

BOOK AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Review Essay: Outsourcing Service and Affective Labor

***Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy.* Kiran Mirchandani. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.**

Carla Freeman, Emory University
cfree01@emory.edu

Few issues have catalyzed public debates about globalization and the nature of labor with greater vitriol in the past decade than that of white collar “outsourcing.” Although the North American Free Trade Agreement drew political attention to the outsourcing of manufacturing work from the United States to Mexico, a different kind of outrage accompanied the growth of back-office outsourcing to India in more recent years. Indeed, the outsourcing of call centers in particular rankled the American public and has unleashed a furious response in large part, I think, because of its middle-class associations. The call centers have become a symbol of labor’s precariousness and of globalization at large. They symbolize the growth of a newly booming and consuming “non-Western middle class” in a country formerly framed as “third world” and poor and growing anxieties surrounding the sanctity of the white-collar middle class as the rightful core of American society.

Kiran Mirchandani’s *Phone Clones* takes up this set of issues from the vantage of the workers in Indian call centers. She examines the recruitment, accent reduction, training, and day-to-day/night work experiences of the agents involved in delivering customer service voice-to-voice, in real time, across the world. What I appreciate most about *Phone Clones* as a commentary on this contemporary phenomenon is its refusal to be pigeonholed by a singular argument. Mirchandani holds in balance not just the complexities involved in these labor arrangements but also some of the contradictions they embody – about customers, idealized understandings of “service,” and the demands for certain kinds of “authenticity” by both customer and agent.

Before I turn in some detail to these specific contributions of Mirchandani’s book, I want first to briefly situate this work amid a broader field of global labor studies to trace some of the threads I see in its development and some of the provocative new

directions I think it charts. What we referred to 25 years ago as the “NEW International Division of Labor” and the anthropology of “globalization” is now not so new. Then, we saw a radical remapping of the globe, such that former colonial territories that had been the sites of extraction (of raw materials and primary agricultural crops) became sites of low cost *production* for the rest of the world’s consumption. When María Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (1983) and Aihwa Ong (1987) wrote their respective works on women workers in newly fashioned garments and electronics factories in Mexico and Malaysia, they began a new tradition of ethnographic scholarship. In my view, two things were especially radical about this work. (1) It saw as its focus the multileveled analysis of local communities, national political economies, and the forces of global capitalism. In other words, the particular histories, colonial underpinnings, nationalist political regimes, and cultural fabric of the northern Mexican border and of Malaysia could not be disentangled from the enterprise of a seemingly faceless, culture-less, capitalist discipline and drive toward accumulation. (2) Gender and, in particular, tensions between an apparently “generic” prescription for “docile, dexterous, feminine workers” and the local norms of gender ideology and gendered divisions of labor came to represent the heart of these dramatic new labor regimes.

At the time those texts were released, in the 1980s, a great deal of political fervor in North America was focused on the loss of manufacturing industries to Mexico and Asia. In fact, this was precisely the debate that led to my own interest in studying transnational labor. In 1988, George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis were battling it out for the American presidency, and I recall vividly the debates about job losses as a result of these movements. We were assured by both politicians that the American economy was now an *information society*, a *knowledge-based economy*, a *white collar* society and that these information-based jobs that lay at the crux of our rightfully middle-class society would replace jobs lost at the lower manufacturing end of the hierarchy that were moving overseas. At precisely that time, I was working as a temporary secretary – a “temp” in typing pools of banks and law firms, typically in rooms lit with fluorescent lights, with about 30 typists entering

data, typing law briefs as fast as we could. Most of my fellow typists were women similarly attracted to the decent hourly wage and flexibility to pursue their studies, manage the care of young children, elderly relatives, or their operatic career (a surprising number seemed to come from the Philadelphia opera company, because, I suppose, they performed at night and made extra money by day).

At just that time, I attended my first meeting of the American Anthropological Association – in Phoenix – and aboard the flight, I happened upon a full-page ad in the airline magazine. Aimed at businessmen, clearly, it boldly stated something to this effect: Do you face unreasonable back-office costs that are too high for you to remain competitive in today's economy? Have your Data Entry in done the Caribbean! What shocked me about this ad was that it used the very rationales and incentives as were being propagated in support of manufacturing outsourcing – tax holidays, sophisticated infrastructure and utilities, and a limitless supply of excellent workers – in light of the growing complaint, on the other side, about American workers who had “priced themselves out of the market” or simply were not willing to do these low-level jobs. However, this time, there were some additions: English fluency, 99 percent literacy rate, and a superb education system to back up the needs of these new service workers, preparations which were *supposed to be the privileged preserve of the so-called post-industrial West*. When vocal spokesmen like Lou Dobbs on CNN entered the debate in the early 2000s, it was precisely this “threat to the American middle class” that lay at the heart of the anti-outsourcing campaign, the notion that *these kinds of services belong to “us” and represent the heart of American culture*.

