this were not offended but took it as an opportunity to have some fun. While a few just opt for Susan or Bob, some get really creative” (23). According to Friedman’s description, the role play is just that, play. His commentary on Indian imitations of western accents suggests this play is comedic, all genially orchestrated by obliging call center sycophants for the enjoyment of western customers.

In his 2001 article for *The New York Times*, “Hi, I’m in Bangalore (but I Can’t Say So),” Mark Landler introduces C R Suman, whose work identity is Susan Sanders, daughter of Bob and Ann and sister to Mark, from Chicago, Illinois. Landler explains that “[t]he point of this pretense is to convince Americans who dial toll-free numbers that the person on the other end of the line works right nearby—not 8,300 miles away, in a country where static-free calls used to be a novelty.” If Landler seems a bit smug about India’s supposedly late-coming telecommunications development relative to the US, these apparently convivial jibes at Indian technology are so commonplace in the American and British press that they’re almost a genre convention. In fact, Friedman’s above comparison between the call center and college housing is just one other example. In his piece, Landler benignly indicates that American customers are being duped by call center workers, but, like Friedman, Landler suggests that the charade is for the customer’s benefit, lest he or she experiences discomfiture upon realizing the static-free customer service is transmitted seamlessly from twelve time zones away.



Critics denounce the computer-aided role play as a much more problematic practice, designed to shelter States-based companies from backlash over outsourcing and manage customers' potentially disruptive interactions with the Indian Other—a motivation that Friedman and Landler are somewhat unabashed in hinting toward. For some scholars, the methods employed to ensure seamless corporate governance harken back to British colonial methods of governance of the empire. The relation between Bhabha's theory of colonial "mimicry" and call center agents' role play is not isomorphic, however. Macaulay called for the creation of a class of Indian "mimic men" to emulate English civility to other Indians in order to aid Britain's control over India, while call center role play is required of Indian call center agents who exercise western conversation with westerners. Pal and Buzzanell set out to use Bhabha's theories alongside Said's, but seem to abandon Bhabha in their actual analysis of call center discourse (201). They introduce mimicry as an act of subversion, because when the colonized copy or reproduce colonial power, it renders the colonial authority hybrid and ambivalent since "the process of communication is never completely achieved" and the identities it produces are unstable (201). Yet, "the scope of resistance is limited in Bhabha's ideas of *hybridity* because it does not suggest any structural change" to hierarchies, but makes an ironic play of them (203). Raka Shome's consideration of mimicry in the call center is even more grim: "Nor is their role playing—and the mimicry informing it—productive of resistance or transgression. If anything, this 'mimicry' feeds into the further colonization and disciplining of the 'third world' worker by global flows of capital and information" (113). Shome's analysis is predicated on role play being compulsory and not an enactment of agency on the part of the worker. She insists that the hybrid racial "passing" achieved during role play, because conducted over the telephone, is a functionally "disembodied phenomenon," the workers' hybridity is a "privatized dis-appearance"

of their Indian selves (113). While Shome and Pal and Buzzanell rightly indicate that resistance enacted through role play is constrained, Shome's notion of disembodiment and a private disappearance uncritically reduce the agent to a mere object of western economic power without exploring the potentiality for contradiction and disruption the virtual space of the call affords.

Tentatively, Shome's reading of call center mimicry appears, itself, "a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning" (Bhabha 128). Here, the role-playing Indian stands in for the Lying Asiatic as a *metonymy of presence* through which adopted American identity—a part, or prosthetic—becomes the privileged signifier for the "whole" of the call center worker; or, "the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy" (128). Shome ignores Bhabha's emphasis on *ambivalence*, slippage, and authority, choosing instead to mourn the essential Indian subject who is muscled out by the stronger Western apparatus of power (its capital) and ignoring his exhortation that "mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask" (126). His theory of mimicry is about the pathology of colonial desire, not merely an act which "*repeats* rather than *re-presents*," anyhow (125). The mimicry the colonizer requests, that which he imagines will reflect back the essence of his civility and authority, when repeated back to him disrupts its status as authoritative and originary. In the call center, the irony of mimicry is set in motion through the "process by which the look of surveillance" that seeks to control and evaluate the Indian worker's performance "returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined [worker], where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence" (127). By repeating assumedly stable and authoritative western discourse back to westerners, mimicry disperses authority and parodizes the westerner, revealing the notion of a fixed and superior western identification is always already a fiction, a parody of

desire. The potential disruption is the realization that this mimicry is not a false copy of an original, but rather a copy without an original. The ambivalence of mimicry is the possibility that the call center worker now exercises a potentially insurgent “colonial” power of “counter-appeal” that can be turned back on the western customer by asking, “Who talks more like an American?” (129-30). When workers experience the slippage between the Americanism they are trained to emulate for customers over the call and the actual Americans they speak with, they subvert narratives of American exceptionalism and often become frustrated by the power relationship imposed on them—both forms of awareness are potentially insurgent (see Mirchandani 2004, 362).

Though the Indian call center agent could be deemed permanently “*almost the same but not white*” in a scopic drive that “appropriates the Other as it visualizes power,” there is a slippage that prevents full visualization (128, 126). According to Bhabha, because the Indian Other is never quite the same, never quite white, western imperial power is authenticated, yet co-opting that power by mimicking it also disrupts western authority and sanctions the possibility of self-determination (Mirchandani 2012, 158n33). Importantly, Bhabha’s notion of mimicry hinges on the visual representation of difference, a referent that is suspended in telephonic communication. Though call center agents are encouraged to smile while on the phone and have even been taught to sip wine (substituting Coke) from wine glasses as their customers might, their external-facing labor is linguistic (Shome 112). With the racialized body of the Indian worker inaccessible to the predatory gaze, Shome rightly identifies “a shift from a regime of visibility to aurality where the racism occurs through a control of language, voice, and accent” (108). We can restate the scenario of the call as follows: The call center worker performs linguistic and interactive proficiency according to a set of competency areas in order to convince

an interlocutor that they share “fundamental” cognitive, social, and cultural commonalities. The drama of the call is then a test, what Wittgenstein and Lyotard would call a “language game,” and what Alan Turing might call an “imitation game.” In the virtual absence of bodies, communication is the privileged medium for testing the “thinking substance” (in Cartesian terms) over the biological mechanism as the seat of the western liberal humanist subject—for, after all, Descartes has already ‘proven’ intelligence to be independent of the body. In fact, this linguistic test is a refined version of Descartes’s original test in “Animals are Machines.”

Recall Descartes’s two standards that unconditionally separate humans from machines: 1) infinitely productive sign use, and 2) intelligent responses to stimuli that display knowledge and not merely emotional, conditioned, or instinctive reflexes. The call center agent must perform both according to a western cultural context to convince the caller that her American identity is “natural” and not “artificial,” and, of course, not automated. The structure of the test and its preparation predefines the Indian workers as artificial because they must be rigorously conditioned to simulate an American, and even somewhat automated because they are often required to rehearse and memorize a script to be executed during the call (Poster 2007, 272; Mirchandani 2004). For the purposes of the call, the worker is an (hopefully) intelligent machine. Formulated to judge an “artificial” intelligence, the mimicry program of the call center is structurally quite similar to the Turing test, a twentieth-century update on Descartes’ test for humanoid robotics.

Alan Turing’s test for computer intelligence, which he called “the imitation game,” and has since been dubbed the “Turing test,” uses the same premises of human intelligence devised by Descartes and propagated throughout the west: knowledgeably informed linguistic communication on any number of topics is the standard of human intelligence. Rather than

making Descartes's hypothetical assumption that a machine could look human by all discernable biological standards before the battery of tests need be deployed, however, Turing simply throws out this prerequisite as pointless according to the Cartesian dualism, which "has the advantage of drawing a fairly sharp line between the physical and the intellectual capacities of a man" (Turing §2). The test is executed such that the interlocutor does not see or hear the test subject, and responses are transmitted via a "neutral" substrate, which for Turing meant they were to be typewritten, printed using teleprinters, or, as a last resort, using an intermediary to repeat answers (§1). The test is executed through a series of questions, chosen and posed by the human interrogator who then assesses the responses of an individual who could be either a human or computer. If the interrogator falsely identifies the computer as a human based on the content of the interview, a degree of intelligence must be granted to the computer.

Because telephonic communication reintroduces the aural component, the call center worker's test is more difficult and performance is judged on an additional axis of voice and accent. The test is recalibrated and the Indian workers' performance is executed according to four components of "acting American" (Poster 2007, 272). Poster identifies the four components as "voice and accent," an American (white)-sounding "alias" to signal an American identity, "American conversational skills" which suggest indirectly that the worker is in the U.S., and a practiced script of responses in case a caller questions the worker's whereabouts (272). Under no circumstances should the call center agent respond emotionally to a caller's abuse, but he or she must maintain a demeanor of obsequious cordiality. Turing's initial example of the imitation game offers insight into the stakes of the Indian worker's simulation. Like the call center scenario, Turing's initial illustration of the game involved all human participants. In this game, the interrogator (player C) asks questions of two participants known by labels X and Y. X and Y

are a man (player A) and a woman (player B), and the interrogator, not knowing which is which, must assign their genders based on their responses. Meanwhile, the man's (player A) goal is to try to cause the interrogator to misidentify by answering with ambiguity or deception. The object for the woman (player B) is to help the interrogator, "the best strategy [for which] is probably to give truthful answers," Turing suggests (§1). This illustration is important to our analysis of call center imitation because it conceives of the game among human players, a literal analogue to the call, and the implications of the game on identities assumed to be essentially and formally rooted in the body's biological makeup.<sup>72</sup> Although he does not draw any conclusions about the gender experiment in his formal paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," for a contemporary reader the gender imitation game points to Judith Butler's revelation of gender as performative behavior instead of a set of natural attributes determined by a person's biology.

