

Domestic Shifts: Reproducing Peripheral Realism in Philippine Call-Center Fiction

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Abstract: This essay situates the recent rise of literature about Filipino call-center agents within the social, economic, and political shifts that are a result of the Philippine economy's waning reliance on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to support domestic social reproduction. While the Filipino business process outsourcing (BPO) industry positions itself as a domestic solution to the supposed diasporic fragmentation of home, family, and nation engendered by the Philippines' long dependence on its overseas workers, call-center fiction reveals how the disorienting temporal, affective, and spatial realities of call-center labor merely reconfigure and shift the terms of the Philippines' continued transnational subordination to global capitalist imperatives. Interrogating these domestic shifts, twenty-first-century Philippine call-center fiction reproduces a unique mode of peripheral realism made uncanny by the late-twentieth-century global dispersal of OFWs and the attendant crises of representation in both national identity and literary form that stem from this unparalleled labor exodus. Typified by experimental interruptions in both content and form, Philippine call-center fiction's uncanny reproduction of peripheral realism registers a self-reflexive awareness not only of the BPO industry's domestic-national contradictions but also of the Philippines' extraordinarily outsized and increasingly disorienting role in reproducing global capitalist modernity.

Keywords: Philippines, call-center fiction, peripheral realism, world-literary system, social reproduction

The meaning and experience of call center work extend beyond the call center proper and into the marketplace and home—linking it to the social reproduction of status, gender and sexual identity, and aspirations for the nation at large.

Jan M. Padios, *A Nation on the Line* 8

I. Introduction

In 2011, a widely circulated *New York Times* article reported that the Philippines had surpassed India as the world’s “new capital of call centers” (Bajaj).¹ The article has been taken up by many scholars thinking through the “new ways in which Asia is linked to the Americas” (Hoskins and Nguyen 5) and cited in numerous academic studies.² Unsurprisingly, charting this shift from India to the Philippines opens up multiple lines of critical inquiry into matters such as the imperialist role of the English language in the historical development of both countries and the comparative advantage afforded the two countries within the global labor market because of their large anglophone populations. But while the emergence of the Philippines as the “new capital of call centers” offers diverse opportunities for reflection, the most significant shift attendant to the twenty-first-century rise of Filipino call centers has largely gone unnoticed.

In 2017, a short piece in the business section of the *Manila Times* announced that revenue from business process outsourcing (BPO)—the broader industry encompassing call-center services—would soon “outpace remittances from overseas Filipino workers” since projected growth in the Filipino BPO sector was more than double the projected growth for overseas remittances (Lazo). Lacking the abridged simplicity of the triumphalist *New York Times* headline, the understated significance of this recent economic shift requires a quick summary of reconfigured labor patterns in the Philippines. In 1974, two years after declaring martial law, Ferdinand Marcos institutionalized state-sponsored labor out-migration with the passage of Presidential Decree 442. Burdened by debt encumbrance to development organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank,

the Philippine economy has relied on transnational remittances from its overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to support domestic growth for decades.³ Remittances have become so central to the economic development of the Philippines that the country is arguably the world's pre-eminent "labor brokerage state" (Rodriguez 141). But while more than ten percent of the population still labors abroad, a subtle domestic shift in Filipino labor composition started to occur at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As multinational corporations attempt to increase revenue by offshoring and outsourcing different points along their value chains, many information and communications technology services like data collection, content moderation, and voice-based customer care have been transferred, as "peripheral functions" (Fabros 27), to third-party contractors in developing countries like the Philippines.⁴ Since the turn of the century, the BPO sector in the Philippines has grown exponentially in both generated revenue and size of the workforce. Today, more than a million Filipinos provide BPO services (IBPAP, "Breakthroughs" 5), and more than eighty-five percent of those employees work in call centers (Philippine Statistics Authority 1). Thus, while BPO work and call-center labor are not interchangeable, since the former encapsulates the latter, in the contemporary Philippines they might just as well be.

The overtaking of overseas remittances by BPO revenue, and by call-center labor in particular, has become a key concern in recent Philippine anglophone fiction, which has been organized to a striking degree around the storied OFW, the country's famed *bagong bayani* or "new hero."⁵ In other writing, I developed the term "Philippine reproductive fiction" to describe literary works about OFWs whose representations of exported and commodified reproductive labor abroad symptomatically figure the Philippine state's own crises of social reproduction at home (Marte-Wood). Reproductive labor is the work of reproducing labor power itself; it is the waged and unwaged care work tasked with the social reproduction of the workforce (Gimenez 281). Although overseas Filipinos work in myriad professions, reproductive laborers such as domestic helpers, caregivers, and nurses remain the most visible OFWs within the global imaginary. Care work has arguably become the

Philippines' most well-known global export. However, as the increasing importance of BPO revenue upends the centrality of OFW remittances to the domestic economy, so too does the emergent body of Philippine call-center literature reverse the spatial coordinates of OFW reproductive fiction. Instead of going abroad, the protagonists of Philippine call-center fiction stay at home—often literally, as the majority of these works devote more narrative space to domestic settings than they do to BPO offices.