That was in the late 1980s, and we are, more than two decades later, well aware of the growing outsourcing of not just rudimentary data-entry services but also much more sophisticated work – skilled work, work that many had assumed required local familiarity, and even face-to-face communication. What is the nature of these service encounters and the kinds of relationships they suggest? What kinds of “selves” and “others” are imagined and formed through these transnational encounters, and what shape does labor take in making these exchanges possible? By taking a long view of industrial and service outsourcing, we see important patterns not just in the means by which corporations devise intricate disciplinary tactics, circumvent union intervention (even in contexts where trade unionism and collective bargaining are well entrenched), and successfully extract labor from sites far afield of their corporate headquarters. In these service encounters, labor itself takes on subtle dimensions that are only now being fully grasped.

Kiran Mirchandani's *Phone Clones* suggests that in these service encounters across the transnational divides between India and a number of Western countries, expectations by foreign corporations, by the service providers, and by their Western customers include not just the *delivery of information* that will solve specific problems but also the spoken performance of certain kinds of *emotions and sensibilities*: deference, servility, and care. At the very same time, the capacity for “cloning” or mimicking the Western customer and his privileged national culture suggests a contradictory set of expectations, the demand for familiarity, and shared reference points. Amid the contradictions are sets of national cultural stereotypes upon which these labor exchanges hinge: the servile, submissive Indian and the aggressive/violent Westerner; the controlled and well-educated Indian; and the unrestrained Westerner in need of therapy.

Mirchandani finds that in the training manuals and courses as well as in the narratives of call-center workers, these characteristics are also gendered, regardless of whether the providers and customers are male or female: the *feminine* servile and caring Indian, the *masculine* aggressive/violent Westerner. As such, the *labor* entailed for the customer-service providing Indian is not simply to deliver the requisite information, technical intervention, or solution to the customer's problem but to do so in a way that uncomplainingly *absorbs* and *manages* what is construed as legitimate – or at least unavoidable – abuse delivered verbally by the voice at the end of the line. The customer-service provider is expected (and trained) to handle the rude antics, and occasional rage, of what they – and the flight attendants in Hochschild's classic (1983) study – called the “irates.” It seems important that we untangle the *sources* of this normalized customer rage. For face-to-face service workers – airline flight attendants or Canadian hotel workers in Paul Watt's (2007) study – the immediate source of rage is presented as a delayed flight, a room without a view, a lost reservation, for example. For the Indian Phone Clones, on the other hand, while customers' anger might stem from malfunctioning technology or a failed Internet connection, what gets equally or sometimes primarily vented is unabashed rage at the agent *personally*. The privacy of the phone line, coupled with the nationalist political rhetoric that espouses protectionism over what are presented as *our jobs*, permits, and might even promote, an unleashing of racist diatribes about Indians stealing what is understood to be an “American” or “Australian” or “British” birthright: middle-class white collar jobs and livelihoods. As one agent put it, “Irate customers are the most difficult . . . because they'll start with the four letter words and they'll end up with a four letter word and it's your job to make them cool” (106).

What fascinates me about the kinds of “authenticity work” undertaken by the customer service operators – and the horrible demand that they absorb and manage customers’ nationalist racism while containing their own feelings of anger – is that this labor regime upholds at least two complex but easily hidden assumptions: first, that *affective* labor is the explicit skill set that must be learned and enacted in this niche of the service economy; and second, by building into the job description the requirement that performing good customer service entails “anger management” these companies *overtly legitimate this verbal violence*. C. Wright Mills long ago interpreted the rise of the “personality” market as a dramatic shift in which elements of character or personality are mobilized and commodified in capitalist exchanges; “personality” as such increasingly becomes the site of self-alienation. What we are witnessing in the expanding demands for affective labor has broadened the reach of what Mills might have been able to imagine. Many of the rudimentary ingredients he described extremely well:

The salesgirl cannot form her character by promotional calculations and self-management, like the classic heroes of liberalism or the new entrepreneurs. The one area of her occupational life in which she might be “free to act,” the area of her own personality, must now also be managed, must become the alert yet obsequious instrument by which goods are distributed. In the normal course of her work, because her personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose, the salesgirl becomes self-alienated. . . . The personality market is subject to the laws of supply and demand: when a “seller’s market” exists and labor is hard to buy, the well-earned aggressions of the salespeople come out and jeopardize the good will of the buying public. When there is a “buyer’s market” and jobs are hard to get, the salespeople must again practice politeness. Thus, as in an older epoch of capitalism, the laws of supply and demand continue to regulate the intimate life-fate of the individual and the kind of personality he may develop and display. (Mills 1951:184)

Amid these service exchanges and the shifts Mirchandani describes, from a Fordist model of customer service regimentation with carefully scripted operators to a neoliberal demand that operators adopt a more “authentic” and entrepreneurial/improvisational individualism in their interactions, however, it is notable that the degrees of punitive monitoring and ambiguous job assessment increase under neoliberalism. In other words, while operators and customers both may chafe under the regimented discipline of the script, the invitation to become more

inventive and entrepreneurial also brings added surveillance and further stress to the labor entailed. As Mirchandani says,

This new business imperative requires the provision of service that does not come across as scripted, fake, and insincere. By *being themselves*, workers can convince customers that they know and care about their real needs. However, when service providers and customers occupy different spatial, cultural, historical, and material landscapes, *workers are not asked to be themselves but rather to emulate an ideal as imagined by their employers and customers*. (4, emphasis added)

This service-providing self is what Mirchandani means by the mandate to become “authentic clones” – that they simultaneously enact sameness and difference, concepts that are all the while under construction.

In these affect-laden service encounters, it appears that both the consumer and the producer hold expectations and desires about themselves and each other that are integral to the labor exchange. These dimensions of the burgeoning transnational service sector are, in my view, what propels the globalization of labor into whole new vistas in ways that demand different and more sophisticated analyses. The intersubjective space in which “authenticity” is unequally and differently desired and contested by both producer and consumer constitutes an especially powerful site of extraction/exchange. The real-time voice contact between these two agents – albeit long-distance and across many time zones – nonetheless brings the global labor relation and the affective residues it produces into closer and more heightened proximity.

On one hand, there are echoes here of the global factory, and the revelation that flexible production and consumption relations are not as invisible as they once were. The globalization literature is full of evocative examples of such imaginings. In the powerful documentary *China Blue*, about a blue jeans factory in southern China, a young woman named Jasmine wonders about the “fat Americans” who will fill the extra-large jeans whose seams and pocket threads she trims for hours each day. She decides surreptitiously to write to one such anonymous consumer, tucking her hand-written note deep in a pocket before her stack gets packed and loaded for travel. She wants to personalize this otherwise alienated labor process by telling a bit about her own life and wondering about his or hers in California – or wherever these large jeans are bound. In Barbados, the medical insurance claims adjudicators I studied in the 1990s were counseled to bring empathy and feeling as well as respectful discretion to the forms they process; indeed, they often

discussed the ailments and diagnoses they coded and entered in hushed tones with coworkers and friends. They imagined the places and the names of people whose doctors' visits and medical issues they spent their days either approving or denying based upon the coding process they followed. Despite the enormous distances that separated them from their customers, they felt the urgency of a more-or-less shared time, not only because their employer demanded their speedy operation of the computer processing, but also in order that these patients would have their medical and financial needs met.

For the Indian call-center operators studied by Kiran Mirchandani, despite their far-flung location and the dramatic inversion of night/day that would ordinarily separate the rhythms of their lives from their customers, their contact is, of course, brought into much more immediate and shared relief. However, far beyond the relation of the blue jeans producer with its eventual wearer, these exchanges are created both in the abstract and through real-time encounters that are layered with emotions – resentment, anger, contempt, fear, compassion, and sympathy. Many ethnographic works about the globalization of labor highlight the process by which a certain *idealized* profile of a worker becomes critical to these restructurings. In the early stages of the transnational textile, apparel, and electronics industries that idealized profile was remarkably uniform: corporations recruited in staggering numbers young, single, childless women with at least a secondary education and turned them into efficient “armies” of transnational producers. The rationales for recruiting this idealized worker were *also* remarkably consistent and hinged upon a number of assumed bodily and temperamental qualities or essences that were typically presented as central to these forms of repetitive, detail-oriented labor: patience, docility, nimble-fingered dexterity, etc. In turn, this essentialized formula for the global factory worker also served to legitimize the gendered pattern in which feminized labor in the global South is also lower paid labor – a rationale that hinged upon equally spurious assumptions of a universal male breadwinner and women's secondary status as wage earners. This idealized profile has been so ubiquitous and so convergent with stereotypical beliefs about gender and the “third world” that the active process by which these idealized qualities are not so much *found* within available “reservoirs” but actively *created, coerced, and extracted* has long been hidden.