Given this consideration, the Turing test complements Bhabha's notion of mimicry by suggesting that identity, even when assumed to be rooted in biology, is always a performance based on normative discursive constructions—identity *is* imitation, it *is* mimicry. The Indian teleworker successfully interfacing a simulated American identity undermines the authority of exceptionalist American identity as originary. In this way, Bhabha's conception of ambivalence is important in the call center imitation game because in the virtual space of the call the Indian worker has the information and vantage point from which to judge the American's performance as well. Call center agents report frustration with some customers' sense of superiority based on nationality, critically reflecting on hegemonic narratives of the global in which "nationality overrides class boundaries" and educational competence (Mirchandani 2004, 362). Mirchandani learned from the interviews she conducted that as workers are trained to act American by

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<sup>72</sup> It has been suggested that Turing's decision to demonstrate the imitation game using a gender-based example relates to his homosexuality, for which he was institutionalized and received electroshock therapy (see Hayles 1999, xii-xiv).

learning about American society and corporate culture, they also develop an “awareness of their connection to American labour markets and the global economic relations within which their jobs are situated” (369). They challenge claims that call center work is “privileged, skilled, and desirable” with an understanding of “the benefits both American companies and Indian subcontractors extract from their labour” (369, 368). While call center agents’ refined sense of the wider political economy offers potential routes of resistance and counter-hegemonic narratives, disrupting these power relationships in late global capitalism is proving to be more daunting than just “problematiz[ing] the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the ‘national’ is no longer naturalizable” (Bhabha 125).

The conditions for resistance in the call center are different than those theorized in Bhabha’s conception of mimicry, which focused on the relationship between a strictly distinct and distinguishable colonized and colonizer, meaning also an exclusive emphasis on a visible and unilateral domination. Economic interests of local, national, and transnational actors complicate the model of unilateral domination in the call center (see also Poster 2011), and elsewhere in the transnational economy. Often, in call center narratives these “mechanisms of resistance [that undermine American exceptionalism can be] made to participate in stabilizing the norms of ‘good conduct’” that are “consistent with corporate neoliberal market values” (Venn 2007, 122, 121). “National” categories are mobilized to re-segregate Indians and Americans into “competing constituencies” and to reinforce expectations of customer service work in the call center (121). Pal and Buzzanell claim that after studying a variety of technical-linguistic, popular, and commercial media from and about the United States during their six to eight week intensive “accent and culture” training, call center personnel become *de facto* “Occidentalists,” the inverse of Orientalists in the west (216). In a piece of trivia that seems like

it could have been adapted from Charles Grant's 1792 "Observations,"<sup>73</sup> some Indian call center training centers teach the "thirty-five equals ten rule," a quick reference for remembering that "a thirty-five year-old American has the IQ of a ten-year-old Indian, making it unethical for an Indian CSO to chastise an irate US caller for immature behavior or a naïve understanding of outsourcing" (Hudson 89). Obviously false, the thirty-five equals ten rule indicates prejudicial stereotypes are adduced to explain dissatisfaction in call center narratives on both ends of the telephone line. Although this characterization of Americans superficially contributes to a growing archive of counter-hegemonic narratives generated through customer service outsourcing, it directly benefits client companies and call center elites because it is designed to motivate the Indian worker to use excessive patience in the line of duty and impose expectations onto the worker as an Indian.

The thirty-five equals ten rule is a reproduction of an Indian—and more specifically, a Hindu—nationalist narrative circulated by Indian elites since before national independence (Chopra 435). Recovering a "Hindu science" by selectively interpreting Hindu scripture, elites constructed a narrative of Indianness that challenges western hegemony by arguing that "Hindu thought had been scientific since its very inception, predating by centuries the European Enlightenment" (434, see also Prakash). Nehru's vision of independent India codified the linkage between national scientific and technological development and a techno-scientific essential Indianness, such that "[a] scientifically developed and socially progressive India was visualized as an embodiment of a timeless Indian ethos" (345). The Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been known to implement "Vedic Mathematics," which includes Sanskrit aphorisms as part of the math curricula, into State education run by its party members

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<sup>73</sup> Full title is "Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals; and the means to improving it"



(Jayaraman). The BJP, despite the defeat of its 2004 “India Shining” campaign, is fielding its nominee for prime minister in the election later this year, Narendra Modi, on a platform titled “Brand India,” central to which is “empowering the young of India to cement their reputation as technologically the best in the world” (bjp.org). In the call center, the thirty-five equals ten rule perhaps allows Indians from a wider range of castes to enjoy participation in a traditionally elite Indian nationalism, but does not arise out of the call center as a narrative of resistance. Rather, its hegemonic function in the call center is to discipline workers into proper customer service agents and instill a national pride operationalized to shield from view the national elites that are part of the larger system instrumentalizing their labor.

Considering the Turing test and colonial mimicry as they play out in outsourced call center work helps us understand how spheres of national and corporate identities constructed in hegemonic global narrative are managed, subverted, and re-assimilated while agents “act American.” Because telephone work renders visual identity markers inaccessible, “national identity is mutable” in the call center context (Poster 2007, 277), which becomes a “new local-global nexus of identity formation” (Patel 28) and thus a focal point for investigating and analyzing labor, economy, technology, and identity in the narrative and experience of the global. The *whitewashed* American identity presented in the call centers relies heavily on popular media in the US, including television shows like *Friends* and even *Baywatch* that are already nearly parodies of American culture (Shome 112; Poster 2007, 281), but comes up against “practical” information agents use to interact with customers (like the 35:10 rule), and narratives produced from workers’ experiences with customers. The particular American identity workers are encouraged to emulate relies on “consumer-driven images of citizenship in the United States” from popular media and therefore “typically reflect white, middle class, heterosexual, Christian

communities” (Poster 2007, 280-81). This American identity, rather than representative of actual Americans, is a virtual projection of an image that the US desires. When this image is convincingly repeated back to customers, it can reinforce the customers’ and corporations’ American identities in the globalization narrative, but Indian workers’ experiences and information quickly reveal that they are producing copies of an American identity that has no origin in reality. Yet, even as the Indian worker’s successful performance—itsself a moment of instrumentalization—serves to destabilize American exceptionalism, the notion of superiority is inverted to coax the worker into adopting values commensurate with the expectations of service work. The practice of role-playing illuminates the performativity inherent in all identity and acknowledges the virtual potential of the Indian workers’ agency during the call, while larger constraints seek to manage the possibility that this agency actually disrupts political economic relationships of power. The “construction of a new, performative, mimetic identity” (Aneesh 524) isn’t necessarily a totalizing project that suppresses the worker’s essential Indian identity, but a technologically-mediated prosthetic that can potentially disrupt racist and nationalist abuse customers often use when they discover they are talking to an Indian, while serving to instrumentalize workers within the larger political economy of transnational service work.

*The colonial administrator’s preference for the unsophisticated ‘native’ was explained by the Hon. W. G. A. Ormsby-Gore, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, during a visit to West Africa in 1926: “The Englishman has an instinctive dislike of ‘assimilation’. We like to keep our life distinct from other races, whether European or not. The more other people acquire our culture, our outlook, our social habits, very often the wider the gulf between us. We frequently get on better with people different from us, and we appreciate the differences more than the points we have in common.”<sup>74</sup>*

The similarities between Indian agents role-playing American identities and the Turing test call attention to the use of human/machine dualism and technological rhetoric in

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<sup>74</sup> (Parry 50, Cmd 2744 (1926), p. 23).

globalization narratives of the offshore Other. These “housekeepers to the world”<sup>75</sup> are often<sup>76</sup> confronted with racialized or ethnic epithets and likened to machines or berated on grounds of artificiality or fakeness when customers suspect the worker is not an American worker, throwing the trope of the racialized customer service droid into relief. Even the expectation that workers will be unquestioning and willing to deceive their customers, don manufactured identities, and readily and habitually efface those identities they previously knew themselves as, assumes the Indian workers have a pared-down conception of ethics and a sense of self. In this sense, the Indian call center agent is valued as a data processor and a voice emitter programmed for randomization. Poster reports that call center agents told her of repeated “incidences of customers who refused to be served by an Indian, and demanded to talk to a ‘real’ American agent” (283). Narratives of artificial and fake accents as opposed to real or authentic accents signal that the call center agent has failed the Turing test and also suggest that Indians are not native speakers of English, although it is one of India’s official languages. The American computer company Dell moved the heft of its customer inquiry services from Bangalore back to Texas due to customer complaints “about ‘accent interference’ and the agents’ inability to engage in efficient American-style conversational English, which interferes with their requests and communication” (Shome 111).

In her analysis of Indian call center accent training, Claire Cowie indicates that one client firm requested accent “neutralization” curriculum “after customer complaints about ‘fake accents’” (322). Many sociological studies found that agents are encouraged to strive for a “neutral accent”—or “droid accent” as Mukherjee’s characters refer to call centers’ desired pronunciation in her 2011 novel, *Miss New India*—free of all dialectical markers that would

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<sup>75</sup>Cover of *India Today*, 18 November 2002.

<sup>76</sup>Poster (2007) writes that on half of the calls she witnessed during her field work the customer was hostile in some way—“the animosity takes several forms, from sarcastic tones to explicit cursing and abuse” (282).

suggest the worker's provenance or habitation. Cowie suggests that this notion of "'neutral' taps into the ideal of a nationless English which is neither British, American, nor Indian," yet she found that often, individual trainers and workers would tend toward either British or American English in their perceptions and executions of neutrality (323).<sup>77</sup> One call center worker featured in the documentary *John and Jane*, Namrata/Naomi, claims to have completely transformed into her American identity, but her "neutral" accent is so untraceable as to seem computerized. In Dale Hudson's assessment, "Naomi's accent draws upon various US regional accents, resembling a computer-generated voice that pauses between words in places where humans do not" (99). Mirchandani notes that "[t]he most 'strange' and 'artificial' workers are those deemed to have non-neutralizable accents" (2012, 48).

Ashim Ahluwalia's *John and Jane*, uses "sci-fi themes of brave new worlds and cyborgs [...] engendered by the uneven flows of globalization" (Hudson 98). Ahluwalia jokes that "it seemed meaningless to make a cinema-verité portrait of a call center agent, who fakes his identity—that's fiction already!"<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, he explains that "the strange nature of this world of replicas dictated the structure of the film."<sup>79</sup> During the opening sequence, a voice from off screen proclaims "Call centers have made virtuality into a reality." Another disgruntled call center agent off-camera rages, "Fucking callers calling, 'Are you an answering machine?' 'No, sir, we're fucking humans here.'" The agent's retelling of this conversation indicates that human/machine boundaries become intimately blurred in this world of virtual reality and flickering signifiers enabled by digital information flow and communication that seems to not

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<sup>77</sup> The notion of a western-but-neutral English accent further normalizes western English as simply "correct" English, echoing a European colonial model of discourse in which the colonizer's "features are set up as culturally universal, making her [the Indian] the exception, negation or lack of the virtue of the One" (Plumwood 58). Then "colour [or in this case a non-western dialect] is a deviation from the 'normal' condition of whiteness" (Plumwood 58).

