BORDERS IN SERVICE

Enactments of Nationhood in Transnational Call Centres

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

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The aim of *Borders in Service* is to trace the connections between two dynamics that underlie transnational customer service encounters between employees and customers – service labour and constructions of nationhood. We argue that the transnational service industry, of which the call centre is an important site, allows for a cogent analysis of these two previously unconnected dynamics of labour and nation. While *labour* has been explored largely in relation to notions of economy and market, and *nation* in relation to politics and the state, this collection draws attention to their intersection: the labour involved in constructing nations, and the nationalisms implicit (and at times explicit) in doing service labour.

Given the fundamentally embodied nature of service work, in which the body or voice of the worker is an intrinsic part of the commodity being exchanged, the identities, social locations, and national contexts of workers and customers form the unspoken bedrock upon which service work is conducted and evaluated. This book explores the work of people engaged in transnational interactive service work who, as part of their jobs, give "concrete expression to their understanding of the nation" (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 539). The contributors to this collection are researchers who are located in a wide array of national settings and have conducted original ethnographic field research on call centres. They explore the political economy of nation in the site of the global call centre – that is, the ways in which borders are enacted, and ideals of nationhood and citizenship are created and expressed through encounters between providers and recipients during transnational voice-based service interactions. Collectively, the chapters in this book capture the diverse ways in which nationalisms are enacted

through the everyday interactions between transnational call centre workers, their employers, and their customers.

Overview of Global Call Centres

Transnational Services and Communicative Capitalism

Call centres emerged as an interdisciplinary curiosity in the last decades of the twentieth century. A *call centre* is an organization, or part of an organization, that handles telephone communications with the public. These involve either the *inbound* labour of receiving customer queries about products, scheduling appointments, providing technical help, problem solving, etc., or the *outbound* labour of calling customers for telemarketing, debt collections, etc.

Many scholarly volumes and analyses have reflected on the dynamics of these *domestic* call centres, that is, those that are located in the same country as the client firms for which they sell and the consumer populations that they serve (for some insightful reviews and collections see Burgess & Connell, 2006; Deery & Kinnie, 2004). Call centres have become focal points of interest across diverse fields because they represent a convergence of many trends in the study of the sociology of work – labour control, resistance, identity construction, emotion work, professionalization, and gendering practices.

Starting around the year 2000, however, this industry transformed radically. Call centres became *global* with the rapid acceleration of outsourcing and offshoring. *Outsourcing* moves the production process out of the office, often to other specialized firms that perform customer service exclusively. *Offshoring* is the process of sending work across national borders and then retrieving the end products or services by mail, shipping, or electronically. In their drive for lower labour and infrastructure costs, firms displace work not only from the main employer (as in domestic outsourcing) but also from the customer base.

Global call centres, in turn, have arisen as the incarnation of this process; that is, firms are diverting their local calls through satellite connections and across national lines, and back to consumers, sometimes under the presumption that the call has never left the original firm or country. Distinctive about these organizations, moreover, is their crossing of lines between the global north and south. The global north is conceptualized as including wealthy countries like the United States, Canada, Russia, Japan, Australia, and many in Europe. The global south

is said to include emerging economies in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. This general (though not exclusive) mapping of affluence and political power along geographic poles is said to be significant for contemporary transnational relations. Hence, the spread of the global call centre industry across this map has important implications for the dynamics of labour, as we will discuss. With this recent switch of outsourcing destinations by firms comes a new constellation in which workers in the global south are largely making calls to and receiving calls from consumers in the global north.

The labour of global call centres should not be confused with that of other types of outsourcing. Rather, it represents a significant shift in the foundation and direction of capitalism in the post-industrial era. We argue that global call centres encapsulate a merging of two new trends in the global economy. One is an expansion of transnational services. A service industry involves doing things for people (rather than making things, as in factories). Service jobs pervade economic sectors – from government (for example, social workers) to transportation (for example, truck drivers), to health (for example, nurses), to education (for example, teachers), and many more. They also run up and down the ladder of occupational levels, from the very high-skilled workers (for example, finance, legal, and medical professionals) to the very low-skilled workers (for example, restaurant dishwashers and janitors). Indeed, services are now the fastest-growing jobs in formal sectors of the economy around the world (Poster & Yolmo, 2016). People refer to many service jobs as front-line work, meaning that employees are at the interface of firms and their consumers (as opposed to the behind-the-scenes labour of employees whom consumers never see, for instance in data entry and warehouse stocking).

The second relevant trend in post-industrial capitalism is the rise of communicative industries. This sector focuses entirely on exchanges between people, especially those exchanges that are mediated rather than face to face – that is, written on paper, posted on the Internet, sent via video, or, in our case, spoken on the telephone. In what Dean (2009) calls "communicative capitalism," this industry facilitates and/or profits from the creation of communications between citizens. At times, it *directly produces* the communicative infrastructure (for example, telecommunications corporations that sell phone services; electronics factories that produce mobile phones; internet and cable providers; social networking companies, etc.). At other times it *indirectly profits* from communications (for example, marketing companies that analyse the content of posts, texts, and tweets).

Less studied, however, is yet another crucial element of the communicative economy: the business of facilitating exchanges between firms and their customers. Brophy (2010) places call centres at the nexus of this dynamic because they manage customer service relations for all kinds of organizations, public and private.

This merging of the service and communication industries changes the types of labour that are sent overseas within outsourcing and offshoring. Rather than sending only manufacturing jobs, firms are increasingly moving abroad the work of information, data, and phones. Early periods of outsourcing in the 1980s and 1990s initiated this process with information services: high-end software development and low-end data entry. Emblematic of the twenty-first century, however, is the nascence of transnational communicative industries: mid-range labour in phone-based customer service. Global south states and firms, in turn, are selling an embodied form of communication. As Cecilia Rivas (chapter 2) recounts, states and their firms are advertising how they "export voice."