This may, by now, be an obvious point, but I find in teaching many now-classic texts and films on the globalization of labor that the degree of consensus surrounding such an “idealized worker” – as expressed by industry representatives, NGO and government officials, and even workers themselves – leaves

students to simply accept at face value the explanatory logic that Malaysian women or Filipina women or Mexican women have been incorporated into these lines of work because their so-called docility, youth, and nimble-fingeredness make them *naturally* predisposed toward these sorts of jobs. The slippery ends to which such naturalized gender profiling is put are nonetheless well documented. Women assembly-line workers and immigrant sweat shop workers are, to a large degree by virtue of their vulnerability in the labor market, *made to be* docile and submissive if they are to keep their jobs assembling sneakers for Nike, processing insurance claims for Data Air, or hand-finishing garments for designer labels in New York. The disciplining forces of capital actively coerce and extract these qualities as integral to the labor power that produces the goods.

This brings us, then, to interrogate the profiling of the Indian customer service agents, on one hand, as familiar “phone clones” and at the same time as “Other” “non-Western” producers who are cast as naturally docile deliverers of patient, accommodating service. *Servility*, in other words, is one of the demands of their jobs that gets mapped onto their (gendered) national, ethnic, and cultural identities. The capacity to calmly manage others' anger is implicitly *essentialized* in certain ethnic/national and feminine ways. Mirchandani illustrates this, on one hand, by suggesting that if the agent does not perform the job properly, company managers, supervisors, and service agents themselves suggest that he or she must learn to expect and then “deal with” the customer's *deserved* ire. On the other hand, the very capacity to perform this emotional management is itself presented as an important and valuable *skill* that is taught and reinforced during the company training program. As she says, “the violence is normalized by managers and trainers as being a part of the customer service agents' jobs and related to deficiencies in workers' skills” (108). In this sense, anger management has two dimensions to it: the ability to absorb and handle a customer's rage as an acknowledged job requirement that entails specific coaching and as a natural inclination of Indians whose culture imbues them with a patient, caring, servile temperament. The eruption of a customer's verbal attack, then, is treated as a natural repercussion of poor job performance or a lack of temperamental suitability, much like having one's wages docked for lateness or absence. Either way, docile and feminized non-Western others become the repository for Western masculine aggression that is implicitly sanctioned. At the same time, and in a dramatic inverse of this essentialized Indianness, the service operators are actively made into “clones” of their customers. They are coaxed and disciplined to “sound” familiar, through extensive accent reduction

work and requirements that they not only learn cultural reference points, modes of expression, and linguistic styles but also – especially in the early period of call-center expansion – fabricate “selves” from scratch with Western names, personae, lifestyles, and tastes, for the purpose of putting customers most at ease.

Were we to be relieved by the apparent shift from a highly Taylorized script to a more self-defined entrepreneurial approach to customer service, Mirchandani makes plain that these labor expectations entail even more scrupulous monitoring and are subject to even greater managerial rebuke. Just as the prepared script and the demand that customer service agents hide their geography and true identities under the masks of fabricated Western names and accents gave way to expectations that agents divulge their Indian nationality and real names, so too have the demographics of the workers in this industry begun to change. In contrast to much of the popular news reporting about the call centers, the outsourcing of customer service work to India has not, in fact, privileged the familiar global factory worker ideal (young single women). Indeed, even the normative or idealized profile of high caste, convent educated, and “well-spoken” middle-class Indians in the industry shares the stage in Mirchandani’s account with others less privileged and less readily imagined in the media hype. One wonders about these differences, whether they spark moments of fissure and resistant challenges to the labor discipline at hand. There are fascinating hints of reversal and contestation in the story Mirchandani tells, and they appear to unfold along gender and class lines (and perhaps along the lines of caste, though she does not say). Although the global labor narrative thus far has mapped the world such that vulnerable and poor workers produce the goods and services for better-educated and more privileged consumers, here in the Indian call centers workers themselves are keen to articulate a different relationship. They not only are intent to pronounce their own agency as thoughtful, (better) educated, and self-aware service providers who are in control of their own emotions; with the encouragement of their corporate managers, they also in turn generate essentialized portraits of their foreign customers as “hyper-aggressive,” ignorant, and emotionally out of control.