<sup>78</sup> Qtd in Hudson 98

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

only virtually flatten the world, but collapse it into a tight network of closely connected nodes. Those in or associated with IT and ITES industries, interested parties, tell narratives that promote the benefits of this virtual reality. N. R. Narayana Murthy, a self-made billionaire and one of India's heroes of IT, claims enthusiastically, "We're living in a make-believe world."<sup>80</sup> Friedman and Indian business elites extoll the merits and opportunities of the "flat world" managerial paradigm's association "with efficiency, empowerment, and lack of hierarchy," which strategically individualize the worker and values of hard work and good conduct (Radhakrishnan 76-77). For many Indians and Americans, however, the specter of a virtual world order is more ominous, perceived as disrupting a stable social order and even cultural integrity. Americans' wariness about virtual connectivity has proven substantiated as of late, and expressions of discomfort and resistance to government and corporate surveillance and privacy infringement can function as anti-capitalist narratives. These can critique the way institutions monitor and use digital information to abstract people into digitized and dissociable bits and resist these techniques of control mobilized in late capitalism's construction of the global. Unsurprisingly, though, customers' discomfort is projected directly onto the Indian call center worker. In India, disdain for abandonment of traditional values and morality, or "the 'downside' of globalization," are also projected onto call center workers, whose perceived materialism, unwarranted income, and the industry's disregard for "background"<sup>81</sup> is contrasted with professionals in more prestigious IT careers (45, 158).

While the smiling young Indian woman in a bridal sari wearing a jeweled bindi featured on the cover of *Time* may depict an acceptable "simulacr[um] of what the U.S. wants from tech support" or customer service generally (Kevorkian 85), when the Indian voice comes through on

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<sup>80</sup>Qtd. in Landler

<sup>81</sup> "Background" is a colloquialism for socioeconomic status and education.

the line and not as a beaming face on a glossy page, the digital can seem to challenge and fragment the material and geopolitical. In *Color Monitors*, Kevorkian looks at popular portrayals of computers, and the technical experts that run them, in American cinema and advertisement, finding that “race comes into sharp relief when computer use is depicted as difficult labor requiring special expertise” (2). Though his study focuses on representations of black male IT experts, the *Time* cover<sup>82</sup> and the movie *Outsourced*, along with customer service websites and advertisements, validate his recognition of a common trope—“Time and again, in such scenarios [when the task or solution is ostensibly labor intensive], the helpful person of color is there to take the call—to provide technical support, to deal with machines” (2). Kevorkian analyzes what he identifies is “the computer-fearing strain in American whiteness, an aspect of white identity that defines itself against information technology and the racial other imagined to love it and excel at it” (2).<sup>83</sup> Like McQuire’s phrasing above—that technology *comes* from the West and *does* something to the other—cyberphobic whiteness, or anxieties over the dehumanizing or disembodied potential of information technology that is ascribed a virtual capacity “to take bodies out of the circuit of action,” reestablishes boundaries between self and other, and human and machine, in narratives that project technology onto Other bodies who contain and are contained by its threat. Kevorkian shows how the image of the Other body in front of a monitor or wearing a headset reassures viewers, but as in the Turing test, the visual faculty is suspended during the call. Over the telephone, in the absence of visual reassurance that the voice you hear “matches up exactly with a person in the world”<sup>84</sup> with a body that indicates he or she is an appropriate consort, customers’ nationalist, elitist, and classist sensibilities can become

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<sup>82</sup> *Time*, 20 June 2006

<sup>83</sup> Remember, the Indian programming prodigy and the computer-savvy black man are not the protagonists in these popular storylines, but side-kicks to the white protagonist who spearheads whatever course of action they are on with his fearless masculine leadership.

<sup>84</sup> The phrase is Alexis Madrigal’s, used in an article for *The Atlantic*, which will be discussed below.

intensified by the anonymity and invisibility of the worker but cyberphobias are also amplified by the technological capability and possibility represented by the transnational transaction. The worker in India becomes a flickering signifier in front of a computer screen, representing the American cyberphobic “fear of too much engagement with technology” (2). Surely, technological innovation and creativity emanate from American minds, those who “think outside the box” while the Indian call center agent exists within the (black) box of technology work (139). In this formulation of white privilege that exists outside of technology, engagement with technology, especially when deemed menial, repetitive, or rule-bound, is equated “with a loss of creativity, autonomy, and humanity” (139). In other words, while the *image* of the racialized body ensures a stable and embodied engagement with a machine, the invisibility of that body results in a conflation of the Indian customer service agent and machine and the projection of cyberphobia onto the worker.

The 2001 launch of AT&T Labs’ “How May I Help You? (HMIHY)” and “Natural Voices” in 2002, both synthetically-voiced automated customer service interfaces, literally software, were accompanied by advertising campaigns that responded to already robust fears of technological globalization, appealing to tradition and Americanism/nativism. The company vaunted their software as a nostalgic return to traditional telephone operator interactions, even though speech is computer generated from thousands of prerecorded sounds, suggesting automated customer service would be preferable to dealing with lesser-software programs or foreign call center agents whose accents are buggy and artificial. Ma Bell offered “the first natural language voice-enabled customer care system,” replacing non-human and non-human-because-non-western sounding alternatives like Indian workers with an actual “human-sounding, intelligent agent” from the United States. The automated, but natural, platform’s “capability

makes it reminiscent of the company's early days when operators and service representatives personally assisted customers." Comparatively, the non-American call center agent in India is ostensibly unable to offer *personal* assistance from their position in the technological back-end while a company can offer the personal effect of service reminiscent of an American telephone operator that surpasses the artificially personal touch coming from overseas.<sup>85</sup>

Our current decade offers even more sophisticated customer service interfaces, designed to find the optimal balance of quality control, customer satisfaction, and cost saving. Samantha West is one such interface that recently made waves. After *Time* Washington Bureau Chief Michael Scherer received a phone call from Samantha West inquiring about his health insurance, Zeke Miller and Denver Nicks broke the story on the magazine's "Bizarre" section of its website on December 10, 2013. The two points of the article were the sophistication of the "Robot Telemarketer" and the question of ethics, given that she "denies she's a robot" when asked. After some journalistic fact-finding, Denver Nicks posted a follow-up article seven days later, this time on *Time* website's "Technology" board. The headline proclaims that Samantha West's employer has revealed "she" isn't a robot, but rather "its machines are operated by real-live humans." Nicks reports that a representative for Premier Health Plans, Inc, the company from whom Scherer received the call, "said that Samantha West is not a robot but a computer program used by telemarketers outside of the United States—he would not say where—to allow English speakers with thick non-American accents to sort through leads to find real prospective buyers before passing them off to agents back in the United States." Following this unequivocal confirmation that there is a person on the line, participating in the conversation and communicating by selecting pre-recorded communiques, Nicks reproduces for the reader a

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of AT&T Labs' unveiling of "Rich," the Natural Voice designed to sound like an African American, see Kevorkian pp.89-91.



conversation between a fellow *Time* reporter and someone using Samantha West (along with sound recordings of two nearly two-minute long phone calls). He prefaces the transcription and recordings proclaiming “the conversations definitely did not sound like they were happening between two people.”

The excerpt Nicks provides is as follows: “‘Hey are you a robot?’ a reporter asked. ‘No I am a real person. Maybe we have a bad connection,’ said the uncanny voice on the other end. ‘Just say, ‘I’m not a robot.’ Please,’ the reporter said. ‘I’m a real person,’ the voice replied. It went on from there.” The trouble with this exchange is that the reporter is definitely *not* speaking to a robot, a fact that may have been in dispute at the time the phone call was made but has been accepted by the time Nicks is crafting his piece. Instead of making a crank call to an automated telemarketer, this reporter is effectively harassing someone while they work, a situation that is certainly not rare for call center workers but is nevertheless inappropriate. Nicks interviews Chris Haerich of the Professional Association for Customer Engagement about whether calls made using this type of technology should be categorized as “robocalls.” After the two wrestle with that question, Nicks muses, “But the peculiar thing about Samantha West isn’t just that she is automated. It’s that she’s so smartly automated that she’s trained to respond to queries about whether or not she is a robot by telling you she’s a human.” Once again, and with no recourse to plead ignorance, he denies that it’s a human that is communicating and *not* a robot. Moreover, he attributes intelligence, training, and response to the software program and not to the human that he and his readers know is selecting the responses. The human voice is the most salient and immediate marker of embodiment, of material existence, that can be transmitted across the virtual space (materially traversed by fiber optics) of the telephone call. Nicks appears unable to recover a full or at least sustainable sense of the human component of the worker-Samantha

West entity because the voice doesn't correspond with the caller's embodiment. Nicks's unapologetic inclusion of the disturbing dialogue between his colleague and the call center worker and frequent and final regression to conceiving of the caller as a robot characterize a widespread, even cultivated, cognitive dissonance concerning computer technology.

This technophobic dissonance works reciprocally, perhaps even partially co-constitutively, with out-of-the-box white-as-western privilege. By this dissonance, realities about what goes on and who does what inside the black box (or behind the digital curtain<sup>86</sup>) of technology and technological globalization can be ignored, misunderstood, or even willfully misrepresented; yet, little to no attempts toward consonance are made because of the (perhaps largely unconscious) assumption that whatever can be shrouded from sight by the digital curtain bears little to no meaningful relationship to the white-as-westerner, namely no relationship by which he or she is held accountable to/for an Other. Of course this pattern can be observed very nearly anywhere there exists an unequal relationship of power, but I wish to limit our consideration primarily to how this operates in technological discourse pertaining to globalization narrative. Technophobic dissonance produces narratives that mitigate or disallow those events, objects, processes, people, institutions, and relationships—contemporary and historical—obscured behind the digital curtain. Predictably, technologies perceived or promoted as sensational often agitate this phenomenon. As we see in Nicks's reporting, the sensationalism of his cohort's initial hypothesis that Samantha West was a robot who denied being a robot appears to be the spark for a technophobic dissonance by which he vacillates between clear explanations of how the "voicebot" is used by a human worker and writing about the program as if it were a robot. And, Nicks is not alone in his excited carelessness over Samantha West; during

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<sup>86</sup> Henceforth I use this phrasing, "behind the digital curtain," in an effort not to confuse the reader by continuing to use Kevorkian's "black box," for which he articulates a specific theorization.

the same month, Alexis Madrigal of *The Atlantic* published two pieces of his own that contain contradictory and baffling claims.

