Reviews

A *Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines*, by Jan M. Padios, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. xiv + 232 pp. Paper, $25.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-7059-8

Jan Padios's *A Nation on the Line* is a comprehensive examination of Philippine call centers as they emerged as "postcolonial predicaments" at the turn of the twenty-first century. What sets Padios's study apart from other research on Filipino call centers is her claim that these workplaces represent a continuation of the Philippines' postcolonial relationship with the U.S., as well as demonstrate the increasing neoliberalization of the Philippine-state as it seeks to understand its place in the global economy. At the heart of Padios's work is an examination of Filipino call center workers as figures that illustrate the tensions surrounding these dual processes of postcolonial intimacy and neoliberal policy. The "contradictions, tensions, and anxieties"[1] of these processes are tracked on a larger scale in attempts to define Philippine futurity through a rapidly expanding call center industry and on a smaller scale in daily navigations of labor and identity formation in the workplace and in sites of social reproduction. Utilizing interdisciplinary and transnational methods, and bringing together conversations from Filipino studies, labor studies, and postcolonial studies, *A Nation on the Line* examines the problems of postcolonial nationhood through negotiations of Filipinoness in the everyday life of the Philippine call center.

In order to do this work, Padios focuses each chapter of her book on a particular contradiction that call center work generates for Filipino national identity. The first half of the book deals primarily with labor as one site of contradiction. First, she examines labor as affective through notions of "Filipino/American relatability" and "productive intimacy" among coworkers. And second, she examines labor as characterized by the shifting value of skill in a postindustrial knowledge economy, where the racialization and feminization of the

1. Jan Padios, *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke, 2018), 29.

workforce create constraints on the value of Filipino labor. The middle chapter of the book provides an in-depth examination of the call center application and training process, as Padios herself applies and trains to work at a call center alongside a cohort of young Filipinos. Finally, the second half of the book focuses on contradictions in class position and sexual politics, pointing to national anxieties about the kind of social reproduction that call centers bring forth. Together, these chapters don't "seek to resolve the tensions and anxieties" they identify, Padios claims, but instead attempt to analyze their construction. For example, Padios examines the way call center work promises proximity to information technology and entry into the global knowledge economy, but at the same time, is positioned as service work and feminized labor. In demonstrating that call center labor is both high-skilled and low-skilled, service work and professional work, stable and upwardly mobile while also contingent and precarious, Padios examines how this labor is representative of the larger problems shaping Filipino labor and national identity.

As such, call centers may create more problems for Filipino national identity than they solve. Indeed, as Padios points out (in alignment with other research on Philippine call centers), the BPO industry was represented by state actors and industry leaders as an answer to the problem of overseas labor migration. Since mass state-managed labor migration first began in the 1960s, discourses surrounding "brain drain" and "care drain" made Filipinos anxious about the loss of human capital resources and the separation of families occurring in labor migration. Therefore, call center work was presented as an alternative to labor migration: Filipinos could have access to Western capital and proximity to its knowledge economy without leaving their homes and their families. But as Padios's research shows, anxieties—particularly those surrounding skill value, racialization, feminization of labor, and heteronormative family dynamics—have not disappeared with the rapid growth of the Philippines' BPO industry, but have only appeared in new forms.

For these reasons, we can see *A Nation on the Line* as a continuation of Filipino studies scholarship that has traced the intimate ties between the U.S and the Philippines through networks of education, labor, and care. Following the work of Catherine Ceniza Choy, for example, Padios examines Filipino cultural affinity for the U.S. as the basis of transnational labor. In Choy's work, this emerged as a "culture of migration"[2] that animated nurse migration, and occurred alongside histories of American presence in colonial education. In Padios's research on Philippine call centers, we can see this through her pivotal concept of Filipino/American relatability, where state actors and industry leaders suggest that Filipinos are exceptionally suited for call center work because of their colonial relationship

2. Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke, 2003), 4.

(affectively structured, Padios contends) with the U.S. Padios's research also builds on the work of scholars who have traced Filipino labor migration through the formation of a neoliberal labor brokerage state, the feminization and racialization of overseas care workers, and the affective management inherent in migrant care work. Following this tradition, Padios's work continues to point to neoliberal state policies, narratives of national labor-based heroism, and the marketing of skilled and caring Filipino workers globally as social practices that continue to shape the value of Filipino labor.

Because of this, Padios's research also builds on historical and transnational approaches to examining the project of Philippine nationhood or what Vincente Rafael calls a "nationalism deferred."[3] Just as Rafael describes Philippine nationhood as characterized by uneven development and unrealized desires, and based on "irony" that "forestalls and interrupts the establishment of a single overarching narrative about the nation,"[4] Padios asserts that Philippine nationhood—examined through the figure of the call center worker—is a project of speculation interrupted by ironies both big and small. Padios's attention to nationhood as a postcolonial project of contradiction reminds me of one vignette from Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas* where an informant named Roberto watched buses filled with young American military men pass through the main highway near his childhood home. He thus grew up thinking that America was just an hour bus ride away over the mountains, and it was only much later that he found out that "America was indeed very far away."[5] This intimate and imagined geography, where America takes on a spectral and material presence in the Philippines, is also evident in the call center labor Padios so thoroughly describes, where mostly white American trainers come to the Philippines to participate in training, and outsourced labor requires knowledge of both physical and cultural American topography, such as state abbreviations or dates of major holidays.