In many countries around the world, global call centres comprise a significant sector of the economy, with some, such as those in India, serving 73 per cent foreign clients (Holman et al., 2007). Four million Americans and 800,000 people in the United Kingdom work in call centres. In Australia 75 per cent of customer contact occurs via call centres (Russell 2009, p. 6). As Glucksmann has observed, "call centres represent not only the most rapidly expanding forms of work and of business organization but also one of the most researched" (2004, p. 795).

Attention towards these global call centres has prompted a surge of literature (Russell 2008; Batt et al., 2009). Studies have shed light on the labour processes that are common across diverse national locations, such as hyper-routinization, scripting, surveillance, temporal controls, and emotional stress. Some reflect on the widespread recognition of the importance of national economic policies in facilitating trade in services, especially those from divergent contexts (Huws 2009). Yet, little is known about how the nation itself is conceptualized and constructed via and within transnational call centres.

India and Beyond: Jumping Off from the Early Case Studies

India has been the focal point for a majority of the studies on transnational call centres in the first decade and a half of their emergence (Aneesh, 2006, 2015; Basi, 2009; Das et al., 2008; Nadeem, 2011; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009; Patel, 2010; Rowe et al., 2013; Russell, 2009; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Thite and Russell, 2009). The rapid growth of the industry in India is likely part of the reason that this site has been identified as important by researchers working in diverse disciplines and contexts.

Indeed, India was among the first to build and receive the telecommunications infrastructure needed for this transnational industry. Panicked about the "Y2K" (year 2000) computer virus, U.S. and Indian entrepreneurs pushed for the laying of fibre optic cables underneath the Atlantic Ocean so that Indian engineers could develop and send software patches digitally to the United States. Other technologies and economies also converged at this time: expanded access to satellite communications systems, a significant reduction in the price of Internet broadband, and the development of programs such as VOIP (voice over Internet protocol), which enables phone calls through the Internet. Indian entrepreneurs, meanwhile, had forged pivotal ties with business contacts in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom through previous decades of immigration.

Scholarship on this initial case of Indian call centres, then, has cued us into critical dynamics of outsourcing. Substantively, it reveals the key role of nationality and nationhood within these transnational labour processes. A provocative thread running through the work of these researchers, including the editors of this volume, has been the constructions of nation through identity, culture, and language. Poster's (2007) work, for example, reveals a process of "national identity management" in which managers and clients of outsourced call centres place particular requirements on workers. Beyond expectations of displaying pleasantness and subduing anger, they also ask workers to display "Americanness." So, in the process of selling mortgage insurance or helping to solve computer problems, call centre workers are encouraged to use American names, adopt American accents, convey Americanness through idle conversation, and use a range of prepared scripts to state implicitly or explicitly that they are in the United States. These four practices fall on a continuum of styles of locational masking, ranging from the lesser forms that are indirect and more suggestive, to the more extreme forms that involve direct and outright lying. Employers vary in how extensively they are committed to this endeavour, and the lengths they will go to promote the facade. In some call centres, workers can be fired for failing to carry out various elements of this process effectively.

Mirchandani (2012) explores the frequency of customer anger during customer service encounters and the consequences of this customer

anger for nation building in the West. While angry customers exacerbate worker stress and intensify the need for training, they also serve a "productive" purpose in the everyday creation and perpetuation of Western nationalism. She argues that Western state and public discourses on offshoring sanction customer aggression on calls; these calls provide opportunities for customers to exercise citizenship rights over jobs that are assumed to have been stolen. In so doing, customers in the West continually define and then protect the assets (jobs) that belong to the nation. Thus, they enact patriotism through their anger.

These insights are especially important given that, over the past five years, there has been significant dispersal of the transnational call centre industry. Although estimates are crude, some analysts predict that 700,000 jobs shifted from India to other countries between 2008 and 2013. These new destinations include Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, the Ukraine, China, the Philippines, Australia. and Malaysia. Large Indian companies have also established a significant presence as call centre providers in numerous countries, such as the Philippines (Arun, 2013). Reports indicate that there are now one million transnational call centre workers in the Philippines (Lee, 2015). Countries such as Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa have emerging call centre sectors that serve English-speaking customers (Benner, 2006; Free, 2014; Graham & Mann, 2013; Hunter & Hachimi, 2012; Mann, Graham, & Friederici, 2014). French-language call centres are opening in Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia, and Madagascar (Lacey, 2005). The global call centre industry now facilitates the crossing of multiple national borders during daily service interactions.

However, this kind of emphasis on nationhood and nationalism has been less prevalent in the research on global call centres in other parts of the world. As an elaboration of our approach, this collection extends and deepens the analysis by exploring connections between labour and nation in the context of proliferating transnational call centres and in a variety of other cross-national interactions.

Voice and Talk: The Labour of Communicative Interactive Service

Talking on the phone is an unusual job. As a task it may be a common feature of contemporary work, but as an occupation in itself it has specific requirements for the service industry. Moreover, outsourcing changes the substance of what people talk about by placing those conversations in international contexts. Several dynamics, then, make

nation and nationalism especially salient within call centre settings, and thus unique from other kinds of transnational services.

First, unlike other kinds of service labour, call centre work is *interactive*. Employees are in direct contact with customers, clients, and colleagues (at least through verbal exchanges). Moreover, transnational call centres bring service participants from different countries in voice-to-voice contact on a mass scale, perhaps for the first time. In turn, these actors carry the nationally-grounded social meanings and habits of their everyday lives with them in their conversations on the telephone.

Second, customer service invokes the symbols and weight of nation within the process of *consumption*. A main purpose of call centres is to facilitate the exchange of goods with the public. Yet those goods (that is, the brands) are imbued with nationhood, and accordingly so will be the substance of the interactions about those goods on the telephone. Moreover, the service process may be viewed through a national and global lens. As revealed by the concept of *service ethnocentrism*, consumers often express preferences about the nationalities of the workers who are providing service (Thelen, Honeycutt Jr., & Murphy, 2010; Thelen, Thelen, Magnini, & Honeycutt Jr, 2009; Thelen, Yoo, & Magnini, 2010).