While Nicks was working on his second installment of the Samantha West saga, Madrigal published his own piece on *The Atlantic*'s website. Before the *Time* reporter was able to break the story, Madrigal revealed the truth about the telemarketing software that had contacted Nicks's bureau chief: "Samantha West may be something *even stranger* than a telemarketing robot. Samantha West may be a human sitting in a foreign call center playing recorded North American English through a soundboard." Already, Madrigal inexplicably claims that humans using a soundboard to communicate is stranger than what would be the most advanced commercial interactive speech program to date. Were Samantha West entirely autonomous—or a robot, in Nicks's preferred parlance—it would fall under the category of interactive voice response (IVR). Madrigal insists that the user-interface is indeed IVR, "but the semantic intelligence is being provided by a human. You could call it a cyborg system. Or perhaps an automaton in that 18<sup>th</sup>-century sense." I'm inclined to agree with his first two statements in the sense that autocorrect software on Apple's iPhones bears the same equivalences, albeit less sensationally. Calling the human-soundboard network an "automaton in that 18<sup>th</sup>-century sense," although a prominent metaphor for call center labor, remains unexplained here, blurring into technophobic dissonance. Madrigal seems to be referencing the Mechanical Turk, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century hoax automaton that required a person to sit in the cabinet the chess playing Turk was seated at and select the mechanism's chess moves. This analogy is certainly appropriate, but instead Madrigal includes a hyperlink that takes the reader to a website chronicling automatons that doesn't mention the Turk. He does, however, indicate that the

motivation for the soundboard apparatus is Americans' disinclination toward non-American accents.

A week later, Madrigal posts "Almost Human: The Surreal, Cyborg Future of Telemarketing," a second, longer installment on "voice conversion" technology, or "agent-assisted automation technology." As an homage to "the great mechanical inventions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century" (same hyperlink) he calls it "*automatonation*," but admits "cyborg telemarketing" may be a better term. After describing a couple notable versions of this technology, he writes, "Let's just put it out there: This is a creepy system. [...] It just *seems* wrong. What good can spring from a bunch of conversations in which one member is ventriloquizing through a machine?" Although Madrigal then shares with his reader that he has recanted this original position after learning the software benefits the labor in significant ways, the technophobic dissonance in this passage is not addressed. Robocalls, which use automated-dialers and play prerecorded messages over the phone, and automated phone systems for inbound calls that ask callers to use the telephone keypad to navigate option menus have been used for decades. Soundboards are likewise familiar, from laugh tracks on sitcoms to handheld sound effect toys. Even the combination of these two technologies seems less sensational than Siri's text-to-speech software. Madrigal's ominous question about the possible good that can come from machine-mediated communication, or ventriloquizing, collapses myopic technophilia into cyberphobic whiteness. As for Nicks, the creepiness or wrongness of the soundboards relates to that fear of the body taken out of the circuit, here replaced by a set of recorded phrases that, when successful, appear to render embodied utterance obsolete. Madrigal's foreboding prognostication not only ignores this technology's overwhelming similarity to innumerable others, digital and analog, wherein humans select from a prescribed set or combination of symbolic units to communicate, but also

shows ignorance and insensitivity toward people who use computerized speech systems. Stephen Hawking's speech synthesizer and Roger Ebert's computerized voice certainly qualify as good things that can come from ventriloquizing through machines, as well as translation programs that allow people to communicate across language barriers. The context and conditions of soundboard-assisted telemarketing are pushed behind the digital curtain in order to sensationalize offshore call center workers' technological determinism and how this form of contact potentially violates Americans' sensibilities.

Art Coombs, CEO of the agent-assisted automation technology company KomBea, demystifies the system for Madrigal as clear-cut Six Sigma business process streamlining—a popular post-Fordist business model that aims at optimizing performance and consistency by eliminating possible inefficiencies and deviations from acceptable standards; the name “Six Sigma” is a reference to standard deviation on a normal bell curve, for which the mathematical symbol is a lower-case sigma. A Mr. Bills of the company CallAssistant elaborates on Coombs's description, pointing out that the soundboard-assisted system precludes agent dishonesty or misrepresentation and adding that though he can't clone his better workers biologically, technology offers the best alternative (plus, one worker is sometimes able to run two or three calls simultaneously). Bills also shared that the system improved employee retention because it “creates detachment,” because workers can blame failures on the machine. One anonymous Filipino call center manager and Marco Edward Calilao, an account manager for PerfectPitch soundboard software in the Philippines, both stressed the accent-based benefits for non-American speakers well above all else. Madrigal finally looks to be wholeheartedly endorsing the technology, offering this final justification from PerfectPitch's CEO, Jacob Munns: ““They are like robots already,” Munns said, referring to call agents who have to read scripts all day,

following a protocol set out by their managers. ‘The software can improve the experience people are already having.’”

Indeed, Madrigal’s comparison of workers to automatons and drones fall into a key category of characterizations in call center narratives that works reciprocally with many managerial and labor practices instituted to ensure standardization and efficiency of interactive labor, reductions that nevertheless indicate the Six Sigma model is largely Industrial-Age Taylorism in Information-Age clothing. Rather than emphasizing the worker’s interactive work of identity formation, reflecting the customer’s privilege back to him or her through proper voice modulation and conversation, metaphors of robotic productivity focus on the visuo-physical reconstruction of the call center worker in the specter of the factory. While accent neutralization and pseudonyms seek to erase the racialized body from the agent’s virtually projected identity, these narratives of roboticism reimagine the Indian body enclosed in the factory, a visual image of the offshore call center worker containing and contained by the machine. Recalling industrial toil, characterized by Marx and Engels as forcing the laborer to become “an appendage of the machine” (2000, 18), one manager in the Philippines tells Madrigal, “Basically the agent is just the driver but the system has its own life. The agents work as ears and hands of the system.”

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### Productive Automatons

In our current epoch of digital technologies, automatons may seem an outdated metaphor through which to analyze transnational interactive service work, yet narratives of roboticism and mechanization like those in Madrigal’s piece indicate otherwise. In both the United States and India, call center work is often compared to and conflated with factory work, accessing the language of the automaton of mechanical production. Invoking the factory or sweatshop is meant to associate telephonic customer service with manufacturing, in contrast to more prestigious technology work. In both countries these equivocations embed the technocratic value system of

the knowledge economy into debates over globalization while also expressing fears about technology work localized in the customer service agent. These narratives use the call center worker to signify failure and entrapment vis-à-vis *homo oeconomicus* as the creative or innovative value-add technology professional that contributes meaningfully in an enterprise society.<sup>87</sup> These hegemonic representations of call center workers as automatons make up narratives contributing to and complicit with the outgrowths of liberalism's moral economy that Couze Venn identifies as "apparatuses and techniques [that] manage conduct in terms of framework setting, a strategy in which the law, finance and the government of conduct function as the determining mechanisms, backed up by the production of fear, of the unemployed, of losing one's job, of criminality, of indeterminate ubiquitous risks" (2009, 219-20). While the metaphor of the automaton exaggerates aspects of telephonic labor in order to dehumanize or devalue call center work, there are occasions in which it is used in narratives of resistance as it focalizes material conditions and labor practices that indeed mechanize the worker, like scripting, tedium and repetition, and rigorous work schedules.

Likening call center workers to factory or sweatshop workers can benefit companies in the United States by tethering service-work outsourcing to the already familiar practice of outsourcing manufacturing work. Though this latter form of outsourcing "sends jobs overseas," factory work is represented as unskilled, strenuous, low-wage labor and coded as undesirable—this reflexively mitigates the complaints of former call center workers in the United States as low-class and devalued.<sup>88</sup> Outsourcing unskilled factory work is also associated with American consumer benefits, such as affordable clothing and electronics. Like the term "back office,"

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<sup>87</sup> See Michel Foucault *The Birth of Biopolitics*, especially 14 Feb 1979 and 14 March 1979 (p. 226) lectures.

<sup>88</sup> We could even compare this undesirability with the description of back office bank software discussed below, n92. In both cases, diminution works to mitigate the importance of the work being done and its relationship to the (American) consumer.

lumping call center workers with factory workers directs Americans' attention to the imagined structural distance between the worker and the consumer. Factory workers are, in MacDonald and Sirianni's terminology, structurally "invisible."<sup>89</sup> The discursive analogy between the factory and the call center detracts from the actual person-to-person interactions between Americans and Indian agents mediated through telecommunications, and instead focuses on the national, racial, and classed segregation that is perceived to separate them. Likewise, the analogy imagines call center labor as mechanical, endlessly churning out profits for American companies that "trickle down" to the American consumer, despite the skilled emotional labor and creativity involved in interactive service work.

For Thomas L. Friedman and *Wired's* Anderson, India itself is the automated factory. Referring to India's exceptional education system of technology institutes, rendered all the more competitive because of the nation's large population, Friedman exuberantly proclaims, "[India]'s like a factory" (127). Though Friedman praises the IT talent India exported to the West during the brain-drain of the latter half of the twentieth century, the factory narrative foregrounds techno-oriental notions of Indians as innately efficient and technologically inclined as identical commodity labor. As noted above, Anderson contrasts the "creativity" of American tech industry with an India limited to maintenance and services, exhaustingly productive yet limited to fabrication, "as if it were itself a machine." He observes that the current lamentation "They sent my job to India!" supplants the previous decades' "I was replaced by a computer!" and goes on to collapse the distinction between Indian and computer—neither can replace American human

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<sup>89</sup> These scholars use this term in reference to unseen service industry workers in the United States, like "back of the house" cooks and dishwashers, and domestic "back office" workers that process records or file claims. Though they are directly involved in consumer products and services, they remain out of sight. MacDonald and Sirianni's analysis of this "invisibility" focuses on racialized service sector work, suggesting a correlation between invisible occupations and people of color. Similarly, Americans may be cognizant that offshore factories produce cheap products for their consumption, but a "Made in Bangladesh" tag does little to conjure images of Bangladeshi men, women, and children laboring in hostile and inhumane factories thousands of miles away. That Indian call center agents' racial visibility enters the consumer gaze audibly, and thus must be disguised, is discussed above.



intelligence. He analogizes the business processing cubicle farm in America to the textile factory; technological innovation has allowed both industries to move to India where machines take over the “donkey work.”<sup>90</sup> Anderson uses this analogy to encourage American tech workers to adapt, mobilizing fears about job loss to ignite a sense of competition among the western *homo oeconomicus* and the computer/automated Indian.

