

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Revisiting the Digital Assembly Line: New Perspectives on Call Centre Work

**Enda Brophy**

Anthony Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013)

Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Sheena Malhotra, and Kimberlee Perèz, *Answer the Call: Virtual Migration in Indian Call Centres* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013)

Andrew J.R. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor: A Political Economy of Post-Industrial Employment and Union Organizing* (New York: Routledge, 2014)

None of the floor managers spoke to me on my last shift and at 11pm that night I signed off for the last time, gave Gareth my headset, handed my security pass to the guard on the way out, said my goodbyes and went and got drunk.<sup>1</sup>

THUS ENDS THE SIX-MONTH STINT endured by British researcher Anthony Lloyd at “Call Direct,” a Middlesbrough, UK call centre. The “feeling of relief” upon quitting his job, Lloyd notes, “was almost indescribable.”<sup>2</sup> Discussions with ex-colleagues would later confirm this sentiment was common among those who left the call centre. In fact, Lloyd’s refreshingly candid account of his dislike of the job reflects the experience a significant portion of the global call centre workforce has had of this relatively new workspace. Distaste for the labour conditions, the desire to leave them, and the eventual acting upon this need have all surfaced consistently, in both scholarly research and popular

1. Anthony Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 141.

2. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 141.

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Enda Brophy, “Revisiting the Digital Assembly Line: New Perspectives on Call Centre Work,” *Labour/Le Travail* 75 (Spring 2015): 211–230.

accounts, as endemic features of one of the fastest-growing forms of labour to have emerged over the last quarter century.<sup>3</sup> From the United States to India, from Europe to Latin America, from China to South Africa, call centres have been established on every continent and every country. In many developed nations, estimates of the number of those making a living in these workspaces are in the millions of people, meaning that a significant portion – often between two and four per cent – of the entire workforce toils within them.<sup>4</sup> While the labour process and conditions of employment do present some variety from call centre to call centre and region to region, as we shall see, the composite picture of call centre work that has emerged is of low pay, lack of autonomy, disciplinary management, advanced forms of surveillance, and exceedingly high turnover rates. In the end, many millions across the world take the route opted for by Lloyd and simply leave.

Scholarship on the condition and experience of call centre work has progressed from early skirmishes of the late 1990s, in which scholars of the labour process<sup>5</sup> decisively rebutted research suggesting that the rise of the call centre signalled the arrival of a more humane “post-industrial” workplace and an empowered “knowledge worker”<sup>6</sup> within it. As global capital has careened from the dotcom recession to the subprime crisis over the last decade and a half, more recent research has confronted a broader set of concerns as well as assessed the regional variations within this quintessentially informational profession, where capital valorizes the language, sociability, communication, and affect of its vast workforce.<sup>7</sup> The three books surveyed here are part of a

3. Kate Mulholland, “Workplace Resistance in an Irish Call Centre: Slammin’, Scammin’, Smokin’ an’ Leavin’,” *Work, Employment and Society* 18, 4 (2004): 709–724; Peter Bain, Phil Taylor, Aileen Watson, Gareth Mulvey, and Gregor Gall, “Taylorism, Targets and the Pursuit of Quantity and Quality by Call Centre Management,” *New Technology, Work and Employment* 17, 3 (2002): 170–185; Diane van den Broek, Alison Barnes, and Keith Townsend, “‘Teaming up’: Teams and Team Sharing in Call Centres,” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 50, 2 (2008): 257–269; Catriona M. Wallace, Geoff Eagleson, and Robert Waldersee, “The Sacrificial HR Strategy in Call Centers,” *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 11, 2 (2000): 174–184.

4. Enda Brophy, “Language Put to Work: Cognitive Capitalism, Call Centre Labour, and Worker Inquiry,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35, 4 (2011): 411–417.

5. Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, “‘An Assembly-Line in the Head’: Work and Employee Relations in the Call Centre,” *Industrial Relations Journal*, 30, 2 (1999): 101–117; Graham Sewell, “The Discipline of Teams: The Control of Team-Based Industrial Work Through Electronic and Peer Surveillance,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43 (1998): 406–469; Simon Head, *The New Ruthless Economy: Work and Power in the Digital Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

6. Stephen Frenkel, Marek Korczynski, Karen Shire, and May Tam, *On the Front Line: Organization of Work in the Information Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

7. Shehzad Nadeem, *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Mirchandani Kiran, “Gender Eclipsed? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work,” *Social Justice* 32, 4 (2005): 105–119; Winifred Poster, “Who’s On the Line? Indian Call Center Agents Pose as Americans for U.S.-Outsourced Firms,” *Industrial Relations*, 46, 2 (2007): 271–304; Colectivo Situaciones,

more recent and diverse wave of research on call centre labour, one that has applied a variety of ethnographic, post-colonial, cultural studies, political economic, and activist approaches to this sizeable workforce. Despite their deep differences, as we shall see, among the key concerns uniting the three efforts is the question of worker identity, and the related investigation of the arguably ambivalent subjective dimension of the call centre workforce.

Anthony Lloyd's effort takes us to Middlesbrough in the northeast of England, one of many cities across Europe and North America that has been trying to come to grips with deindustrialization after the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> While pursuing his doctoral work, Lloyd's covert ethnography takes him into a local call centre (which he dubs "Call Direct"), which answers calls from customers of another company, "Internet Plus," which has outsourced its customer service operations. At Call Direct, Lloyd worked alongside his subjects of study for six long months, "doing the same job as them, taking the same calls, dealing with the same problems" and therefore being "treated the same by management and granted no special privileges."<sup>9</sup> As Lloyd points out, this prolonged exposure to the daily routine of life on the call centre floor both benefits his research and differentiates it from the vast bulk of academic scholarship on call centre work. The author is in an ideal position to carry out this embedded study given that he is hardly a complete outsider to the culture he describes. As Lloyd notes, had he not been fortunate enough to receive funding for his doctoral research, he likely would have had to pick up service sector work anyhow in order to afford his studies. That a precariously employed student carries out an ethnographic study of call centre work feels entirely appropriate, as Lloyd is well attuned to the subjective qualities animating this info-service workplace.