Because many reproductive-laboring OFWs toil within private domestic spaces, the notion of workplace and home has long been entangled for transnational Filipino workers—their lived experiences give shape to the materialist feminist insistence that “every sphere of capitalist organization presupposes the home” (Dalla Costa 32). Exploiting blatantly gendered anxieties about OFWs’ “absence from the home(land)” (Rodriguez 97), the Filipino BPO industry has positioned itself as a new alternative to the older “Philippine model of exodus capitalism” (Andriesse and Kang 338)—one that is capable of “reconnecting the disconnected family” (Padios, “Dial ‘C’” 218).⁶ BPO corporate rhetoric ubiquitously claims that Filipino “families can remain intact because opportunities are available at home” (Robles). In a recent press release, Magellan Solutions Outsourcing Incorporated, a large inbound call center based in Mandaluyong, claims that during the BPO boom at the turn of the twenty-first century, “many Filipinos found it a beauty that they did not have to leave the country to be able to provide enough support for their families” (“What is the Latest Outlook”). While not directly mentioned by name, the specter of the OFW drifts to the fore as the less-desirable other to call-center employment.⁷ Appealing to the assumed filial piety of Filipinos, call-center work gets recast as a means to support families and keep them intact. But call-center work is technically not reproductive labor, so the growing archive of Philippine call-center fiction therefore understands this customer care as analogous to reproductive labor precisely because business process outsourcing has uncannily shifted notions of home, family, and nation heretofore defined by the OFW imaginary.⁸

While Philippine call-center fiction—short stories such as Indira Myra C. Endaya’s “Shift” (1999), Joseph Nacino’s “Walking Backwards” (2005), Dean Francis Alfar’s “Six from Downtown” (2006), Sharmaine Galve’s “The Paranoid Style” (2008), Arlynn Despi’s “Carpaccio (Or, Repentance as a Meat Recipe)” (2011), Julian dela Cerna’s “The Love Spell” (2012), Glenn Diaz’s “Escape” (2013), and Victor Fernando R. Ocampo’s “Exit Quiapo Station” (2016); Chris Martinez’s monodrama *Welcome to IntelStar* (2006); Noel Pascual and A.J. Bernardo’s graphic novel series *Crime-Fighting Call Center Agents* (2011–14); and Diaz’s novella *Kilometer Zero* (2016) and novel *The Quiet Ones* (2017)—renders the care work of OFWs and BPO agents analogous, its mode of literary representation is qualitatively distinct from that of OFW reproductive fictions. E. San Juan Jr. asserts that the late-twentieth-century diasporic dispersal of Filipina domestic workers engendered a “crisis of representation” for the Philippines that informed “the breakdown of realistic representation” in OFW narratives (*History and Form* 168). Registering this crisis of realism through attenuated protagonicity, peripheral characterization, and elided emplotment, OFW reproductive fictions critically “illuminate the fragmented *content* of reproductive labor time through *formal* experiments in temporally disjunctive narrative” (Marte-Wood; emphasis in original). While OFW reproductive fiction’s experimental modes of writing are best understood through Benita Parry’s account of peripheral modernism,⁹ I suggest that in returning the Philippines’ transnational protagonists home, twenty-first-century call-center fiction instead reproduces a peripheral realism made uncanny by the OFW crisis of representation.

Two crucial yet distinct approaches to defining peripheral realism have emerged from the recent scholarship on “worlding realisms” within the ever-shifting coordinates of capital’s “singular modernity” and its “world-literary system.”¹⁰ While each approach is indebted to Lukácsian realism and its attempt “to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” (Lukács 38), both ultimately go beyond Lukács’ work in re-orienting their respective notions of social totality to the problem of