Jacob Munns’s proclamation that “[call center workers] are like robots already” reiterates that while their customer-facing labor is unique vis-à-vis traditional manufacturing offshoring, it nevertheless occupies a “place in the global assembly line” (Mirchandani 2004, 358). Whether a machine-system provides the agent’s voice, or the agent is the ears and hands of the machine-system, or an automated dialer dictates when and to whom a call is made,<sup>91</sup> in representations of the worker as a factory automaton, “the assembly-line scenario dictates that the [worker], to move in concert with the automated device, cannot act autonomously. Control resides elsewhere. It is all a recording; the moves are on Memorex” (Kevorkian 87). As the sound board consists of literal recordings that prevent or mediate freely autonomous speech, Indian workers using their own voices are asked to follow a prescribed script and emotive voice modulations, their every keystroke, call time, and audio conversations recorded by the computers with which they work (Poster 2011, 870). Client firms can even integrate software programs that generate “interaction analytics” that convert the wave frequencies of voices on the audio files to emotion matrices (882). Kevorkian writes that the assembly-line worker, surveilled, dominated, and directed by the machine, is feminized. Citing Anne Bonds, Patel points out that “when women joined the call center industry in the rural American West, the white-collar status associated with this job was

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<sup>90</sup> The sizable textile industry in the Indian subcontinent significantly contributed to its importance as a source of external economy for England. Because of the historical presence of textile factories in India, I take up this equivocation of the call center and textile mill in my discussion of Indian narratives of the automaton below.

<sup>91</sup> See Poster 2011, p.884

devalued into that of a deskilled, feminized workplace,” a devaluation that intensifies when call centers move overseas (30). Like descriptions of “[oriental] women as workers with nimble fingers,” further feminizing call center workers through factory narratives “defin[es] them as disposable and replaceable in the realm of global manufacturing” (31).

Through narratives that liken call centers to factories and workers to automatons, media representatives channel fears about job loss into motivation for American workers to become enterprising contributors competing in the informational knowledge economy. These sentiments aid public relations efforts made by American companies like Dell, who insists that only “mundane tech chores” and “non-critical tasks” will move “to cheaper markets overseas” (qtd. in Kevorkian 82). In this way, various elites in the United States assure consumers and workers that only menial and insignificant work is outsourced, constituting somewhat less than a job for a worker that is somewhat less than an American person. Using Dell as his example, Kevorkian also points out that associating technological tasks and jobs with people of color can aid in a company’s transition to actual automation, implying “[actual] robotics aren’t costing any white men any white jobs” (86). The Samantha West phenomenon is a harbinger for the move toward increased automation. From Samantha West and other virtual representatives (V-reps) to interactive analytics, “the interactive service industry is a new frontier for software vendors [...] experimenting with a multitude of software packages that can manipulate virtualized sight and sound” (Poster 2011, 883). Narratives that represent call center workers as already automated and distanced from American consumers in the imaginative geography of the global ease transitions toward both additional outsourcing and literal automation that might otherwise foment outrage about American job loss. The trope of the call center automaton contributes to the notion that, in Kevorkian’s analysis, “Nonwhite work may be performed interchangeably

under the sign of automation, either by dark-skinned servants to technology or, subsequently, by fleshless technological servants” (88).

Significant to the nature of interchangeability ascribed to the call center automaton is the cultivated belief that the BPO labor force in India is plentiful, such that hordes of anonymous and identical obliging Indian script-readers are lined up for the opportunity to cheaply serve American clients and customers (Cowie 319, Patel 25). Represented as abundant, interchangeable, and replaceable units, the call center labor force circulates in narratives as a natural “resource” (Plumwood 55). As technologized beasts of burden in the electronic sweatshop, Plumwood’s assertion that, historically, “Once nature and animals are viewed as machines or automata, minds are closed to the range and diversity of their mind-like qualities” extends to representations of the workers in hegemonic technological globalization narratives circulating in the United States (Plumwood 55). Characterizations of call center workers as model workers, provided by managers and owners of call centers and training agencies in India, often merely rephrase these diminutions in more complementary terms. Mirchandani notes that explanations of customer service training like accent neutralization “[draw] heavily on discourses of human resource development whereby Indian labour is constructed as a flexible commodity that can be trained to meet client needs” (2004, 360). In order to program Indian agents to meet client needs, the labor processes for which they are trained are designed to disguise labor conditions and otherwise avoid bad publicity as well as customer dissatisfaction. Requiring agents to use “American” pseudonyms, for example, can shield outsourcing client companies from backlash or speculation relating not only to job loss, but also concerned Americans’ “assumptions about transnational corporate practices” associated with the electronic sweatshop (366). Other labor practices, such as “being asked to follow scripts, and not reveal

anything about themselves” over the phone, often reinforce customers’ negative stereotypes of Indians as mechanical or unintelligent during the call (366).

In India, the same connection between factory work and call center work is used to discourage Indians, particularly women, from seeking employment in call centers, and is historically tied to British colonialism. While the business environment of a call center agency is much safer and more “professional” than factory work, the need to work at night—synchronous with daytime in the United States—produces similar anxieties about safety across both modes of employment. Litigation in India concerning night shift work dates back to British colonial rule. In order to recruit the female Indian work force for twenty-four hour cotton mills, the British instigated the Factories and Workshop Act of 1891, which allowed women to work night shifts provided the length and system of shifts were deemed “proper” (Patel 49). In March of 2005, the later Indian Factories Act of 1948 was amended to allow women to work the night shift, but the employer must provide transportation from and to the worker’s residence (49). Therefore, call centers and factories alike must provide company transport for at least the female employees working the night shift. Though factory work is perceived as employment for lower-classes, whereas the requisite proficiency in English, alone, associates call center work with middle-classes, the two industries are frequently addressed similarly and even lumped together as dangerous, inappropriate, and immoral places for women to be working during the night (33). These narratives, rather than representing women workers as automatons, focus on female bodies as targets of violence or sexual impropriety during the night in order to reassert traditional cultural and religious feminine codes of conduct (41).

Conflations of factory work and call center employment are most commonly used rhetorically by Indians that feel workers in the transnational service industry are being exploited

because forced to work as *homo technicus* rather than *homo oeconomicus*, like the interlocutors Shashi Tharoor argued against in “The Coolies are Scheduling the Trains.” Patel notes that “call center employment is viewed as a site of exploitation (such as ‘*cyber-coolies*’ working the night away in IT sweatshops)” (41). She explains, “[a]lthough call center employees earn a relatively high wage, it is commonly known that their American counterparts earn far more for doing the same work, hence the term *cyber-coolie*” (41). Some Indians worry that India’s youth are squandering their creativity as they perform monotonous tasks during sleepless nights that line the pockets of American corporations and “dull the mind” (41-42). Instead of innovating software programs for Indian companies like i-flex solutions,<sup>92</sup> Indians are coopted as inexpensive cogs in a capitalist machine, and the owners of the means of production are in the West. Remarkably, the same trope of the factory automaton is used in both the United States and India to devalue call center labor in terms of national and global economy and encourage the undertaking of more lucrative enterprise in the technology sector according to hegemonic capitalist good conduct.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> In May of 2003, *The Economist* printed an article titled “Techno-Coolies no More; Indian Software.” The piece is about Bangalore-based i-flex solutions’s FLEXCUBE, which garners praise as “the world’s best-selling banking-software product,” though it occupies the “unglamorous but lucrative niche in the bank back office.” Such description of i-flex’s market niche makes clear it certainly isn’t the Apple of any glamorous software company’s eye. Confusingly, the by-line of this article announcing FLEXCUBE’s success reads, “Does India need its own software brands?” The first few sentences of the write-up form a non-sequitur—a piece about an Indian software company’s industry-leading product begins by asking a rhetorical question about whether or not Indian software brands are even necessary. Later, the author declares, “Some even argue that [i-flex’s success] points the way forward for the whole [Indian IT] industry: let it emerge from the shadows where Indian techno-coolies beaver away writing code that is sold in an American or European wrapper.” This notion that it is time for Indian software products “to enjoy their day in the sun,” the author notes, “has an obvious appeal to an industry that feels under threat [...] from a perceived protectionist backlash in America and Europe against the outsourcing of IT jobs to India.”

<sup>93</sup> Though call center workers constitute a low rung on the IT industry ladder, their relatively high wage-earning opportunities among Indian industries and proximity to the high-skilled Indian IT sector encourage their participation in what Peter van der Veer calls a “culture of magical belief” in the power of information technology to turn out multimillionaires overnight (277). Van der Veer places Indians’ belief in economic salvation through the IT industry on par with religious belief, noting “there are software training centres and temples in every small town” (277). Concomitant with this fervent hope in information technologies is the goal of immigrating to the United States, where even mid-level IT jobs pay incredibly in terms of rupees (278). The “dream of the ‘new man,’ celebrated in European thought,” coupled with the “old pattern of providing cheap Indian labor and services to a

On the other hand, however, these correlations between the two industries draw attention to material labor conditions and relationships of power, globally and locally, that bring to bear on the bodies and experiences of call center agents. Deployed strategically, these can aid in a larger endeavor to “provide a fuller picture of the constructed and contingent character of the ‘free’ market, and make visible underlying relations of force sustaining it” (Venn 2009, 216). Praful Bidwai told *BBC World Service*, “It’s a perfect sweatshop scenario, except that you’re working with computers and electronic equipment rather than looms,” coupling technophobic fears about call center technology work with a reference to the exploitation of young Indians in textile factories, initiated by British imperialists and continuing across South Asia today. Here, Marx’s theory of totalizing mechanization through the draconian factory-based automaton offers an explication of alienating factory work based in systemic capitalism that is likewise expressive of general fears of embodied technological labor.<sup>94</sup> Working during the night, call center agents’

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global market” gives rise to exploitative “body-shopping,” in which Indian IT workers are invited to migrate to the United States temporarily for a twenty-first-century version of indentured labor (279, 282). As homage to the railroad industry’s ingenuity obtaining migrant labor, body-shopped Indians are also termed “technocoolies” (282). The point of my digression to body-shopping is to elucidate the power of myth and historical hierarchies that pervade the new coupling of biopower with cybepower. Myths of salvation through “technologies that promise ultimate mobility and perfect exchange” are those we should be wary of (Haraway 1991).