The big questions driving Lloyd's study are directed toward the subjective dimension of performing such customer service work: "How do the young men and women engaged in call centre work define themselves? From what is their identity shaped and created? How do they view the local labour market, the world at large and their place in it?"<sup>10</sup> These questions allow him to confront some vexed debates surrounding class: "can we still talk about class in the same way we traditionally did? What does the working class look like in the face of an economy no longer functioning around industrial labour and manufacturing?"<sup>11</sup>

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*¿Quién Habla?: Lucha Contra la Esclavitud del Alma en Los Call Centers*, (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón Ediciones, 2006); Jamie Woodcock, "Smile Down the Phone: An Attempt at a Worker's Inquiry in a Call Centre," *Viewpoint Magazine* 4 (2013). URL: <http://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/25/smile-down-the-phone-an-attempt-at-a-workers-inquiry-in-a-call-center/>, (accessed 24 November 2014).

8. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*.

9. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 4.

10. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 3.

11. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 3.

In seeking the answers to these questions, Lloyd's study offers a vivid portrait of deindustrialization from within. In the author's words, Middlesbrough is a good site for such an investigation because "there is nothing unique about the place" which "is representative of many other post-industrial towns and cities with nothing to offer."<sup>12</sup> The opening section of the book offers an extended discussion of the city's economic development from its rise as England's premier iron ore mining town in the late 19th century to the great expansion of steel production and chemical industry in the early 20th when Middlesbrough contributed to the wealth of the surging British Empire. During this time, as Lloyd outlines, the proletarianization of mining and factory labour was accompanied by the formation of "local pride and working-class culture."<sup>13</sup>

The history of Middlesbrough's decline, beginning in the 1970s, will be familiar to those who know the trajectory of the American Rust Belt, the mining and steel towns of central Canada, and other industrial centres across the developed world. Capital's abandoning of the Fordist-Keynesian compromise during the 1970s has produced notoriously unkind effects for the working populations in these regions. By 2008, 88.1 per cent of the Middlesbrough workforce was employed in service industries, and into the void created by deindustrialization arrived the call centre industry. Lloyd "applies" for his job off the street (the process "could not have taken more than five minutes"<sup>14</sup>) and is successful. The woman interviewing ahead of him fails the test and is given another chance, causing Lloyd to suspect the recruitment team ensures everyone passes the test.

Once inside the call centre, Lloyd notes (foreshadowing the pivotal theme of virtual space in Carrillo Rowe et al.'s book<sup>15</sup>) "you could be anywhere in the world."<sup>16</sup> The entire first day of training is devoted to introducing the company's ethos and philosophy. As is fairly typical of call centre operations, the indoctrination of newly hired workers encourages them to see themselves as professionals, to think of their job as fun, and to maintain high levels of affective commitment.<sup>17</sup> At Call Direct, phrases such as "passion for service" adorn the walls, acting as reminders of what is expected of workers. While the company representative training the new recruits suggests Call Direct is dedicated to the workforce and the broader community, from the very first day of training Lloyd both observes and finds within himself the stirrings of a worker

12. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 3.

13. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 13.

14. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 35.

15. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Sheena Malhotra, and Kimberlee Pirèz, *Answer the Call: Virtual Migration in Indian Call Centres*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

16. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 35.

17. Peter Fleming and Andrew Sturdy, "Being Yourself in the Electronic Sweatshop: New Forms of Normative Control," *Human Relations* 64, 2 (2011): 177–200.

cynicism that will be omnipresent during his time at the company: “all of us in the room ... were expendable and we knew it.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the initially appealing air of “relaxed informality” that is fostered at Call Direct, “the inescapable truth about call centre work,” Lloyd observes, “is that the job itself is very hard.”<sup>19</sup> His account amply confirms the labour process inquiries of the 1990s and 2000s undertaken into the proletarianization of what the Marxist scholar Harry Braverman would have referred to as “mental labour” along the new digital assembly lines.<sup>20</sup> Far from the fulfilling, autonomous, and liberated labour of the “knowledge worker,” Lloyd’s account of his travails at the company reveal that “on closer inspection there is still a rigid structure in place determining the pace of work, controlling employees’ movement, reducing autonomy, and increasing levels of stress and burnout.”<sup>21</sup>

Like the exhortations on the walls, employee disenchantment with the work at Call Direct is a permanent feature of the workplace. In his time at the company, Lloyd explores the “wider culture of agents who were generally apathetic to begin with” and how they “seemingly pass through a barrier towards a fatalism which results in them giving up any remaining loyalty or dedication to their work.”<sup>22</sup> Most are gone within days or weeks of being hired, and the refusal of work by avoiding calls, calling in sick, or other techniques is prominent among those who stay. Employees, Lloyd suggests, neither see work as “an important indicator of their identity” nor believe that the company cares about them.<sup>23</sup> In place of labour or class identity, there is a generalized ethos of working to live and a regularized practice of blowing the week’s wages on partying and consumer items on weekends. Most poignantly, even those who invest in the job and hang on to achieve management positions draw salaries that not only tend to exclude them from the hope of home ownership and a middle-class life, but that technically add them to the ranks of the working poor.