Customers evaluate the services they receive on the basis of pre-existing nationalist sentiments. A study of Americans' attitudes towards offshoring finds that while one would expect customers who have professionally benefited from offshoring to be positively predisposed towards the trend, in fact those "who feel a sense of national superiority, or who feel that members of other ethnic and racial groups are less praiseworthy than their own racial or ethnic group, tend to have particularly hostile reactions to outsourcing" (Mutz & Mansfield, 2011, p. 3), irrespective of their employment history.

Third, customer service is *communicative*. Quite critically, language has a special role in service, as the medium by which it is relayed. Accordingly, national features of speech – accent, voice, word choice, etc. – become key ingredients of the exchange. In global call centres we see a process of submerging, heightening, and altering national features of language. For instance, the same baseline language (in this case, English) becomes territorialized (as Indian English, Philippine English, etc.) and then re-territorialized (as globally neutral English). As Sonntag (2005) argues, global English is a form of "linguistic capital" that facilitates the need for Western corporations to acquire lower costs through offshoring, while it acts as a mechanism for cultural imperialism.

Fourth, *emotions* are integral to service transactions, and these may be imbued with nationalism. Research has shown how displays of emotion by employees, as well as expectations by consumers about the emotions of employees, are grounded in national foundations (Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Grandey, Rafaeli, Ravid, & Wirtz, 2010).

Fifth, customer service involves *aesthetic and bodily labour* (Lan, 2001; Wacquant, 1995), as workers' bodies are marked with nationhood. The interactive nature of call centre work, in conjunction with the important role played by the customer in the service encounter, reveals that the work of employees involves aesthetic labour (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Aesthetic labour refers to "the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied 'dispositions'" of the worker. These dispositions include his or her physique, bodily appearance, and even voice. Employers transform dispositions "into 'skills' ... geared towards producing a 'style' of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer" (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003, p. 37).

Put simply, the aesthetic labour of call centres involves the work of sounding right over the telephone. The local dynamics of aesthetic labour have been well documented in other types of services (such as retail service and tourism), yet less attention has been devoted to how this is happening globally in sites like call centres. We will examine how employees often display subtle or overt signals of nationalism through their physical display – their clothing, appearance, voice, etc. – even though their work is on the telephone.

Finally, but not insignificantly, call centre work takes place entirely through technological platforms. The virtual context of communicative labour, in turn, shapes the way individuals present themselves to each other, as the medium of exchange is sound (audio) rather than sight (video or text) (Poster, 2015). Some analysts argue that this context heightens tendencies for consumers to express hostility and verbal abuse, especially related to xenophobia (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2014).

Moreover, this context enables capabilities for anonymizing and morphing. Speakers can alter their identities, presenting themselves with different nationalities to their callers. Knowing this, some firms are engaging in strategies of vocal manipulation among workers to prevent, or at least obscure, the revealing of their corporate identities vis-à-vis customers (Poster, 2015). In short, voice has utility for deceptability in this industry; it can help to maintain the anonymity of the firm as an outsourcer. In this project we explore the way that firms use the deceptive capacities of telephone work to manipulate nationality.

Thus, telephone work is inseparable from the local, embodied, situated contexts of workers. As a result, service offshoring illuminates many central components of the globalization of this work – such as identity, surveillance, control, culture, stratification – and nationalism. The book maps the diverse notions of nationhood that occur through these service interactions.

Key Concepts of Border Enactment in Transnational Call Centres

The National within the Transnational

This volume brings two new directions to the theorizing of the national and transnational in global call centres. First, we emphasize the *interplay* of the global and the national in terms of their unique coexistence and mutual constitution in the contemporary era. In many analyses of call centres, the global often takes centre stage. Considerable attention is given to features of the supranational (for example, neoliberalism, westernization, transnational flows, global divisions of labour, etc.). Some argue that the relevance of the nation is deteriorating in light of global trends. Thomas Friedman (2005), for instance, uses outsourced call centres as an example of a "flattening world" in which the trends of connectivity, workflow software, and other technologies are enabling "a global community that is soon going to be able to participate in all sorts of discovery and innovation" (p. 212), and "without regard to geography, distance, time, and, in the near future, even language" (pp. 205). Within the narrative of the "flat world," call centres are conceptualized as uplifting global south workers into the middle class as well as enhancing the economies of the global north through the expanding purchasing power of global south consumers.

Our argument concerns the continued relevance and in fact reification of nation in the transnational service economy. Indeed, Sassen (2006, p. 2) reminds us that "the epochal transformation we call globalization is taking place inside the national to a far larger extent than is usually recognized. It is here that the most complex meanings of the global are being constituted, and the national is also often one of the key enablers and enactors of the emergent global scale." Along these lines, the chapters in this collection reveal that *the production of nation by call centre actors is what enables the transnationalism of outsourcing to be carried out*. By recreating (sometimes fictitious) national symmetries between onshore consumers and offshore workers through talk on the

telephone, global call centres bolster the facade of local production. This, in turn, facilitates the silent continuation of outsourcing practices, in which northern firms move their contracts to overseas locations with cheaper operating costs.

Conceptually (if not also methodologically) the articles in this collection adopt a frame of "global ethnography" (Burawoy, Blum, George, Gille, & Thayer, 2000) in order to view the macro and the micro in one setting and to see how the global, national, and local are engaged interactively. In the process we incorporate an analysis of the central features of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc., within those sites (Poster, 2002). Thus, we engage with debates within the field of transnational studies on the salience or dominance of the global over the national. The chapters highlight how imageries and practices of the national coincide with, and at times counteract, those of the global – in short, how the two are in continual interplay and tension.