<sup>94</sup> In his *Das Kapital*, Marx associates the low-skilled labor of the factory worker with the automaton. He writes, “To work at a machine, the workman should be taught from childhood, in order that he may learn to adapt his own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton” (281). Marx contrasts productivity with capitalist exploitation of that productivity: “In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. [...] In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage” (281). For Marx, the factory produces an ontology in which “the automaton itself is the subject, and the workmen are merely conscious organs, co-ordinate with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with them, subordinated to the central moving-power” (280). In its American usage, the call-center-worker-as-automaton metaphor subjugates the Indian worker to the capitalist machine, a less-threatening human necessity for the smoothness of production. In its Indian usage, the metaphor is intended to agitate resistance to such subjugation due to the human cost. This human cost, Marx explains, is because “[a]t the same time that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity” (282). From a nationalistic Indian standpoint, the concern for call center agents as “*cyber-coolies*” doing work that “dulls the mind” echoes Marx’s insistence that automated factory work not only exploits cheap labor for profit, but also wears down the body and shackles the mind. In Marx’s formulation, the factory as a system of machinery “constitutes in itself a huge automaton,” and so the automaton of the factory, as capitalist exploitation materialized in and through the technological apparatus, exists in constant antinomy with the human worker (272). Furthermore, “The automaton, as capital, and because it is capital, is endowed, in the person of the capitalist, with intelligence and will; it is therefore animated by the longing to

labor may be repetitive but is no less stressful, as Mirchandani reports one agent's complaint that high call volume and scripting leave him feeling "like a keyed toy" (2004, 361). Limited vertical mobility and a range of physical, and sometimes psychological, ailments lead to astonishingly high attrition in an industry many never view as more than a stop-gap job (Cowie 318, Pal and Buzzanell 214, Patel 33, Pal and Buzzanell 213). In *John and Jane*, the high attrition rates in Indian call centers are implicitly related to synchronicity with EST and high stress levels due to customer abuse and social constraints. Raka Shome claims "the third world worker's body is colonized through the colonization of the body's clock and its biological functioning [...] through biopolitical power and control" (116). A "constant pattern of ailments, fatigue-related diseases and psychological conditions amongst call center workers," are at least partially attributable to working the night shift and upsetting "the body clock" (115, see also Aneesh 527-28 and Pal and Buzzanell 204).

Though call center workers enjoy relatively high wages and a place in the booming ITES sector of New India, performing labor typified by emotional and interactive work rather than manual, the persistence of the factory automaton metaphor indicates cracks and slippages in transnational service industry labor practices through which new critical and resistant narratives of experience can join up with other counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist narratives across the globe. That both Americans and Indians talk about call center workers as automatons in relation to nationalist economic concerns is all the more interesting because the automaton seems such a clunky and insufficient metaphor for these agents and the work they do. Their labor is enacted

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reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by that repellent yet elastic natural barrier, man" (272). Capitalism, then, makes automatons out of everyone. The capitalist, or the American client or local Indian owner or manager in the case of call center discourse, is intelligent and willful, but only as that human-like intelligence and will is predetermined by the capital-automaton which subjugates the capitalist as another mere living appendage. Thus, the automaton in call center discourse is embedded through factory work to capitalism's ability to objectify through mechanization.

through digital mediums rather than mechanical, and that labor is typified by emotional and interactive work rather than manual. Both instances of the comparison serve to normalize hegemonic value hierarchies of labor and enterprise in the global market and define a naturalizable, nationalizable *homo oeconomicus* against the devalued technology worker as *homo technicus*.



## Coda: Bad 'Borgs

*“For the United States and for Americans, this is a time of great unease and increasing insecurity. The uneasiness comes not just from the violation of our territory by terrorists and not just from insecurity in terms of our personal safety. We also suffer now from profound economic unease and insecurity. In fact, this unease reflects major shifts in our world—shifts that may be long-term but are certainly changing in perceptible ways our way of life and possibly the quality of our lives.”*<sup>95</sup>

During the mid-2000s, CNN anchorman Lou Dobbs hosted several *Exporting America* segments during his regularly scheduled news show and published a book and started a website by the same title, effectually making it his business to stop the business of outsourcing for American companies. As the mouthpiece for American protectionism, Dobbs’s choice to foreground terrorism in the opening lines of his preface to a book criticizing outsourcing is not only significant because he enjoys a large audience, but because this association between outsourcing and terrorism is one that resonates with his large audience. While Dobbs’s rhetoric on-camera directs American workers and consumers to challenge corporations that outsource overseas, as a point of contact with the alleged importers of America, with the added benefits of a captive audience and relative anonymity, the outsourced phone call provides a sounding board for impassioned nationalism, solidarity with the American working class, and anxiety-driven outrage. Anger over job loss is projected onto the Indian call center worker for “stealing” the American jobs despite the fact that American corporations actively sought out and sent the jobs overseas. In addition to U.S. news media like Dobbs’s program, outsourcing to India has been foregrounded in political rhetoric such as John Kerry’s spotlighting of outsourcing in his 2004 presidential bid, and popular media like the movie *Outsourced* and a recurring segment on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* during which host Jimmy Kimmel video conferences with his fictional joke writers in India. Though these platforms address Indian workers with varying levels of animosity

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<sup>95</sup> This passage is the opening paragraph to Lou Dobbs preface for Hira and Hira’s *Outsourcing America: The True Cost of Shipping Jobs Overseas and What Can Be Done About It* (2005, ix).

and bemusement, they play on xenophobic stereotypes of Indians as “stealing” jobs, eager to perform any task at any hour and at any price.<sup>96</sup>

In narratives of protectionism, the supposed violation of state economic territory and terrorizing of individuals through job displacement is conflated with the physical violation of state sovereign territory and terror perpetrated during the events of 9/11. Through the biopolitical doubling of the state as the territorial body and the citizen body, securitization and protectionism are conjoined and protectionist anxieties and hypernationalist racial hatred become scalable—upwards to the security of the state and back down through affinity groups formed as self-designated counterpublics, to the scale of individual economic, bodily, and informational security. The scalability of hypernationalism is not merely metaphorical; Poster, who shadowed fifty call center workers in northern India, reports that “[m]ost often, customer hostility in my sample resembles the Bush administration’s state rhetoric of ‘war on terror’” (2007, 284). *The New York Times* ran an editorial on Father’s Day in 2004—a banner year for the politicization of outsourcing and protectionist agitation—in which Bruce Stockler wrote a fictional letter informing his children he has outsourced his fatherly duties to a “Mr. Gupta” in Bangalore. Michael Palm writes that the op-ed illuminates the new character of the threat that outsourcing poses for the inherited entitlement of “white, male breadwinners in the U.S.”—that “runaway outsourcing could become a form of intimate, familial robbery.”<sup>97</sup> The supposedly national economic threat of global outsourcing and Indians stealing American industry scales to the

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<sup>96</sup> For example, when Jimmy Kimmel contacts the Indian employees via web cam, they are frequently sleeping in their offices (due to the time difference) and immediately jump to attention, pretending to have been awake and hard at work. Often, when Kimmel calls them for a video chat, the Indian actor answers as if he is doing customer service for another company.

<sup>97</sup> Stockler’s punch lines focus on paternal rites of passage in popular culture, like rough-housing and enjoying scatological humor, contrasted with bed times that consist of “sitting alone in your beds, listening to the disembodied voice of a near total stranger [Mr. Gupta].” Anxieties over the paternal role of the father as breadwinner and the paternal role of the State are piqued; meanwhile, “[e]ven maternal surrogacy is being outsourced internationally” (Nadeem 23). Perceptions of the threat of outsourcing often tend to target patriarchal authority in the U.S., while popularly tending to target the morality and dignity of women in India.

American family and the father, himself. Rhetoric of protectionism and rhetoric of terror agitate narratives verging on a discursive race war between the enterprising American humans and *homo technicus* Indians as a race of bad 'borgs.

In the two chapters above, I have outlined a racial, cultural, and economic antagonism between Americans and Indians cultivated in technological globalization narratives of late capitalism and intensified in discourses in and surrounding the outsourced Indian call center. While the first chapter focuses on American hegemonic narratives that call on colonial and developmentalist tropes, and the ontological beliefs that underpin them, in order to construct an imaginative geography of the global that privileges the United States and subordinates India, the second chapter complicates the fiction of American domination even as it elaborates on it. In particular, the grand narrative of hegemonic binarism in which the (white, liberal humanist) American is unilaterally privileged over the (Othered, dehumanized) Indian deconstructs as a single, driving hegemonic globalization narrative in view of the event of the call as virtual potentiality, and even more so the current articulations of an Indian nationalism that has been comfortable inverting such a binary since the early part of the twentieth century. In this final section, I argue that in both the United States and India hypernationalisms are disciplining workers, reinforcing the segregation of the global populations according to nationality and within the nation in order to operationalize those populations as competing constituencies in the knowledge economy and normalize neoliberal value hierarchies. I do this by reconstructing nationalist narratives in call center discourse on both ends of the telephone line in order to argue that, rather than a clash of civilizations, the call center case shows that racist nationalisms benefit a transnational (as well as national and local) hegemony of business elites profiting from competition and rivalry among workers in the global economy. Conditions of resistance to

hegemonic narratives are ever more precarious as difference and individualization are absorbed in order “to control or transform or even incorporate them” into the government and discipline of normative economic behavior (Williams 113)—“in effect a saturation of the whole process of living” (110). In my analysis, both nationalisms emerge as neoliberal dispositifs “promot[ing] insecurity, inequality and individualization as part of ensuring the conditions for power to exercise a hold over conduct” (Lazzarato 110).