The contradiction between the forms of identity that inspired the vanished mining and steelworking proletariat of Middlesbrough and the info-service workforce feeding the call centre sector could not be sharper. The labourist and trade unionist pride of the industrial working class has been replaced, Lloyd finds, by postmodern cynicism and indifference. As such, the workforce only engages in individualized, “politically useless”<sup>24</sup> forms of resistance “that

18. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 44.

19. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 39.

20. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (1974; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

21. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 39–40.

22. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 40.

23. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 122.

24. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 91.

in no way affect the work process, the management strategy, or the company.”<sup>25</sup> Without a class identity developed in the face of the profoundly exploitative working conditions in call centres, for Lloyd, “militancy no longer exists, and the interests of capital have triumphed, often through stealth rather than a direct fight with labour.”<sup>26</sup> The prognosis for labour’s liberation is bleak.

The research effort that Lloyd has produced offers an illuminating view of the British post-industrial call centre workplace, of its seemingly amorphous workforce, and of the way these have become embedded within the eviscerated urban settings once dominated by extraction and manufacturing. The book is written in a refreshingly colloquial style. (Of his encounter with the workplace, he notes: “the room looked like a standard office anywhere in the world, totally unremarkable and devoid of character,”<sup>27</sup> where “Madness, Simon and Garfunkel, Girls Aloud and Whitney Houston all failed to enliven the atmosphere.”<sup>28</sup>) Lloyd’s presentation of his experience and his portraits of his colleagues at the call centre give us fresh insights into the rhythms and culture of this new workplace, as well as an unnerving sense of being there with him, of living through it with him.

At the same time, the conclusions reached in this book will not ring true for many scholars of call centre work, not to mention activists and organizers in the sector. For labour’s allies, Lloyd’s analysis is profoundly dispirited and ultimately dispiriting: where there is no class identity, there can be no resistance, and where there is no resistance then capital has triumphed in this informational workplace and the service economy that lies beyond it. As the author concludes, “*the industrial working class used to possess a political potentiality*, but low grade service workers cannot be the source of progressive change as they appear to be devoid of any sense of collective identity and destiny that might one day coalesce into progressive political intervention.”<sup>29</sup> The integration of lengthy tracts of theoretical analysis in the text do very little to cast new light on this workforce other than to suggest it is downtrodden, confused regarding its real interests, and caught up in the surface-level appearance of its role in the capitalist labour market.

Indeed, the analysis Lloyd offers of the motivations, drives, desires, and refusals of co-workers occasionally strike one as condescending. The nostalgia for a bygone collective working identity derived out of the Fordist-Taylorist compromise precludes an openness toward the potential for new forms of struggle and collective association, ones which might draw on the profound

25. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 76.

26. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 79.

27. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 33.

28. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 34.

29. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 149, italics in original.

ambivalence of the workforce, its refusal to identify with the company, even its allegedly petty and ineffectual forms of micro-resistance.

Moreover, the declarations made regarding the absence of militancy in call centres are simply not borne out in the research. By the end of the 1990s, the German labour-activist collective Kolinko had begun to document an impressive range of conflicts in call centres.<sup>30</sup> The growth of call centre work since then has been accompanied by the emergence of labour resistance in a variety of forms, some of it surprising in its ferocity.<sup>31</sup> As the research of Andrew Stevens discussed below demonstrates, labour-capital conflictuality has been a defining feature of call centre employment, even if it did not surface at Call Direct. Making dire conclusions regarding the potential for collective organization that resides in the customer service workforce on the basis of one well researched call centre in Middlesbrough is ultimately unconvincing. Thankfully, this shortcoming does not take away from what Lloyd's study does have to offer – the rich, investigative nature of the analysis of this work, the many portraits of those who animate it, and the search, however fraught, for the emergent class identities within it.

At one point in his discussion of Middlesbrough's political economic shift, Lloyd gloomily states that "profit and capital accumulation is possible without remaining dependent on *Western* labour."<sup>32</sup> Whether or not one agrees with this statement, it is certainly true that one of the most significant developments to have taken place within remotely provided customer service has been the outsourcing of these functions offshore, mostly from America and the United Kingdom, with one of the premier and most notorious destinations being India. The most recent wave of call centre analysis has included a series of book-length efforts investigating the labour dynamics entailed in this shift, including Bob Russell's *Smiling Down the Line: Info-Service Work in the Global Economy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), Reena Patel's *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), Shehzad Nadeem's *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves*, (Princeton: Princeton

30. Kolinko, *Hotlines: Call Centre, Inquiry, Communism*, (2002), URL: [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e\\_lebuk.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_lebuk.htm) (accessed 24 November 2014).

31. Enda Brophy, "The Subterranean Stream: Communicative Capitalism and Call Centre Labour," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 10, 4 (2010): 470–483; Julie Guard, Mercedes Steedman, and Jorge Garcia-Orgales, "Organizing the Electronic Sweatshop: Rank-and-File Participation in Canada's Steel Union," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class Histories of the Americas* 4,3 (2007): 9–31; Al Rannie and Gail Drummond, "Community Unionism in a Regional Call Centre: The Organizer's Perspective," in John Burgess and Julia Connell, eds., *Developments in the Call Centre Industry: Analysis, Changes and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 136–151; Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, "Subterranean Worksick Blues: Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres," *Organizational Studies* 24, 9 (2003): 1487–1509.

32. Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line*, 18, emphasis in original.

University Press, 2011), and Kiran Mirchandani's *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). The latter three texts arguably contribute to an emergent genre in the analysis of call centre work, drawing on post-colonial and feminist perspectives and a cultural studies infused sensibility in order to situate call centre work within a broader analysis of the highly uneven dynamics of globalization.

Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz's book, *Answer the Call* adds itself to this important transnational perspective on Indian info-service work.<sup>33</sup> Focusing on call centres in India servicing the United States, the book draws on 45 interviews conducted with call centre agents, trainers, managers, and CEOs collected through almost a decade of research, spanning 2003 to 2012. The approach, the theoretical points of reference, and the subjects investigated by the authors are very different from those related by Anthony Lloyd, and a sense of this contrast is offered early on when Carrillo Rowe et al. suggest the themes they have drawn out of their conversations with interviewees

are not meant to portray the real call centre agent but rather to infuse key concepts in cultural studies, communication studies, transnational feminism, and globalization studies with the rich and textured meanings generated by this labour force, which imagines itself as global through its labor as communication workers.<sup>34</sup>

In the (quite possible) eventuality that the call centre jobs Lloyd discusses were to be offshored, the Indian information-technology-enhanced services (ITES) sector and its workforce would be a likely destination for the outsourced labour. While Carrillo Rowe et al.'s focus is customer service work performed for American consumers rather than British ones, the authors' broader concern is to investigate the subjective dynamics triggered by such transfers of affective, relational, and immaterial labour across global production networks and along the encounter of different cultures, to India.

An important contribution made by these authors is the argument that the spatial coordinates and national identities involved in such transfers of labour are not nearly as neatly delineated as might be presumed. The book's central theoretical category, as the subtitle suggests, is that of virtual migration, developed by the sociologist A. Aneesh in an early and foundational investigation of offshored ITES labour.<sup>35</sup> As Aneesh outlined, and as Carrillo Rowe et al. reiterate, one of the novel dynamics of the exportation of "back office"

33. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Sheena Malhotra, and Kimberlee Perèz, *Answer the Call: Virtual Migration in Indian Call Centres* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

34. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 27.

35. A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).



customer service functions transnationally is that in the call centre industry “the labour, not the body, is transported across national boundaries.”<sup>36</sup>

Carrillo Rowe et al.’s book simultaneously builds upon and departs from Aneesh’s conceptual contribution to the study of call centre labour. While the latter argued that Indian call centre agents retained a single and unambiguous national identity as they performed their labour across borders, the authors of *Answer the Call* disagree. The formation of subjectivity they find developing among the call centre workforce is more complex, transnational, and even virtual than Aneesh had allowed for. Offshored customer service gives Indian agents a “sense of being oriented toward the West” and a beguiling “sense of movement toward America” through their daily labours.<sup>37</sup> Agents’ quotidian migration is also material however, “marked by the daily movement between first world and third world zones” or what they compellingly call the “checkered geographies” of urban neoliberalism, where slums share city space with corporate high-tech offices.<sup>38</sup> Underscoring the intensely uneven economic development linking globalized cities through informational industries, the book opens with the authors arriving at a call centre on the outskirts of Bangalore, and describing a corporate office tower that “could be transplanted into the cityscape of a Midwestern American city.”<sup>39</sup> The subjectivity of Indian call centre agents thus forms, as the authors elaborate, in an in-between space, a condition, which according to them “invites us to rethink what and where is India, America, and the expansive yet compressed border that divides them.”<sup>40</sup> They refer to this liminal space, which becomes the site of their study, as “virtual borderlands.”

Like other instances of what could be described as post-colonial approaches to call centre labour, the authors note that the history of imperialism has determined the particular role of the Indian labour force within the transnationalization of service work. As with Kiran Mirchandani’s analysis, the authors are concerned with the historical trajectory that has yoked Indian communicative labour to consumers in Anglophone countries, the United States above all.<sup>41</sup> Carrillo Rowe et al. argue that virtual migration is “a function of U.S. American hegemony, which enables U.S. and multinational corporations to extract labor and resources from India while fortifying racial purity in the homeland.”<sup>42</sup> Through this hegemony, they note, America is transnationalized,

36. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 2.

37. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 2.

38. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 5.

39. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, viii.

40. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 17.

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

42. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 69.

and “the communication practices of the call centre industry ... offer a critical site in which to explore how disciplinary power is exerted” in this process.<sup>43</sup>

As part of the authors’ transnational approach, the early part of the book is dedicated to exploring the “politics of representation through which the figure of the Indian call centre agent is rendered intelligible in the West.”<sup>44</sup> Carrillo Rowe et al.’s textual analysis engages some of the more widely circulated North American popular cultural depictions of this workforce. These documentaries and films introduced outsourcing and its protagonists to an American workforce already reeling from the effects of downsizing, recession, and soaring economic inequality during the first decade of the 21st century. Buttressing these representations is the construction of what the authors call “power temporalities,” or the “uneven structuring force of time on the life-worlds of differently located global subjects.”<sup>45</sup> In these depictions, Carrillo Rowe et al. note, the emergence of India as a global player in the ITES sector is presented as a threat, yet at the same time through the “progress narratives”<sup>46</sup> within the texts the Indian workforce is symbolically domesticated, rendered less threatening, depicted as an “emergent/infantile global subject.”<sup>47</sup>

On the other end of the phone line, in India where the bulk of their research is carried out, the authors note, “the industry is changing everything.”<sup>48</sup> As the aforementioned work of Patel, Nadeem, and Mirchandani has documented, hundreds of thousands of call centre workers in the country submit to disrupted circadian rhythms, “insomnia, nausea, nightmares, sore throats” and other ailments in order to serve American customers over the phone and through the night.<sup>49</sup> In this work and its “performance of identity that constitutes agents’ subjectivity,” call centre workers are caught between domestic national traditions and the cultures of those they speak to throughout the night.<sup>50</sup> The countless discrete communications with Americans demand an “assimilated performance by the call centre agent”<sup>51</sup> (what Mirchandani has helpfully called “authenticity work”<sup>52</sup>), in which through the imposed adoption of non-threatening fictional American identities, “Rekha becomes Rachel, Sita

43. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 82.

44. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 33.

45. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 33.

46. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 61.

47. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 49.

48. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, x.

49. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, x.

50. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 4.

51. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 19.

52. Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*.

becomes Stacy, and Ekaraj becomes Elvis.”<sup>53</sup> The communicative requirements of transnational corporations are paramount, dissolving kinship networks, daily schedules, and consolidated forms of identity. As Jaffer, a Muslim, notes to the researchers: “here in the call center, his religion doesn’t matter because everyone has to take on another identity.”<sup>54</sup>

If the Middlesbrough call centre workers in Lloyd’s account are subjectively ambivalent, the figure of the Indian call centre worker is, as the authors identify in yet another conceptual offering, one of “pseudohybridity.”<sup>55</sup> These workers earn two to three times the starting salaries offered in many other service industries and much more than their parents ever did. They can cultivate Western lifestyles and take on the consumerist attitudes that are actively fostered by call centre businesses among their workers. Strikingly recounted, for example, are the descriptions provided by workers of being given access to several credit cards upon signing up with a call centre and thus (happily) plunged into a world of conspicuous consumption. As the authors note, “the stories of call center agents suggest that the formation of their identities as workers is almost inseparable from their formation as consumers.”<sup>56</sup> At the same time, there is little question of their class position globally, as part of an emergent cybertariat<sup>57</sup> attached to the communicative needs of global capitalism. For the authors, these call centre workers are therefore “multiply classed subjects who might simultaneously occupy different class positions – living in a relatively humble home with their parents, for example, while buying expensive cell phones and frequenting upscale nightclubs.”<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, Carrillo Rowe et al. outline a “global sense of belonging” developing among this workforce, supported by the neoliberal values of individualism, materialism, and meritocracy.<sup>59</sup> On the other, there are the endless night shifts, the racist abuse over the phone from white people half a world away, and the inescapable reality of the wage relation.

*Answer the Call* is especially notable in its attempt to approach Indian call centre labour from the perspective and on the terrain of its subjectivity. One of the clearest lessons that emerges from the discussions with call centre agents as recounted by the authors is the way in which the production of value through immaterial labour such as call centre work is at one and the same

53. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 9.

54. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 18.

55. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 137.

56. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 155.

57. Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014).

58. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 76.

59. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 111.

time the production of subjects and subjectivity.<sup>60</sup> In the case of the Indian call centre industry, this process nurtures new hybrid identities within the workforce, formed in the in-between, the transnational “space of flows”<sup>61</sup> that has become a critical new sphere of accumulation for global capital. Importantly, the reference points for these new subjectivities are ultimately not so different than the ones described by Lloyd among his colleagues in Middlesbrough. Indian workers are interpellated by a Western identity and a familiar ethos of hedonist consumerism – “shopping, buying, clubbing, clubbing, clubbing”, as one agent sums up the lifestyle.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, these workers will always be relegated to what the authors describe (in another valuable formulation) as a kind of “mediated inclusion” within global markets, one that sees them safely kept beyond the national borders of the companies they serve.

There are questions raised by the authors’ approach and conclusions in this book, however. The reader is offered precious little in the way of an overview or history of the Indian ITES industry and therefore of the industrial context of that which they are discussing. As a result, the discussion of the subjectivities of Indian workers feels unanchored to the relevant political and economic trajectory of their nation and sector, not to mention the local articulations of class and caste (captured so vividly, for example, by the anthropologist Xiang Biao in his study of migrant Indian IT engineers, *Global “Body Shopping”*<sup>63</sup>). Of even greater consequence for the theorization of virtual migration developed in the book is the fact that the image one gets of the emergent Indian call centre workforce can feel whimsical at times. The sense offered by the book that these workers tend to love their jobs, for example, is suspect given the evidence coming from elsewhere of the unforgiving labour process and tremendously high levels of turnover affecting this very same workforce.<sup>64</sup> Carrillo Rowe et al. suggest that most call centre agents “offer glowing accounts of working with and for Americans.”<sup>65</sup> At the same time, the authors also note early on in the

60. Andrea Fumagalli and Christina Morini, “Life Put to Work: Toward a Theory of Life Value,” *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 10, 4 (2010): 234–252.

61. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, Volume I, The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

62. Cited in Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 160.

63. Xiang Biao, *Global “Body Shopping”: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

64. Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, “India Calling to the Far Away Towns’: The Call Centre Labour Process and Globalization,” *Work, Employment and Society*, 19, 2 (2005): 261–282; David Holman, Rosemary Batt, and Ursula Holtgrewe, *The Global Call Centre Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*. URL: [www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcenter/upload/gcc-intl-rept-us-version.pdf](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcenter/upload/gcc-intl-rept-us-version.pdf), (accessed 24 November 2014); Kiran Mirchandani, “Gender Eclipses? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work,” *Global Justice*, 32, 4 (2005): 105–119; Premilla D’Cruz, *Workplace Bullying in India*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

65. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 112.

book that interviewees are sent by a team manager, who “selects the best and brightest.”<sup>66</sup> The choice to go through management in order to interview call centre workers suggests the researchers were not overly concerned to seek out the kind of counter-subjectivities described so compellingly by Lloyd. In fact, as the authors note, “the interpersonal and global dynamics of call centre labor might ironically have been played out over the course of our interviews as agents were once again interpellated by those in positions of power to answer the call – this time of the Westernized researcher.”<sup>67</sup> There is a risk, if one is not interested in portraying “the real call centre agent,”<sup>68</sup> of turning the complex and contradictory workforce that enables globalization into an object of theorization rather than more fully fleshing out its subjectivity – intended here as agency, conflictuality, and becoming.