As a second direction for our volume, we question the conceptualization of nation in call centre analysis. Much of the writing on transnational call centres to date assumes a fixed national frame: the nation is often conceptualized as an uncontested, clearly demarcated, physical land mass. Many see it as "a bounded space under the control of a group of people, with fixed boundaries, exclusive internal sovereignty, and equal external status," similar to the way in which territory is conceptualized (Elden, 2013, p. 18). The nation may have emerged historically under particular circumstances and with a particular role: it aided the consolidation power of merchants and bankers in medieval times, in their drive to assert independence from feudal lords, aristocratic nobility, and religious leaders and to lay the foundations of capitalism (Sassen, 2006). Later, by functioning as the administrative centre of imperialism, the nation helped those capitalists to enhance their wealth. However, the expression of the state as a concrete and unified entity (if such a thing ever existed) is being increasingly destabilized.

Indeed, many scholars agree (to varying degrees) that the nation itself is a social construct, especially as a product of the contextualized interests of actors at particular points in time. It is as much about symbolic imaginings, communities, beliefs, and ideologies as it about material geographies, organizations, and policies. Our volume is an extension of the considerable empirical and theoretical research on how nations are socially fabricated, sometimes in very contradictory ways, and reflective of particular sectors of society that are in power at the moment. We examine related concepts of *nationhood* (understandings of what constitutes the nation), *national identity* (individual subjectivities and personal associations with the state), and *nationalism* (allegiance to the nation through heightened political zeal and often collective movements) as extensions and integral processes of nation building.

Thus, while rich data exist on call centre labour processes, technological standardization, worker experiences, and offshoring practices, little is known about how the very idea of nation is "imagined" (Anderson, 1991) as part of the work of interacting across national contexts. Towards this end we direct attention to a particular dynamic of nation making: the process of *banal nationalism*. This refers to the way that nation is constructed through the everyday practices of, in our case, global call centres. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) note, the nation "is not simply the product of macro-structural forces; it is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaged in routine activities." Nations are "produced" through "mundane practices" (Billig, 1995) such as routine talk and interactions, the choices that people make, the symbols that are celebrated, and the consumption preferences that are expressed (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 537).

Call centre workers, employers, and customers engage continually in these activities, through the training programs they design and in which they participate, the scripts they develop and use, and the ways they construct their own identities. In this sense the sector provides a useful site for the "empirically grounded investigation of nation in everyday life" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 539). Based on interviews with members of the ethnic majority in Britain, Skey (2011) documents the ways in which everyday talk about lives, work, and news stories is guided by a "national frame of reference" that is taken for granted. He argues that "it is through peoples' daily engagement with, and mutual recognition of, these everyday symbols, institutional arrangements, familiar places and social practices that having a national community ... makes sense" (p. 152, italics removed).

In short, the essays in this collection interrogate the tensions of nationhood, while exposing its significance in work settings. We examine the contexts in which nationhood is maintained, weakened, or reified and heightened. In some sites it appears as a monolithic category (especially in opposition to, and in confrontation with, categories of nationhood from other geographic locations). But at other times nationhood is destabilized, questioned, and integrated with other features of other nations or with the transnational.

Post-Colonialism in Action: Reconnections of Empire and Colony

Given the authority of neoliberalism, one might assume that global firms transcend concerns about nation in favour of profit. For instance, labour arbitrage is said to motivate global industries to move to locations in the global south where costs are cheapest. This is especially true of industries like electronics and garment manufacturing (Poster & Yolmo, 2016), where firms are known to establish themselves in countries that have the highest rates of poverty and the lowest wages (like Bangladesh and Thailand).

Yet, this is not necessarily the case with global call centres. Entrepreneurs in this industry have another agenda for their practice of international outsourcing: to find a communicative match between their own consumers and potential workforces abroad. This refers, in a direct sense, to language. Workers and consumers should speak the same language on the telephone, despite geographic distance, to ensure a baseline understanding of one another. In addition, the communicative match has a broader definition. It refers to sociocultural understandings about the nation, including points such as religion, government, economic policy, entertainment, and leisure. Workers and consumers should share parallel meanings of the wider national context within their conversations, whether formal or informal.

As a default strategy for achieving this symmetry, *global firms have been reconnecting former national pairings of empire and colony*. Contracts from the global north tend to go to locations in the global south where their representative nations have previously engaged in colonization (or where their colonized subjects have migrated): United States–Philippines, United Kingdom–India, and France–Algeria, for example. This is also the case in China, where workforces in different regions of the country are targeted by global firms depending on their prior histories of conquest and migration (Qiu, 2010): Mandarin-speaking populations in the southeastern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian are sought by firms from Taiwan; Cantonese-speaking populations in Guangzhou are sought by firms in Hong Kong; Japanese speakers in northeast Manchuria are sought by firms in Japan, owing to its historic occupation of that region.

In short, what we see in the global call centre industry is an overt system of post-colonial regroupings. Observing this trend, a new wave of scholarship is calling for the adoption of a post-colonial framework to understand transnational call centres (Boussebaa, Sinha, & Gabriel, 2014; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013). *Post-colonialism* is an epistemology

emerging from theorists in the global south (Nayar, 2010, 2015) who argue that current relations between states are highly predicated on, and often repetitive of, earlier historical periods of colonialism (meaning the conquest by Europe and other powers of many parts of Latin America, Africa, and Asia). The contemporary period (occurring after states have achieved their independence, hence *post*-colonial) is characterized by more indirect, and some argue more insidious, power relations. This includes the continued deprivation of basic necessities among peoples in the global south, and the alignment of their elite institutions with those of the United States and other global north countries. In light of this, what is so remarkable about the global call centre industry is how it reveals the enactment of post-colonialism – directly and in action.

The post-colonialism of call centres is reflected in their ongoing dynamics and day-to-day operations. Case studies have uncovered virulent rhetoric by some global north consumers, who reify the status of workers in global south countries in post-colonial terms (*uncivilized, ignorant*, etc.). State leaders are known to repeat this imagery in their political discourse; to ignite nationalism in their local campaigns, they vilify outsourcing and its associated workforces. A particularly resonant marker of post-colonialism is the language of "terrorism" and "terrorists" (Nayar, 2015). This arose after the attacks of September 11, 2001 as a commonplace slander on the telephone by customers in the United States and the United Kingdom against workers in India and Muslim-majority Pakistan (Zaidi & Poster, forthcoming). In this volume, accordingly, we explore the impact of these post-colonial regroupings on the dynamics of call centres in varying contexts around the world.