Poster indicates that in political rhetoric in the United States, “[t]urning outsourcing into a symbol of nationalism helps politicians obscure and evade larger issues like de-industrialization, the withering of state supports for workers, skyrocketing health costs, and declining real wages” (2007, 283)—particularly because outsourcing and offshore workers become the scapegoat. The increasing securitization of the individual in late capitalism, through which “the individual [is] increasingly at the mercy of the market” (Lazzarato 111), is conflated with terror and grafted onto the outsourced Indian call center worker as a threat and competitor, but also as unequal to the American individual because perceived as “cheap.”<sup>98</sup> One worker tells Poster that, “Some [customers] are really furious or angry: ‘You’re calling from South Asia, that’s the place with Bin Laden. You’re calling from South Asia so you must be some terrorist.’ [...] They look at India as if they’re terrorists” (2007, 284).<sup>99</sup> Workers report that after the 2004 presidential election, during which outsourcing was foregrounded as a key political and economic issue, racially abusive calls increased, whereas before customers’ hostility generally related more to their satisfaction with the product of service (284). Consumer groups participate in online forums, like Get2Human.com, “oppos[ing] Indian workers by surveilling foreign accents and poor English, and marking them with red flags on the website

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<sup>98</sup> Recall Mirchandani’s transcription of one worker’s experience: “They would be like ‘Indian people, cheap people. Working for less than what we earn in a day.’ And all that crap” (2012, 66).

<sup>99</sup> See also Mirchandani 2012, p. 70.

master list” (Poster 2011, 887). While “[r]anting rhetoric of hypernationalism and xenophobia on the website—by the leaders and members alike—serves to reinforce the geopolitical status of U.S. customers above Indian workers” (887), these American consumers merely discursively deflect insecurity in the global market onto Indians, and define inequality as a racialized vector of measurement.

The job “stealing” that Indian call center workers are accused of often takes on an expressly technological character, as digitization of personal data and finances bring new and often difficult to understand vulnerabilities. Anger over job pirating joins up with anxiety that a techno-savvy Indian will pirate an American customer’s identity. Workers report that when customer support for an “American” product comes from India, some customers become wary that the support is a scam (Mirchandani 2012, 65). Because many processes handled by call center agents require sensitive personal information, including credit card or bank account numbers and social security numbers, “agents feel the identity posing [as an American] can make their job easier, even if they do not agree with the method” (Poster 2007, 286).<sup>100</sup> Unsurprisingly, “[d]iscourses portraying Indians as thieves also continued to be actively reproduced through intermittent reports of fraud or customer abuse in relation to outsourced customer service work” (Mirchandani 2012, 62). To avoid this public relations nightmare, corporations that outsource to call centers implement security measures that would ordinarily seem quite extreme. Though customer information must be accessible and transmittable from computers in the call center, client companies “strip the units of any drives, ports, and sometimes keyboards, so that even managers do not have portable access to any kind of information” (Poster 2011, 885). In an attempt to obviate misuse of customer data, including compromising expensive databases of customer information by sharing them, client firms treat every employee as potentially

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<sup>100</sup> See also Raghuram, p. 1483.

dangerous. American exceptionalism and white supremacy are intensified during call center interactions and protected by narratives that claim outsourcing is unfair to, or even terrorizes, American workers. Poster writes: “Accordingly, the rhetoric of empire is apparent in Indian call centers—not through an explicit language of racial superiority—but through the mediating language of ‘terror,’ and the denigration of South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim identities” (2007, 297).

In the United States, these imperialist narratives enable the subjugation of American workers to the government of conduct benefitting local, national, and transnational neoliberal elites. Neoliberal globalization, in which the hegemonic “view of the individual as a living being is premised on the universalization of property and competition” (Venn 2009, 226), instrumentalizes a fundamentalist individualism in the form of *homo oeconomicus*, “the entrepreneur of oneself,” disciplining the individual to “maximize[e] himself or herself as ‘human capital’ in competition with all other individuals” (Lazzarato 111). Lazzarato “argues that this process not only adds to the general securitization which the neoliberal government of conduct promotes, but it is also destructive of social bonds and the conditions for social cohesion” necessary for state functioning (111). The neoliberal state, then, “foster[s] ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ values of cohesion by promoting reinvented racism and nationalism, stiffened by militaristic values, that is, by a return of the ‘discourse of race war’ congruent with all forms of the exclusion and objectification of the other” (Venn 2009, 226). In other words, the globalization of the marketplace upon which neoliberalism is predicated does not just institutionalize inequality, but “a zero-sum game of systemic dispossession not offset by active redistribution at the national or the global scale” (225). Therefore, in order to ensure a somewhat peaceful coexistence among individuals constantly competing and the corporations and

institutions that actively impress potential dispossession onto individuals, hypernationalist racism forms an ersatz affinity for workers (especially those most at risk or already disenfranchised) in the form of a common enemy, that serves to motivate competition as well as protect against uprisings against business elites and other disruptions to hegemonic order. The extremist and reactionary bad 'borg and derivative narrative constructions of Indian call center workers as Oriental droids, mimic machines, and automatons provide just such a common enemy for American middle and lower classes.

*“Once one gentleman told me, ‘You guys get hired because you are cheap. You are taking away all our jobs because you are cheap. You can be bought off for pennies.’ I will not forget the call. I told him the reason we get this job is not because we can be bought off, but because you cannot provide the service.”<sup>101</sup>*

When Indian call center agents' interactions with American customers subject them to hypernationalist and racist abuse, agents in turn “construct Westerners as protectionist, parochial, and unreasonable” (Mirchandani 2012, 71). Mirchandani (2004, 2012), Poster (2007, 2011), Taylor and Bain, Pal and Buzzanell, and Raghuram all record Indian workers' expressions of indignation in response to racist customer abuse. As in Parama's retort above, many Indian workers, citing the economic logic of outsourcing that benefits American corporations (Pal and Buzzanell 211), the higher value Indians place on education (Mirchandani 2004, 362), or the simple rudeness of callers' racial epithets in comparison with agents' professionalism (362), come to privilege their cultural and national identity as Indians above American's. The economic logic of profit-making, valuation of educational prestige and competence, and emphasis on professionalism expressed by the Indian call center workers are commensurate with neoliberal value hierarchies. Though BPO executives may lament Indians' perceived ineptitude when it

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<sup>101</sup> Pal and Buzzanell's transcription of an interview with Parama, a call center worker in Kolkata (211).

comes to “flexible professionalism,”<sup>102</sup> workers appear to readily identify with core aspects of neoliberalist individualism—personal responsibility and competition for profitable output, self- or family-financed educational competency, and individual absorption and alleviation of on-the-job “risks” like customer racism in lieu of the corporation for which one works<sup>103</sup>—as Indians. Furthermore, they indicate that these aspects of their individual Indian identities are actively reinforced by defining themselves in opposition to westerners rather than a unilateral importation of western office culture.

Conservative nationalists and religious groups in India may be concerned about globalization’s degenerative effect on call center youths who, due to exposure to western culture, become individualized (instead of family-oriented) hedonists, drinking at clubs after work, conspicuously consuming American name-brands, and engaging in sexual promiscuity,<sup>104</sup> but the workers themselves develop a particular set of grievances and criticisms about American culture. Pal and Buzzanell report that just as one call center worker, Gauri, responds to customer abuse by “laugh[ing] it off and mak[ing] faces...[while] the stupid customer thinks [she is] listening,” their interviewees scorned coworkers considered to be “wannabes, who want to be just like Americans” (qtd. in 209). The authors write that, “[t]heir rejection of the wannabes stems from a nationalist sentiment that makes them view wannabes as Western allies” (210). Even though workers may enjoy the social capital of acting American in their professional lives as increasing their accessibility to opportunities in the West, and in their personal lives when they receive special treatment because others assume they are NRIs (nonresident Indians living in the U.S.)

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<sup>102</sup> Nadeem writes that “flexible professionalism” is “a favored trope of what is called the knowledge economy. In contrast to the worker who indolently waits for orders, the professional knows what to do and moves quickly and discretely from task to task” (134).

<sup>103</sup> Gautam, interviewed by Pal and Buzzanell, does indicate that tolerance of racial abuse is part of “Western management practices that we have been trained to adhere to” (209). In Mirchandani’s study, agents cite being trained to be deferential to customers and tolerant of abuse, but exchanging stories of ignorant and aggressive customers “allows workers to pity rather than revere their American customers” (361).

<sup>104</sup> See Nadeem pp.50-53, Mirchandani 2012 pp. 95-100, Patel pp. 41-46, 58-59, and 93-94.



(Poster 2007, 293-94), a majority of Indian call center workers practices and narratively constructs their consumption and enactment of “westernization” as discrete from Americans’, calibrated to their needs and motivations and informed by familial, religious, and nationalist influences.

Due to the observable disparity in education level and technological expertise between agent and customer,<sup>105</sup> Mirchandani notes that workers in her study often characterized Americans as “rich but stupid” (2004, 361).<sup>106</sup> A female worker recounted to Mirchandani how her opinion of Americans changed after working in a call center: “Previously, before we started interacting with Americans, [...] it was in my mind, they are really good, they are really very intelligent, they have a lot of knowledge, nobody can beat the Americans. That was what my perception was. When I started handling calls the type of questions they ask, I said, oh, it’s bad. They only have money. They don’t have brains” (362-63). If American hegemonic narratives often cast Indian technology workers as themselves technologized and machine-like, then, borrowing from this this worker’s imagery, Indian call center agents circulate narratives in which Americans are brainless zombies with thick pocketbooks and an insatiable appetite for buying things and therefore also for the Indian brains that enable and assist their consumptive consumption. Phrases like Pal and Buzzanell’s “Western allies” and the Indian worker’s “nobody can beat the Americans” introduce overtones of war-like conflict and rivalry, characterizing the United States as an oppositional and imposing force. Indian call center workers respond to

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<sup>105</sup> Trends in call center employment may be shifting from hiring college graduates to recruiting high school graduates and high school dropouts (Patel 33). An interviewee informed Patel that high school graduates and dropouts are preferred by some companies “because they are less likely to quit, can be hired at a lower cost, and are able to communicate on par with college graduates” (33). Mirchandani corroborates that recruitment literature and signage often target “freshers,” or undergraduate students, and claim “Anyone can apply” (2012, 77). This trend has caused additional concern over call center employment in India, as some worry “the lure of fast money is causing some students to drop their education” (Patel 33).