Another issue with the authors’ approach, especially one that aims to be attentive to institutionalized sets of power relations in call centre work, is the almost exclusive focus on the relationship between workers and customers. In the process, the relationship between labour and capital almost disappears in this book. For example, in their discussion of affective labour (a concept drawn from the autonomist Marxist tradition), the authors encourage us to rethink the “scope of what counts” as such labour “beyond the immediacy of the worker/consumer encounter to consider the multiple sites in which affect is (re)directed through globalization.”<sup>69</sup> Their solution, to apply the concept of affective labour in an analysis of the personal relationships between workers, including beyond the workplace, only serves to magnify the already notable absence of an analysis of the employer-employee relationship in the book. The authors, in fact, reiterate Lloyd’s dismissal of the potential for call centre conflict in consigning collective action and unions to the dustbin of “older forms of politicizing labor” which “fail to mobilize call center workers, even as a new host of disciplinary, discursive, sociocultural, and economic benefits do.”<sup>70</sup> This may even be true, but the wage relation and management’s dictation of the labour process quite evidently structures so much of the frequently exploitative and alienating conditions of work within Indian call centres, and to avoid treatment of these forces is to miss a great deal of the source of the unequal, neo-colonial power relations existing in these workspaces.

The contribution made by Carrillo Rowe et al.’s research project is not diminished by these analytic choices however. As the authors suggest, in their study of “the communication processes through which globalization circulates,” their focus is “the ways identities and forms of labor migrate without

66. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, x.

67. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 27.

68. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 27.

69. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 99.

70. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 127.

the bodies that produce them.”<sup>71</sup> That the authors are more interested in the virtual territories in which this labour is projected in its encounter with consumers, rather than the hierarchical employment relations characterizing the labour process, is ultimately a matter of priorities. In seeking to extend and complicate our understanding of virtual migration, Carrillo Rowe et al. have contributed a rich, even overflowing set of concepts, of which some have been mentioned already here and many more lie waiting for the reader in the book’s pages. Beyond its useful analysis of subject formation, it is these concepts that will now be available to those interested in the critical analysis of transnational call centre labour, to pick up and develop further, or to challenge, through their investigations of and engagement with the global call centre workforce.

The third book reviewed here also explores the formation of the call centre workforce in India, albeit from yet another, very different perspective. In some ways, Andrew J.R. Stevens’ *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labour*<sup>72</sup> acts as a necessary companion piece for *Answer the Call*, offering a discussion of the indispensable historical context for subject formation in the Indian call centre. Stevens deploys a transnational, comparative approach, focusing on the political economic conditions that nurtured the development of call centres in India and Canada – another of the world’s premier (although less notorious) destinations for the outsourcing of customer service work. As with Lloyd’s book, Stevens’ dominant framework for understanding the macro-level forces affecting the call centre industry is that of post-industrialism, a theory pioneered in the twentieth century by the liberal-democratic commentator and Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell in order to explain the decline of Fordism and the associated political, economic, and cultural shift toward the valorization of knowledge, services and communication in the United States.<sup>73</sup> This shift, as Stevens argues, “has not resolved the contradictions or crises within capitalism, nor have such developments deflected the deterioration of working conditions in seemingly prestigious industries.”<sup>74</sup> Illuminating the truth of this statement is the entry point Stevens chooses for the analysis of call centre work – that of trade unionism and collective organization.

Stevens utilizes political economy as the lens through which he explores the emergence of call centre work and the role of trade unionism and worker representation within it. His macro-level analysis presents notable continuities with the French Regulation School’s analysis of the transition within capitalism since the 1970s. If post-industrialism is the regime of accumulation within which the rapid development of call centres has unfolded, neoliberalism is the

71. Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Perèz, *Answer the Call*, 176.

72. Andrew A.J. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor: A Political Economy of Post-Industrial Employment and Union Organizing* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

73. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

74. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 2–3.

emergent (and crisis-ridden) mode of governance that has enabled the transnationalization of this ubiquitous workspace. The sizeable call centre sector and the millions of souls it employs, Stevens illustrates in the first part of the book, are brought into being at the encounter between these two mutually constituting historical developments.<sup>75</sup> Contesting capital's formidable power in these workplaces (and, crucially, its capacity to transfer labour between them) is labour's traditional representative, the established trade union movement, of which the author is particularly concerned to document the transnational articulations.

Stevens' study draws on 60 semi-structured interviews, mostly with union officials and labour activists, conducted in India, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland between 2008 and 2013, as well as a wealth of media articles, government reports, and other documents in an attempt "to assemble a model that characterizes the political economic terrain on which call centers develop."<sup>76</sup> The author is less interested in virtual borderlands than in the material conditions structuring the relationship between employers and workers in the sector. The discussion of this terrain begins with a portrait of the connection between post-industrialism and the globalization of what, following liberal-democratic scholars and commentators such as Fritz Machlup and Peter Drucker, Stevens calls "knowledge work."<sup>77</sup> From the theory of the new international division of labour (NIDL) that gained prominence during the 1980s to the political and economic developments that determined its declining explanatory capacity, Stevens argues for a more complex approach which takes into account a *global* division of labour, one which

acknowledges the importance of interlocking commodity chains; fragmented production networks and systems, investments in human capital, indigenous modes of social reproduction, migratory flows, connections to and between markets, as well as cultural and historical forces that lend to the construction and maintenance of particular labour forces.<sup>78</sup>

Cutting through the myths surrounding offshoring to provide a helpful picture of what is actually going on, Stevens notes that the overall structure of foreign direct investment (FDI) has begun to shift toward services, although these are still less transnationalized than manufacturing.<sup>79</sup> Reports of widespread unemployment caused by offshoring remain exaggerated however, at least in some cases. A more likely explanation, despite the paucity of data available

75. Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2nd edition (London: Sage, 2009).

76. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 23.

77. Peter Drucker, *Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New "Post-Modern" World* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999).

78. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 36.

79. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 47.

through which to gauge the process, is that in an expanding post-industrial economy which intensifies the demand for cognitive and communicative forms of labour, capital's drive to offshore is accelerated both "as a means of meeting labour demands and stabilizing wages."<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, Stevens argues, the practice of offshoring cannot be divorced from "the deterioration of employment standards and the growth of temporary and part-time work."<sup>81</sup> By 2002–2003, the majority of export-oriented investment in services was represented by call centres, with the UK, Israel, Canada, and Ireland scoring the dominant share. The rise of India as an outsourcing destination would occur after the dotcom bust, however, when the financial sector demanded greater efficiencies (or disciplining of labour) from firms across the economy. As a key part of this bigger picture, Stevens provides a thorough overview of the rise of the call centre sector in both Canada and India, demonstrating the key role of the entrepreneurial state (albeit at different jurisdictional levels in each case) in both forming the workforces that would be fed into the emergent sector and setting the economic incentives to attract investment to its shores.

Having prepared the ground for an analysis of the labour organizing taking place in these sectors, Stevens begins by assessing the series of efforts that have been launched on the Indian subcontinent, the first of his two case studies. These initiatives, he begins by noting, are stories of a promising rise in organizational capacity among ITES workers, but also, ultimately, of a more recent decline. On the one hand, it is highly significant that over 20,000 workers joined India's only union for workers in the ITES sector, the Union for ITES Professionals (UNITES), between 2005 and 2010. The union has arguably been the most successful of several attempts to date seeking to organize workers across the sprawling sector. On the other hand, as Stevens outlines, the structure of industrial relations in India, the turbulent history of trade unions on the subcontinent, the new identities emerging (and, just as importantly, being promoted from above by management) within the ITES sector, and the economic uncertainty surrounding the sector itself have all worked against the successful establishment of labour organizations in the sector.

From the first years of the 21st century when transnational companies ramped up their outsourcing to the country, established trade unions in India proved unable to represent workers in the expanding sector. As a result, the organizing efforts that took root were mostly subsidized by European trade unions, less formal in nature, and somewhat ambivalent in their politics. The IT Professionals Forum, launched in 2000, developed a conciliatory approach to employers and actively dis-identified with the tradition of unionism, tending to focus on the most highly skilled IT sectors and neglecting call centre workers. The organizing has also included more autonomous efforts, such as that of the Young Professionals Collective (YPC), an initiative by labour and social justice

80. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 48.

81. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 53.



activists to organize call centre workers outside the structure of a union, through creating a platform to “educate and empower call centre employees.”<sup>82</sup> UNITES, the most recent and successful attempt to organize workers in the sector, has managed to negotiate collective agreements with six companies in the sector, where management is sometimes motivated to accept a trade union interlocutor in the interests of addressing the tremendously high turnover rates characterizing the industry. UNITES has been successful in bringing issues of inequality and exploitation in call centres to light publicly in recent years, as well as raising the issue of the need for gender equality and safety in the workplace. The union’s public prominence, amid layoffs and overall uncertainty in the sector, seems to have dimmed more recently, however.

Ultimately, as Stevens points out, only “a small percentage of workers, concentrated mostly in the business process outsourcing (BPO) and call center workplaces constrained to the metropolitan hubs of Bangalore and Hyderabad, are actual members of this adolescent union in the constellation that is India’s vast trade union movement.”<sup>83</sup> More broadly, he observes, ITES unionism in India has been “a manifestation of top-down union initiatives” rather than a “wellspring of rank-and-file activism.”<sup>84</sup> A key part of the cause for this is to be found in the ambivalence of the sector’s workforce toward the idea of trade unionism. Some of this is the result of employers’ appeals from above: Nasscom, the sectoral association representing businesses in ITES, has encouraged “the imagery of an entrepreneurial middle class as the core of India’s economic renaissance.”<sup>85</sup> Info-service workers, as stressed by Carrillo Rowe et al., are encouraged to see themselves as professionals and consumers rather than workers. A significant part of the hesitation toward unions, Stevens crucially reminds us however, is caused by “a disillusionment with unions *as they exist* rather than with the principle of collective bargaining itself.”<sup>86</sup>

In Canada, in the absence of a union specifically for call centre workers, Stevens completes his case study research with an overview of the United Steelworkers’ effort to organize Canadian call centres serving a range of sectors. As in India, the general picture has not been of a surge in collective organisation, but there have been at least partially successful efforts that offer insights into the potential for trade unionism. The example focused on at length in the text is the contest between call centre labour and employers in the northern Ontario mining town of Sudbury. There, Stevens recounts the Steelworkers’ campaign to unionize the Sudbury Omega Direct Response (OMDR) call centre, which at its peak employed around 1500 people. Beyond

82. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 97.

83. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 107.

84. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 89.

85. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 71.

86. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 110, emphasis in original.

the successful union drive, the author's fieldwork produces a detailed report of the struggle for control on the unionized shop floor, as well as the day-to-day challenges faced by union activists to build a sustainable infrastructure of representation inside the workplace. In the end, despite the young bargaining unit's success in the face of these challenges, the biggest threat it faced, Stevens notes, was ultimately "the precarity of the outsourced call centre market."<sup>87</sup> As in several other instances of call centres being successfully unionized in Ontario, the OMDR in Sudbury shut its doors in 2009. Stevens rounds out his discussion of Steelworker-organized call centres in Canada by describing the cases of Political Communications, a progressive polling research firm based in Toronto and Vancouver, and Visa Financial, an in-house call centre operation attached to the credit company also based in those two cities.

Ultimately, what Stevens finds of note in his comparative analysis are the "parallel frustrations" that members of the Steelworkers shared with their counterparts in UNITES and the YPC in India.<sup>88</sup> Generating interest in trade unionism among this workforce is not simple, and with ambivalence from below and rampant precarious employment characterizing the sector, the "institutionalization of the union's representative structure" or even the "normalization of the union's presence" are a tall order.<sup>89</sup> As the author notes, the political economy of offshoring and outsourcing has fashioned significant hurdles for the established labour movement.<sup>90</sup> The final section of the book is dedicated to considering, based on the cases he has surveyed, the potential for global unionism. "If any consensus has been established among trade unionists nationally and internationally," Stevens notes, "it is that collective bargaining relationships with multinational corporations need to be confronted through a global framework."<sup>91</sup> The newest iteration of this age-old thrust to internationalize worker organization are the global union federations (GUFs) such as the Union Network International that has sustained several of the attempts to organize call centre workers in India.

Stevens offers a sober and methodical book-length assessment of the conditions of, and prospects for, trade unionism in global call centres. With the possible exception of Virginia Doellgast's *Disintegrating Democracy at Work: Labor Unions and the Future of Good Jobs in the Service Economy*,<sup>92</sup> his effort is also the first book-length project to approach call centre labour from the perspective of trade unionism, a rarity in a field that was, in its first round

87. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 131.

88. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 144.

89. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 145.

90. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 169.

91. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 167.

92. Virginia Doellgast, *Disintegrating Democracy at Work: Labor Unions and the Future of Good Jobs in the Service Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

of debates at least, dominated by contradictory and clichéd images of well-adjusted knowledge professionals versus exploited workers in electronic sweatshops. *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor* is a valuable addition for both scholars and labour organizers thanks to its nuanced depiction of the dynamic and novel relationship that is emerging between labour and capital in this new workspace.

While Stevens' effort is thorough, it is not a comprehensive overview of labour resistance in call centres, however. The author's emphasis is on global efforts, which he rightly identifies as a crucial territory for the broader collective organization of labour. But labour resistance is broad and diverse, spanning from slacking off at work and petty forms of sabotage all the way up to the collective organization of the established labour movement and beyond. While relatively rare, rank and file and self-organized forms of collective action among call centre workers nonetheless exist as examples that offer continuities with more insurgent forms of collective organization. Italy's *Collettivo Precari Atesia*, a self-organized shop floor collective, brought Europe's largest call centre to its knees repeatedly and spurred a national movement of precariously organized call centre workers between 2006 and 2008.<sup>93</sup> There are also transnational examples of such social movement organizing, such as the Calling for Change campaign organized between the Australian National Union of Workers and the New Zealand rank and file union Unite in 2007 among outsourced tele-research call centres in Auckland. Stevens' approach is decidedly on the side of labour, and his analysis is careful to avoid any romanticization of this emergent working-class subject, or of its forms of action. But his focus is on established and relatively top-down forms of trade unionism and labour activism (as he points out, global unionism is "defined by administrative, not bottom-up rank-and-file action"<sup>94</sup>). As with Carrillo Rowe et al., it is ultimately a matter of analytic priorities. Stevens' pragmatism sees the most potential in a renewed labour movement rather than a reinvented one. To others, he leaves the task of searching for alternatives to an established labour movement in crisis.

In the last three decades, call centres have come to dot the urban and suburban landscapes of states across the globe. Designed for the efficient extraction of communicative, linguistic, and immaterial labour, these techno-social assemblages are now ubiquitous. Observing call centres from the outside, or walking through the open-concept offices, past the rows of desks with their monitors and headsets, one could, as the authors of these texts note, be almost anywhere – but for the highly diverse labour force that fuels this sector. Given the great diversity of cultures and contexts making up this workforce, but also the shared virtual spaces it inhabits and the growing set of interconnections

93. Alice Mattoni, *Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012).

94. Stevens, *Call Centers and the Global Division of Labor*, 147.

marking it, these three books highlight the growing importance of transnational approaches for an increasingly transnational workforce. The books reviewed above extend and complicate our understanding of this paradigmatic form of labour in a highly communicative and profitable sector of contemporary capitalism. The approaches clearly differ from each other, but the subjective dimension of call centre labour offers an unexpected point of connection between them. In this respect, there appear to be emergent consistencies across a labour force that is otherwise heterogeneous in its composition – subjective tensions between the professionalism and consumerism elicited from above and the labour identities resisting from below, an uneasiness in the face of established trade unionism, and a distaste for the job manifested in regularly high turnover rates. What this latest, interdisciplinary and diverse wave of 21st century call centre research is exploring, as a collective of call centre workers in the southern Italian region of Calabria put it recently, are the “new subjects and old forms of exploitation” emerging along a now-global digital assembly line.<sup>95</sup>

95. Carlo Cuccomarino and Francesco Maria Pezzulli, “Tra Mirafiori e Bangalore,” *Il Manifesto*, (13 December 2012): 8–9.