Indeed, affective labor represents the linchpin of this transnational service industry, both in the production of an immaterial “good” in the form of service and as the medium through which labor also expresses what resistance and agency can be mustered. There are not (as far as the reader knows) strikes or other physical demonstrations of dissent but rather the voicing of emotional discontent, outrage, anger, and resentment. The organization and practices of the globalized customer service sector suggest a field awash in affects. In

the Indian call centers Mirchandani has studied, as under systems of neoliberalism at large, the expanding affective economy increasingly looks upon emotional labor *as a particular set of skills to be taught and valued*. However, as my own recent fieldwork signals, an expanding emotional economy transcends the workplace and is heightened in all aspects of people’s lives, in “public” market-oriented exchanges and in “private.” I am finding among Barbadian middle-class entrepreneurs a growing set of desires for emotional connection and expressiveness that is emerging across multiple fields, from formal service-sector encounters and new therapeutic relationships to intimate “partnerships” and parental or other kin-based relations. Where “support” has long been understood in material terms (e.g., food and basic provisions, school fees, gifts, a house), more and more emphasis is being placed upon *emotional* connection as integral to parental, kin-based, and intimate relationships. A new discourse of feeling, formerly, as one of my informants noted, the ambivalent “preserve of the priest or the bottle,” draws upon, and converges with the “emotional capitalism” (Illouz 2007) of today’s entrepreneurial culture at large. For those engaged in new businesses involving personalized caring service (whether in wine bars, spas and salons, or other more rugged but equally attentive engagement with clients), the delivery of caring sensitive affects as part of the service exchange mirrors, siphons, and also cultivates the simultaneous desires for intimate connection in private life (Freeman forthcoming).

These affective dimensions of labor/life are, I think, among the most important aspects of contemporary labor regimes such as this one and for life under neoliberalism more broadly. They beg for close ethnography and acute analytical focus. Mirchandani documents that these service agents (men as well as women) are taught to emulate two roles during training programs to successfully provide customer service – mothering and servitude. Mothering “involves listening carefully to customer needs and providing information in ways that boost customer self-confidence” (105). Sadly, in several cases she describes, when connections with genuine empathy are forged between customer service workers and their overseas customers, and time is taken to “really listen” to them as human beings, the reward structure valorizes efficiency and outcome above the labor-intensive “authenticity work” of connecting (114–115).

Mirchandani says gender can be supple and slippery, capable of hiding behind other social markers and segregating strategies such as race and nation, where feminization, “mothering,” and the gender of subservience are simultaneously framed and reinforced under the rubric of neocolonialism. I am troubled here, however, by Mirchandani’s proposal of “gender’s

eclipse” and wonder whether in its entanglement with cultural and racist national stereotypes and supposed “essences,” gender and femininity in particular are not instead being reworked, reproduced, and potentially revalued (Mirchandani 2005). It strikes me that at just the moment that these modes of affective labor are being increasingly called for in the capitalist market, promoted explicitly as *skills* and not simply assumed (and unremunerated) natural essences, and as more and more men are performing these traditionally feminine skills, social critics are inclined to argue against the relevance of gender. Surely, if affective labor has long been invisible to capitalist calculations of value by virtue of its apparently “natural” feminine qualities and association with the unwaged reproductive arena, we ought to examine today’s heightened capitalist value associated with these and other forms of immaterial labor and the gendered implications this holds (Lazzarato 1996; Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2004; Weeks 2007). We might not just challenge the invisibility of feminine labor but recast it as something other than de-valued, regardless of a worker’s sex, ethnicity, race, or class. *Phone Clones* offers critical ethnographic material with which to open up debates and questions that all students and scholars of labor will find important and engaging.

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Review Essay: The Anthropology of Sot Weed

***Tobacco Town Futures: Global Encounters in Rural Kentucky*. Ann Kingsolver. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011.**

***Tobacco Capitalism: Growers, Migrant Workers, and the Changing Face of a Global Industry*. Peter Benson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.**

David Griffith, East Carolina University
GRIFFITHD@ecu.edu

Humans have become awfully good at producing hazardous materials: guns, nuclear waste, dioxin, bourbon, fast food, tobacco . . . For such an intelligent species we seem remarkably foolhardy, exposing ourselves and each other to these and other hazards and even at times encouraging our fellows to engage in dangerous and unhealthy behavior. Few have done this quite as successfully as tobacco companies, which is perhaps one reason they have been singled out for what they, along with the people who produce tobacco for them, view as persecution. “You don’t go out and