<sup>106</sup> In a footnote, she indicates “A few workers noted positive perceptions of Americans [...] but these were by far the exception” (372n4).

American customer aggression and ignorance by “reinforcing the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Mirchandani 2012, 68), countering customer abuse with narratives of personal<sup>107</sup> and national<sup>108</sup> pride.

If we reduce the power dynamics in the call center such that the binaric relationship of a dominant western customer (and cultural populace) to a subordinated Indian worker (and cultural receptacle) is far and away the most prominent and important operative, then agents’ oppositional and self-privileging narratives are quite obviously counter-hegemonic. Indeed, this appears to be the foremost mode of analysis scholars have taken regarding these reversals, albeit with reservations. Pal and Buzzanell argue that workers’ understanding of themselves as desirable because providing affordable and quality service “reverses[s] dominant neoliberal discourse” because it “challenges the dominant neoliberal rhetoric that promotes the call center industry as an *opportunity for developing nations* rather than claiming it as a profit-driven business proposition” (211). This might be true if the corporate body were the IMF or World Bank<sup>109</sup> and therefore strategically conscripted into maintaining the neoliberal rhetoric of benevolence; otherwise, American corporations tell the same story of affordable and capable laborers. In their final analysis of coworkers belittling “wannabes,” however, Pal and Buzzanell draw attention to the term’s “resonan[ce] with the historical exclusionary discourse of elite middle-class nationalism that disallows others” (215). Citing Stuart Hall, Mirchandani claims

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<sup>107</sup> Mirchandani includes this transcription in *Phone Clones*: “They literally say, at times, that ‘you bloody Indians don’t know how to speak English. Can I speak to someone who can speak English.’ We transfer the call, but they should not say that.... ‘Sir, I can speak many languages. Can you? Think about that. You don’t have to humiliate anyone’” (2012, 68).

<sup>108</sup> The following is extracted from a transcribed exchange in Pal and Buzzanell’s article: “They don’t expect us Indians to have much knowledge of English. They don’t realize that our Constitution is written in English. I realize [now] the average American is not educated, even the English is not so good” (210).

<sup>109</sup> The World Bank recently shifted about a 100 jobs from the U.S. to a Chennai office (Nadeem 121). Further, Nadeem writes: “So promising is its future that India ‘could drive down the global costs in services, just as China drove down global costs in manufacturing,’ the authors of a World Bank report conclude” (121, quoted World Bank report published in 2005).

that call center workers' constructions of Americans as "rich but stupid" effectively "subvert[s] the ideology of the 'West' as being superior to the rest of the world" (2004, 361). Later, in her book-length work, she categorizes outsourced transnational call center work as a "'political project of belonging' through which boundaries between collectivities are constructed and naturalized," using Nira Yuval-Davis's term as differentiated from simply belonging such that "[t]he *politics of belonging* involves reproducing the socially sanctioned boundaries between those who belong and those who do not" (2012, 71, 155n44, author's emphasis). In call center politics of belonging, "Westerners construct themselves as a community of financiers whose jobs are being stolen; Indians see themselves as a community of skilled and legitimate participants in the global economy" (71). Mirchandani immediately concludes her discussion of this oppositional political project of belonging, reminding the reader that during the phone call the community of westerner customers "can freely express their position on calls, while Indian workers form their community in private, illicit settings" (71). The imbalance of power enacted and exploited by abusive or rude customers during calls is certainly a central theoretical and experiential problematic of transnational call center work; and, yet, I am uncomfortable with the sweeping claim that the community of Indian workers is private or illicit as its antagonistic formation vis-à-vis the community of westerners reproduces nationalist narratives.

I wish to take up these narratives of Indian identity articulated in opposition to American customers in order to situate them in terms of contemporary neoliberal hegemonic Indian nationalism. The decades following India's post-liberalization integration into global markets—it's "second independence"<sup>110</sup>—have brought a "resurgence of religious-political conservatism and its [somewhat incongruous] embrace of economic liberalization," as evidenced by the BJP's high-profile 2004 "India Shining" and 2014 "Brand India" campaigns I referenced in Chapter 2.

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<sup>110</sup> See Nadeem pp. 44 and 220.

As Rohit Chopra has shown, since before independence from the Britain, dominant nationalist discourse was shaped by a Hindu, upper-caste, educated, English-speaking majoritarian that claimed a “Hindu science,” predating the European Enlightenment and privileged “to challenge the hegemony of Western claims over reason” (434). Post-independence socialist India pursued its unique and modern destiny in the Nehruvian project that linked Indianness with national scientific, industrial, and technological development (435). Nehru built the formidable Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), but the Indian state focused funding on English-language higher education at the expense of primary education, such that English and therefore the prestigious educational institutions were and are largely inaccessible to the staggering majority of Indians who do not have the resources to send their children to private English-language primary schools (436). As affected by liberalization and neoliberal globalization Chopra states the elite nationalist *doxa* of “globalized India [requires that] contributing to the inflow of foreign exchange is seen as sufficient for realizing the dreams of national development and prosperity” (439). In the Sunshine sector (IT), the most powerful elites build résumés overseas (preferably the U.S.) as their patriotic duty in the global economy, others develop software and patented intellectual property for global circulation (439).<sup>111</sup> Business processing outsourcing, like call center work, is considerably lower on the hierarchy—still illuminated at the periphery of the science and technology spotlight as “frontline ambassadors for Brand India” (Mirchandani 2012, 25) and still requiring the relative privilege of having learned English,<sup>112</sup> but marginalized in India’s creative class of IT professionals and business elites.

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<sup>111</sup> See Nadeem, p. 196.

<sup>112</sup> More public schools are teaching English, meaning accessibility has increased. Call center trainers and employers, however, express staunch prejudices regarding regional Indian accents that reinforce a degree of socio-economic exclusiveness and regional and personal prejudices. One executive shared with Patel that, “If an applicant is from Ahmedabad, we don’t touch them. Their accents are untrainable” (46). In BPO it seems, untouchables aren’t designated strictly by caste, but by English-language proficiency directly influenced by socio-economic and regional background.

Within India, elite narratives conflict in their representations of IT and ITES outsourcing as alternately the Indian economy's "golden goose"<sup>113</sup> and crippling the Indian economy's future by employing a generation of otherwise enterprising Indians as cheap, menial laborers for the West.<sup>114</sup> Overwhelmingly, however, both narrative strains serve to normalize the value hierarchy of the neoliberal elite's vision of an enterprise society in the global economy and discipline the middle-class technology worker as a competitor in the global marketplace and dutiful Indian national. The BJP's platform of "empowering the young of India to cement their reputation as technologically the best in the world" ("Vision of Modi") goes hand-in-hand with generating wealth for the liberalized national economy and calls on the notion of essential Indianness developed by Hindu elites that adopted and recuperated European science and reason as Indian. The neoliberalized Nehruvian image of India retains an emphasis on science and technology, but "Nehru's hope—no matter how naïve it might have been—that technological progress would lead to social equality" is sidelined in rhetoric "saturated by references to making the most of the golden opportunities provided by globalization and making India a superpower in the twenty-first century" (Chopra 439). Local, national, and transnational business elites in India evoke this Indianness in the governing of good conduct for telephonic customer service workers. Training programs, like those that use the thirty-five-equals-ten rule, and management tactics, like a CEO who tells workers that the average American is uneducated,<sup>115</sup> encourage workers to provide patient and courteous customer service while actively defining themselves as capable and intelligent Indian workers against the imagined slothful and stupid American. Whether praising or deriding transnational call center employment, elites in the press agree with Tharoor that "The next stage [for IT and ITES sectors] must be for Indians to develop such services for our own

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<sup>113</sup> Pramod Bhasin, CEO of an outsourcing provider, quoted in Mirchandani 2012, p. 25.

<sup>114</sup> See Tharoor, also quoted in Chapter 2.

<sup>115</sup> Paraphrase of a respondent in Mirchandani 2004, p. 362.

market.” The value division expressed in this sentiment mirrors precisely the American hegemonic narrative binary of the technology developer, creator, and innovator in Silicon Valley privileged over the efficient and hard-working but unimaginative and task-driven technology worker in India. In Indian hegemonic narrative, as noted in the factory automaton metaphor, the call center worker remains devalued, but the innovative and creative developer is naturalized as Indian. Nationalist narratives serve to re-segregate Indian technology workers as individual competitors for prestige and wealth, motivated by the constructed inequality among careers and backgrounds, so that the worker absorbs the risks of local, national, and transnational market insecurity.

This analysis of American and Indian nationalist narratives reproduced and circulated in and around transnational call centers shows how seemingly resistant or community-based struggles and mechanisms of resistance are “made to participate in stabilizing the norm of ‘good conduct’” and the construction of social identities “consistent with corporate neoliberal market values” (Venn 2007, 122, 121). Operationalizing nationalism in the indoctrination of individuated competition benefits local, national, and transnational neoliberal hegemonic interests. This is not to say the nation-state is unimportant, differential geopolitical powers, and the colonial and cultural histories and presences that inform them, are an integral precondition for capitalist economic globalization and outsourcing. Rather, taking neoliberal dispositifs into account in conjunction with national and postcolonial hegemonic apparatuses reveals that the conditions under which narratives can form anti-hegemonic counter-narratives that resist and disrupt hegemonic mechanisms of power and control in technological globalization. What mechanisms of resistance can evade absorption by the market mechanism and government of conduct? These would be narratives and actions that seek to expose and potentially disrupt the

globalization of the normalization and individualization of insecurity, articulating anti-capitalist value systems that powerfully counter the hegemonic instantiation of inequality and dispossession of zero-sum capitalism. Anti-hegemonic affinity groups would not be built on hatred or the interests of individuals in competition, but transnational and transindividual communality based on the vulnerability and relationality of humanity in common. Foucault writes,

“Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind,’ which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. [...] We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.” (in Dreyfus and Rabinow 216)

This project on narratives of the transnational Indian call center, seemingly banal labor in the glittering project of globalization, is an attempt to discover “which specific and perhaps originary problem is connected with them” (210) by “analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies” (211), their historical, virtual, artefactual, and institutional conditions of emergence and the ontological metanarrative of humans and machines that authorizes their discursive and non-discursive articulations.

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