Integrating Labour and Nation

Labour and nation are rarely viewed interactively. In much of the literature the exercise of nationalism is conceptualized separately from participation in the labour market. Nationalism has been the scholarly subject of political activities, the state, civil society, and even the home. Labour has been viewed as primarily a domain of spheres such as the economy, capitalism or socialism, market forces, organizational structures, and unions. The connections between labour and nation, however, are increasingly relevant in contemporary contexts.

For instance, we see the rise of specialized industries and their workforces that serve to protect nations (such as armies and associated war industries) and police the borders of nations. The world's largest single

employers are military organizations (even ahead of Walmart); number one is the U.S. Department of Defense (at 3.2 million workers), and number two is the People's Liberation Army of China (at 2.3 million) (McCarthy, 2015). The first two decades of the 2000s have witnessed a massive proliferation of border construction, reinforcement, and maintenance. In turn, legions of workers are being recruited for migration management, detention, and deportment (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

More recently, scholars have noted the growing securitization of many spheres of social life within nations. Poster's analysis of the nascent field of cyber-security charts many new jobs involved in creating and enforcing surveillance infrastructures, from cyber-czars, to designers of online war games, and airport screeners (2012; 2016). Cyber-spies, like call centre workers, engage in national identity management, posing from the United States as militants in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan in order to detect potential threats.

These direct employees for the military should not overshadow what may be the even greater numbers of indirect employees who support the military-industrial complex. As Enloe (2014) documents in her classic book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, such labour is often highly gendered, including many types of work done by women – prostitution on military bases, nursing and health care of soldiers, and the unpaid tasks of diplomatic wives. On a broader scale, many seemingly mundane state institutions participate in the creation of ideal citizens. Employees involved in social assistance, youth training programs, or services for immigrant integration all do the daily work of making national publics.

The connections between labour and nation are similarly manifest in the transnational industries that move things across borders: people, firms, services. Nationhood becomes critical for labour in many transnational contexts, such as (1) immigration, where migrant domestic and health-care workers (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003) encounter racial discrimination from employers and publics abroad, while being received as national heroes at home; (2) multinational firms and export production, where global labour confronts and threatens the localized ideals of nationalized femininity (Lynch, 2007; Ong, 1987); and (3) global labour unionism, where national contexts may challenge but also make possible the forging of international labour movements (Evans, 2014).

The transnational service sector is an emblematic site to see the interactions of nation with race, ethnicity, and class. For instance in a study of the hotel sector in the United Kingdom, Dyer, McDowell, and Batnitzky (2010) note that the assignment of cleaning and front-of-house jobs is

closely tied to workers' gender, ethnicity, and migration histories. They find that "attributes based on supposed national characteristics construct workers as more or less eligible for different types of work" (p. 653). White migrants are perceived as "cosmopolitan" and given the front-office jobs in hotels, while migrant workers of colour (often from Africa and the Caribbean) are seen as most suitable for doing repetitive and unpleasant cleaning work. Workers from certain countries are constructed as hard-working and passive, while others are perceived as having propensities to make demands and therefore less suitable. Both customers and employers play a role in this process: customers evaluate the quality of service in the light of pre-existing stereotypes that are racialized and sexualized, and employers hire workers who will be successful in satisfying customer needs.

These studies highlight the embodied nature of service work and demonstrate the inextricable link between the provision of service and the enactment of identities, including national identities. Yet, in such cases the transnationalization of service work has been most frequently conceptualized in relation to the physical migration of labour or customers across national boundaries. Workers, many of whom are women, immigrate as permanent or temporary migrants to fill largely precarious jobs in domestic, care, nursing, cleaning, or retail sectors of wealthy nations. Travellers cross national borders and engage in tourism, shopping, and sex.

While call centre work shares many features with these other interactive service jobs, it is unique in an important way: the grounded location of both workers and customers in their "home" countries. Thus, rather than the workers migrating, it is the work that migrates. This represents what Aneesh (2006) refers to as "virtual migration." In this dynamic, workers travel to the nations of consumers through the telephone and the Internet, in other words virtually. The two parties do not meet in person, face to face, but rather voice to voice, as mediated by information communication technologies. Global industries, in turn, maintain the same inclusion of cheap labour forces, but without having to endure the messiness of employing migrant workers within their borders.

Recasting the Citizen Worker

If call centre employees are workers for the nation, they do so in a new capacity that straddles the local and the global. This requires recasting the historic concept of the *citizen worker*. We use this framing to propose

a different vision of the interplay of nation and labour in the era of transnational customer services.

A dominant paradigm in twentieth-century United States and Europe (in theory, if not in practice) was that all workers should be citizens, and all citizens should be workers (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Large sectors of the labour force worked directly for the state. National governments in many countries have been administrators of labour unions. Today some of these general principles of the citizen worker still apply: on the one hand, labour is the medium through which immigrants can achieve citizenship (for example, work visa programs that enable eligibility for residency "green cards"); and, on the other hand, disbursement of state benefits to citizens can be dependent upon particular types of labour (that is, "workfare" programs). On the whole, however, this model is clearly breaking down. The social contract between the two actors is being dissolved given that the labour market is not dependent upon "legal" workers, and alternatively not all citizens are granted rights to employment.

Our argument is that this citizen worker is being reconstituted within the transnational service industry. Workers are now labouring for the state virtually rather than in person or even from within its borders. In the process they are not only *working for* the nation, they are actively *constructing* the nation itself. This labour is different from manual, bureaucratic, or even knowledge work; it is ambassadorial and entrepreneurial. His or her role is in acting as a state representative who is capable of eliciting contracts and other tasks. It is also imaginative. Employees are creating the nation symbolically and idealistically for consumers on the telephone, through a digital world that operates in inter-country space on the channels of information and communication technology (ICT).