While *A Nation on the Line* furthers existing conversations in Filipino studies, its comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical framing also sketches a map for possible trajectories for further research. As a scholar interested in the ways literacy has maintained intimate ties between the U.S. and the Philippines, I see Padios's research as pointing to future directions for examining Filipino learning and labor. For example, future research might track how tertiary education institutions in the Philippines respond to the growth of the BPO industry by credentializing and professionalizing call center work (a tradition already made evident in migrant worker education). In addition, Padios presents a critical approach to

3. Vincente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke, 2000), 206.
4. Rafael, *White Love*, 4.
5. Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke, 2003), 12.

analyzing English language use in Filipino labor that productively links language-based labor to questions of nationhood. Building on her work, we might examine Filipino labor and language as sites where the logic of capitalism is not natural, but must be taught as common sense, and that this logic, as Catherine Prendergast reminds us, is one that positions those outside the West as "backward" in global development narratives: English may be capital but this capital has differing value according to who possesses it. Thus, building on Padios's work might mean that we pay attention not only to the contradictions of Philippine nationhood but also to the contradictions of global capital that claims to operate via the unfettered flow of labor, capital, and bodies. How does call center work uphold this narrative, and how does it show its cracks and fissures?

We can see this question play out in one ethnographic account in the book where Padios describes an American cultural competency training that asked call center trainees to compare American English phrases to "Filipino-isms": the American English "goodbye" was compared to the Filipino-ism "I'll go ahead"; the American "I'll pick you up at 10 A.M." appeared alongside "I'll fetch you at 10 A.M."[6] The purpose of this lesson was to point to the deficit in Filipino English for relating to American customers. But as Padios explains, there was little interest in these American English language lessons by trainees and surprisingly much more engagement with the list of Filipino-isms. As she writes, trainees found the list "particularly funny."[7]

We might think about the trainees' response to American English training by situating it within the economy of English that Prendergast describes. For example, we might notice how the trainees see American English as distant, as an object of study, and perhaps as a literacy that has no real meaning to their own identities other than as functional skill. In contrast, Filipino English is alive, evolving, and creative. It is a site of vitality. While Padios details how applicants stalled in their use of English when presented with antagonistic questioning, we also see language play in the application and training process, such as from the trainee who describes himself as "007." In other words, we might understand Filipino English as not only a kind of mimicry, or solely as a product of workers' Filipino/American relatability, but we might also pay attention to the ways call center workers see these Filipino-isms as a means of negotiating and mediating Filipinoness itself—an identity that is perpetually evolving and uncertain. Indeed, Filipinoness and nationhood are the unsettled areas of social life that call center labor brings forth. As such, they might be sites for intellectual and affective engagement, as well as sites of possibility.

Along these lines, there may be an opportunity to see affect and its relation to labor and knowledge production not only as the means for the appropriation of affective capacity for productivity

6. Padios, *A Nation*, 112.
7. Padios, *A Nation*, 113.

and capital, but also a capacity for possibility or becoming (to use affect theory parlance), where precarity describes the space between uncertainty and emergence. By this I mean that there may be not only contradictions and tensions in call center work, but also traces of affective life that allow for the imagining of alternate temporalities or spatial affiliations that make up Philippine nationhood. According to William Mazzarella, it is the failure of affective mediation that leads to the continual desire to engage and re-engage with the conditions of identity and belonging. Following Mazzarella's claim, we might ask: What other negotiations of Filipinoness might make way, even for a brief moment, for some kind of futurity outside the constraints of capital and colonial recall? If American English and other practices of routinized work are not the aspects of labor that are engaging to Filipino workers, then what labor animates Filipino capacities, energies, and intellectual abilities? It might be in the work to sustain a logic of capitalism, but it could also be the work to open up alternative futurities for Philippine nationhood.

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Early on in A *Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* (2018), Jan M. Padios claims that the emergence of the Filipino call center industry marks "the single most important social, cultural, and economic development in the country in the twenty-first century."[1] This point cannot be emphasized enough, and I want to insist that Padios's book will come to mark a watershed moment in both Filipinx American and Philippine studies insofar as it represents a critical bridge that generatively spans earlier scholarship on the domestic and diasporic politics of Filipino labor export, and the more recent turn toward theorizing labor's reconfigured technological mediation within the global knowledge economy. Situating the rise of the Filipino call center specifically, and the development of the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in the Philippines more generally, within global capital's singular modernity, A *Nation on the Line* is one of those rare pieces of scholarship that seamlessly moves between an intimate and embodied relational ethnography and an

1. Jan M. Padios, A *Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.