Our concluding chapter will describe how the citizen worker is now transforming into a *global citizen worker*. As a service employee who has direct contact with the outside world, she or he is expected to present a cosmopolitan savvy to foreign consumers and corporate clients. We will also note the drawbacks that go hand in hand with this role. While some workers experience benefits in status from being valued as global citizens, others may experience a distantiation from state entitlements as a repercussion of neoliberal policies. Still others experience a number of stigmatizations in the call centre, related to territoriality, criminality, and deportation, as Luis Pedro Meoño Artiga will show in chapter 6.

Border Work

At the heart of nation building in call centres (as elsewhere) is the creation of state borders. Conventional definitions of the *border* suggest a line drawn on a map to demarcate discrete sovereign territories or walls between nations. Scholars note that borders increasingly have functions that are flexible and dynamic (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). They have dual tendencies of dividing and connecting states; capacities of hierarchizing and stratifying; and "devices of inclusion that select and filter people" as well as techniques of exclusion (p. 7). In turn, nations are concerned with these sites for border reinforcement and border crossing.

As enactors of banal nationalism, workers in global call centres participate in these border activities. However, this is not the border work described above in terms of physical surveillance and obstructions of mobile bodies. Instead, the border work of call centres occurs for and through the communicative and service economies. It is a continually shifting act to promote the interests of many sets of actors surrounding global call centres, including their overseas clients and customers, national officials, and on-site managers.

This means that it has some unusual patterns, contexts, sources, and dynamics. The border work of global call centres is done as follows:

(a) *Linguistically*. Rather than being enforced through material items like paperwork, bureaucracies, checkpoints, militaries, and gunpoints, the border is constructed mentally. It takes the form of intangible sounds, words, and intonations. It is done over the telephone, via ICTs, and through the interaction itself.
(b) *By everyday people*. Rather than being carried out by official representatives of the state, it is done by workers and consumers. These are regular people who are often thought of as the users, end points, or "objects" of border control. In quite a reversal, the work of the virtual migrant is not to pass through the border but to enact, develop, imagine, articulate, sustain, and then recreate it. Their jobs have little to do directly with state or nation (although national policies on foreign direct investments, labour laws, and/or migration may deeply affect their work). Unlike the examples above, these are not workers in industries related to borders, militaries, armaments, security, etc.; they are white-collar office workers in industries of consumer sales, credit, telecommunications, etc.

(c) *By actors in other countries* (often not the state of which they are a citizen). Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) note that "border struggles ... are played out in many contexts, often far away from geographic borderlands" (p. 280). In the case of call centres this is in fact done by global south actors in former colonies, who are making the nation for corporate actors in imperial centres or metropoles.

Yet, the link between transnational capital and border work has been longstanding. One might see the border work of call centres as a twenty-first century version of the twentieth-century maquiladora. Maquiladoras are multinational factories that operate on the border between the United States and Mexico. Made possible by free trade agreements of the 1970s and 1980s, they literally have straddled the border in some cases: conveyer belts move parts manufactured by cheap workers in Mexico to higher-costing assemblers in the United States. In the current era, nations no longer need such elaborate architectures or the side-by-side positioning of other nations for this global coordination to operate. Workers and customers across faraway nations are in contact with one another virtually. As a result the boundaries between nations are enacted on a continuous basis as customers and workers cross national borders with every call.

Throughout this volume we will document what Mezzadra and Nielson describe as "border as method" – that is, the border as a method for capital, selectively opening and closing, filtering and excluding different kinds of workers, and stretching wide or narrowing around economic corridors and zones. In our case the border is a method for everyday citizen workers in call centres. These are employees who (in the interests of call centre stakeholders) redefine the meaning of the nation on a regular basis, highlight some features of the nation over others, recast their own nationality, move the lines on the map to appeal to consumers, and cross the border(s) daily in their virtual labour.

Multiplicities and Hybridities of Nationhood

The border work of call centres complicates our understanding of nation even further. As a crossroads between many countries through virtual infrastructures, the labour of nation making involves a number of multiplicities and hybridities.

To start with, the labour of the new citizen worker is multiplicative. Workers are creating not only one nation but *many nations at the same time*.

For the client firm and its consumers, they use linguistic skills to create nations in the global north. For the outsourced firm and local state officials, they create the nation where the call centre is located in the global south. Being a labourer on the virtual border is to do the work of both sides simultaneously.

Thus, in call centres borders are performed and contested in the light of multiple nationalistic pressures. This is compounded by the fact that call centres are increasingly taking contracts from more than one country at a time, whether in the same core language or in many linguistic groupings. In turn, workers are often asked to inhabit and display these multiple, discrete nationalities and then enact corresponding borders. This is an application of what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) refer to as the "heterogeneity" of borders and their labours in the contemporary era.

In addition, call centres are very representative of hybrid identities. As Bhabha (1994) describes, hybridity is a common experience of peoples in post-colonial societies as they negotiate identities from both their colonizers and anti-colonial movements. Furthermore, many theorists have noted that the nation itself is a hybrid construct, constantly emerging and re-emerging from many sources at once.

Along these lines there are many hybridities of call centre labour. The work often requires dualized skills and involves dualized tasks. Specific sets of linguistic resources are needed for the labour of alternating between nations. Cases from El Salvador and the U.S.-Mexican border in this volume illustrate the common use of code switching, in terms of flipping back and forth from Spanish to English. Furthermore, the inherent multiplicity of global call centres leads employers to search for hybrid people. In their recruiting, many call centres target specialized communities of personnel who have pre-existing dual identity resources of the colony and the metropole. In fact, this is how many U.S. researchers have gained access to Indian call centres as a site of study; employers are eager to hire foreign nationals residing in the United States who are familiar with India but can teach accent and culture to local populations in India. (However, this can backfire: see Aneesh, 2015, for a humorous account of an Indian-born researcher living in the United States who was told by the call centre that his accent was "too American.") Some global call centres (in countries like Guatemala and El Salvador) make it their *primary* aim to hire workers with lived experience in the countries they are servicing. Consequently their workforces are comprised largely of migrants. In this sense, reconnecting diasporic and former nationals to their homeland is a tactical

recruitment strategy. These employers then benefit from the ongoing personal ties that workers have to their families abroad, and the continual investments and enhancements of their social capital in hybrid national identities.

Fundamentally, the hybrid space of the call centre can have detrimental effects on workers. To be on the borderland, as Anzaldúa (1999) illuminates so brilliantly, is to be nowhere and everywhere. For the Chicanas and Chicanos in her example, the borderland is neither completely Mexico nor the United States. Its inhabitants learn to become a part of both worlds while not being accepted fully by either. In this volume we examine the fallout (and tensions) of border making and crossing on everyday people. Many workers (from countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Morocco, as this volume will show) are migrants and former victims of physical borders, yet they are asked to enforce those same state borders within cross-national telephone conversations. Call centres demonstrate the contradictions of virtual space within the transnational service industry.

Aims, Questions, Themes

The overall aim of this collection is to provide an interdisciplinary perspective on the issue of nationhood and transnational customer service from the fields of sociology, education, labour, geography, anthropology, linguistics, humanities, business, management, and organizational behaviour. We embrace multiple methodologies: qualitative and quantitative, interpretive and content analysis, surveys, case studies, and ethnography. The book brings together leading scholars who are doing ethnographic work on offshored transnational service work in many parts of the world but especially in the global south, particularly Mauritius, Morocco, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, Guyana, and the U.S.-Mexico border.

Borders in Service explores the many ways that workers engaged in cross-national service exchanges create imaginaries of nations, both their own and those in which their customers are based. The following overarching questions are addressed: How are the ideas of nation, nationhood, and nationalism manifested in cross-national service exchanges? How are nationhood and the national constituted? What engages and activates the nation as a narrative and a practice? When is nationalism emphasized, and when is it suppressed? How are citizens and outsiders constructed during service encounters? How do histories and

geographies have an impact on the enactment of various cross-national service interactions? How do the relationships between gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation affect service encounters? Critically, how does the national intersect with the transnational in rhetoric, imageries, and practices? And how are the boundaries of national belonging, citizenship, and value formed, enacted, and contested?

The chapters examine a wide range of dynamics within global call centres and how they reflect national imperatives. They explore nationhood and national identity in the various material and symbolic elements of these settings. Contributors, for instance, study the interactional and linguistic features of call centres: language, speech, and accent issues; conversational dynamics between workers and consumers; and expressions of consumer sentiment. They look at the informal aspects of work culture and space, like the physical space, including arrangements, architecture, decor, and the corporality of workers, including their bodies, comportment, and dress. They examine the formal aspects of the labour process: training processes and content; organizational, human resource, and labour policies; workplace stratification systems; and unionization and resistance. Finally, they consider the socio-economic aspects of the broader context and communities outside the call centre: the intersections of labour with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality; the representations of call centres in the media (news, television, film, Internet); and discussions of call centres within state policies, religious bodies, educational institutions, community associations, and civil society.

We argue that the significance of this exercise is initially one of scope. Our fundamental goal is to show the geographic dispersion of the call centre industry beyond India. We undertake one of the first comparative examinations of call centres in the dawn of this transnational industry that pays special homage to the meaning and significance of national difference. In an interdisciplinary field that tends to emphasize similarities we illuminate the profound variations of call centre labour patterns arising from the socio-political context. The authors in this volume provide rich ethnographic detail of particular geographies, affirming that Central American, South American, African, and Asian landscapes make highly divergent experiences for call centres. Critically, when most call centre research collapses regions of the world, or remains focused on the global north, our authors emphasize the urgency for research on the global south, as well as specific points within it. We also show how the industry itself is re-centring, further attenuating from the global north

and shifting towards the global south. It is here that the transnational call centre industry is increasingly being networked and organized, and that authority relations are re-situating.

Theoretically, this volume challenges a number of premises and unquestioned assumptions of dynamics in the call centre industry. We seek to dispel a variety of myths about the outsourcing of call centres (as well as many other types of transnational businesses): (1) that multinational firms are placeless and/or will dissolve national boundaries; (2) that technology will override discrepancies of place and geography; (3) that the skills used in call centres are universally transferable, as theories such as human capital would predict; and (4) that call centre workforces are more or less monolithic without any significant internal differentiations or stratifications, local or otherwise.

In contrast, we present many counter-trends and alternative readings of the way the global call centre industry is advancing, by placing nation and nationhood at its core. Throughout the chapters this volume emphasizes four themes: (1) that *national identity management* and authenticity work are spreading around the globe, rather than receding or remaining specific to the case of India; (2) that nationhood is often inextricably tied to the way call centres define themselves through a process of *national branding*, which is central to their marketing and promotion strategies for attracting foreign clients and their migrant workforces abroad (that is, as a homecoming); (3) that the *global citizen* is emerging as the model worker for international-facing industries, as one who interacts with foreign personnel and presents a cosmopolitan image while still embodying national symbols and practices in other contexts; and (4) that *communication hierarchies* are often the underlying foundation for global call centre labour processes, as they differentiate the workforce along transnational lines and linguistic capacities.

Outline of the Book

The chapters are organized thematically in three sections. Before considering how nationalism affects the operations of call centres and their workers, we reflect on how call centres play a role in creating the image of the nation. Part I looks at the national brands that are generated by state governments in El Salvador, Guyana, and Mauritius through policies concerning the workforces of transnational call centres.

In chapter 2, Cecilia Rivas explores the construction of the brand "El Salvador Works," which situates call centre employees as hyper-mobile,

global workers whose skills are ripe for export and circulation within the global economy. Branding by the state investment agency involves the naming of Salvadorans as hard workers who are fluent in English as well as "neutral Spanish." Yet, as her ethnography reveals, "the ideal, bilingual Salvadoran call centre agent does not exist naturally as an immediately available workforce." Rather, English fluency is associated with diasporic Salvadorans who are "returnees," either because they have been deported from the United States as a result of criminal convictions or because they are of Salvadoran heritage. In an attempt to dislodge the association of ideal call centre workers with the supposed criminality of bilingual deportees, the "El Salvador Works" brand instead utilizes a "Meet Your Roots" campaign in which diasporic Salvadorans are encouraged to visit and discover their "roots" while working in a call centre. In this way the national branding exercise involves policies, organizational practices, and programs through which ideal call centre workers are actually created. Nation branding involves the construction of not only labour but also geographies.

As chapter 3 on Guyana shows, the call centre sector facilitates nation branding not only in terms of the promotion of the nation as an ideal location for foreign direct investment but also in terms of the marketing of call centre jobs as ideal for local, middle-class, cosmopolitan citizens. As Trotz, Mirchandani, and Khan's call centre interviews reveal, employees' experiences of their work (which include low pay, routinized jobs, harsh penalties, and little protection from labour law violations) disrupt these state discourses. Neoliberal state policies and the proliferation of labour market precarity go hand in hand. The chapter explores three forms of sovereignty that are continually being enacted and expressed within Guyanese call centres – state sovereignty, customer sovereignty, and the sovereignty of global capital. Within nation-branding discourses, cheap labour is constructed as a national advantage through which foreign investors can be encouraged to set up call centres in Guyana. Yet multinational investors demand educated, cosmopolitan workers, who are forced to become the promised cheap labour, because of limited employment alternatives.

In similar ways, as Benner and Rossi show in chapter 4, the branding of Mauritius involves national constructions that convey "multiple incarnations of itself to assert connections to, and facilitate relations with, other places within a competitive geography." Although physically located close to South Africa and India, and a member of the African Union, the country is branded as an ideal location for call centre work

given its diverse population that is deeply embedded within diasporic networks, and its location off the coast of Australia. The chapters in this section reveal that branding plays a key role in the context of global competition for call centre contracts. The call centre sector is deeply shaped by the exercise of state-oriented nationhood.

After considering the way in which national call centre workforces are advertised to the world, part II explores more closely the development of nationally appropriate workers. It considers how nation states and call centre industry leaders are heavily invested in the social reputations of these workforces. In many instances they dictate the parameters of how those employees should behave, or how the public should view them. Some of these imageries are uplifting, like the elevation of the call centre worker as a "national hero" in the Philippines. Others are deflating, like the shameful "gang members" in Guatemala. The experience of such contradictory narratives for employees is considered in this section.

In chapter 5, Salonga analyses two commercials by Convergys, a prominent transnational call centre in the Philippines, and traces how call centre workers are constructed as national saviours, helping both their families and the nation through their engagement in demeaning and arduous work. Such hero nationalism is based, however, on racist and culturalist constructions of Filipinos as "naturally caring and nurturing" and having a "sweet, caring" communicative tone that facilitates their success as call centre workers. Chapter 6 explores the case of Guatemala. Given that young, middle-class, bilingual (English and Spanish) students populate call centres, the presence of U.S. deportees (called "homies") who possess English-speaking skills that are perfectly suited to the call centre industry results in a situation of "exclusionary nationalism." Such nationalism deepens ethnic identities, rather than unifying citizens under the banner of a common nation. The call centre sector becomes a site for creating a "nation within the nation"; while working alongside one another, employees of one group are constructed as outsiders (potential gang members and drug addicts), while the others are representatives of the nation. As Meoño Artiga argues, call centres are "real and imaginary urban spaces" within which workers compete to be the "new Guatemalans – flexible, cosmopolitan and consumerist."

Part III reflects on the production of nation within the labour process itself by workers for their employers. Here we see how workers engage in performances of nation and border crossing while they are on the telephone with their customers. In the process, we see that language

is one of the key markers of nationalism within global call centres; wording, accent, and voice become pivotal dimensions for defining the nation when a firm operates across state lines. These chapters delve into the complex processes by which multiple languages are deployed in call centres, particularly when those organizations lie on or close to political boundaries (like the United States–Mexico case in chapter 8) and when they serve many linguistic consumer populations at once (like the Moroccan case in chapter 7).

In chapter 7, Elmoudden traces the ways in which call centre workers discursively cross national spaces for their work, and one worker in Morocco notes, "Every time I leave the centre, I feel as if someone is taking my passport away from me and I will have to re-enter Morocco." Such honorary immigrants hold neither immigration rights nor the security of citizenship. Workers engage in discursive crossings through language in the context of multilingual transnational call centres, where agents speak mostly French but also Spanish, English, and German in order to serve clients in Europe. In chapter 8 the discussion focuses on the discontinuities between the construction and experiences of work that necessitate the intricacies and tensions of performing hybrid national identities – that is, one for the local community and another for the customers on the telephone. Heyman and Alarcón note that nationality in global call centres is enacted as a "border performance." In other words, workers are required to engage in deliberate routines to display and exhibit nationalism properly, capitalizing on their "Spanish heritage," which forms the basis of their appropriateness for jobs. Serving Spanish- and English-speaking clients, the bilingualism is seen to arise out of the workers' location in El Paso, rather than being conceptualized as an organizationally valuable skill.

The conclusion in chapter 9 reviews the overall argument on the expression of banal nationalism in global call centres, and how it relates to structural patterns of geographic decentering in the global service economy. It delineates the four features of nation and nationhood that appear throughout the volume: expansions of national identity management; the increasing role of nation branding; the making of global citizen workers; and the resilience of communicative hierarchies along national markers. It also reviews the tensions that these dynamics create for workers (and employers), and the kinds of resistance that appear.

Collectively the essays show that nationhood is exercised within the call centre sector much more deeply, and in much more varied ways, than previous studies have considered (especially regarding the single

focus on India). Despite international standards, standardized labour processes, and common technologies within transnational call centres around the world, the actual experience and construction of work differ significantly. Nation, national identity, and nationalism are critical elements of the social construction of global call centres. We will show that borders in service are increasingly relevant as states assert their agendas through the call centre industry and, alternatively, as executives benefit from instilling a sense of nationhood and nationality in their workers.

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PART ONE

Call Centres as Building Blocks for Narratives of the Nation State