“historical motion at the periphery” (Lye 351). One approach, that of the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), turns to Michael Löwy’s notion of “critical irrealism” to claim that experimental and irrealist aesthetics in (semi-)peripheral literatures are often more real than “ideal-type realism” (WReC 68) insofar as they best register the fragmented and contradictory experiences of capitalist modernity beyond the world-system’s core.¹¹ The other approach, best exemplified by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, turns instead to Giovanni Arrighi’s periodization in *The Long Twentieth Century* (2004), which tracks global capitalism through successive imperial hegemonies and cyclical oscillations between periods of production and circulation as a means of historicizing realism’s perennial returns as neither anachronistic nor regressive but dynamically critical. While their shared materialist commitment to peripheral realism as critical methodology reveals many generative resonances between these two approaches, they differ significantly in their understanding of what constitutes peripheral realist objects of study. Whereas the WReC’s focus on the relationship between “peripherality and irrealist aesthetics” (68) leads them to experimental texts, modernist forms, and fantastic content, Esty and Lye instead attend to “realist-appearing realism” (Lye 345) in the peripheries of the world-literary system. Not entirely at home within either account, Philippine call-center fiction collapses the conceptual distance between these two seminal approaches to peripheral realist objects.

Because Philippine call-center fiction exemplifies “the decentering of the entire older realist-modernist dyad” (Esty 323), any analysis of its realism must then paradoxically “take the form of an identification of its *modernism*” as well (WReC 66; emphasis in original). To this end, I focus on the brief incursions of experimental forms typically associated with modernist aesthetics—metatheatrical address, nonlinear plots, multiple narratorial perspectives, and autoreferentiality—within Philippine call-center fiction’s otherwise realist narratives. That these elements do not typify this literature in toto, but instead momentarily interrupt the texts’ prevailing realism, critically registers the uncanny alienation that results from the Filipino call center’s transnational reproduction of social reality for clients in the global north.¹² Responding to

the formal contradictions attendant to the ersatz reality of BPO work, with its scripted conversations, one-way deference, and affective subordination, Philippine call-center fiction interrupts its own literary realism, and in this way “irrealist aesthetics might then be presented as corresponding not to any depreciation of realism, but to a refinement of it” (WReC 70).

In the strange new labor occurring in Philippine call centers, with their flipped working-day schedules, “accent neutralizations,” and technological mediations, “reality itself comes to seem unreal” (WReC 76).¹³ This work’s content therefore reveals the main formal distinction between peripheral realism’s uncanny reproduction within twenty-first-century Philippine call-center fiction and the “realist-appearing” peripheral realism of earlier moments within Philippine literary history, such as the 1940s social realism of authors like Juan C. Laya and Manuel Arguilla, or the 1970s/1980s “national democratic front” socialist realism of writers like F. Sionil José and Lualhati Bautista. Paul Nadal’s generative account of a “historically emergent peripheral realism” (601) in Commonwealth-era Philippine fiction reveals how earlier literary developments indexing “the historical attenuation of political sovereignty” (594) concomitantly register Filipino labor’s *formal* subsumption into the capitalist world-system. Following this logic, I argue that the uncanny return of peripheral realism in Philippine call-center fiction therefore indexes Filipino labor’s twenty-first-century *real* subsumption into new forms of work “remade entirely in the image of capital” (Marte-Wood and Santos 110).¹⁴ Whereas earlier Philippine peripheral realisms took their conceptual possibility as a given, Philippine call-center fiction, as a peripheral realism of real subsumption, foregrounds its “interrogation of realism and the realistic itself” (Jameson, “Antinomies” 479).¹⁵ This historically specific development in Philippine literature turns the peripheral modernism of OFW reproductive fiction inside out by returning home and reproducing those experimental formal strategies whose link to diaspora gestures beyond the nation in order to apprehend Filipino subjectivity within the more expansive social totality of the world-system. Thus, Philippine call-center fiction’s uncanny reproduction of peripheral realism signals a self-reflexive awareness not

only of the BPO industry's domestic-national contradictions, but also of the Philippines' extraordinarily outsized role in reproducing global capitalist modernity.

At the level of form, "realist aesthetics are impurely intermingled with the unreal" (Deckard 351) in Philippine call-center fiction, a choice that registers the disorienting shifts attendant to the rise of Filipino business process outsourcing. But at the level of content, a more striking pattern emerges: Philippine call-center fiction's irrealist interruptions occur almost exclusively within domestic settings. Nacino leaves it unclear whether his BPO worker protagonist has been communicating with an uncle or a supernatural, red-eyed *balete* tree behind his grandmother's house in rural Rizal province; dela Cerna's call-center agent accidentally reanimates a corpse that subsequently haunts a boarding house for BPO workers; Pascual and Bernardo's crime-fighting call-center agents battle mythical *aswangs* inside domestic spaces; Despi's call-center agent slowly transforms into a *butiki* "house lizard" after failing to repent for his sins; and Alfar stages an impossible moment of the grotesque on the bloody floor of a call-center agent's home. Such moments reveal surprising continuities across the different scales of domestic, national, and literary settings. Shifting from realist to irrealist modes of representation within the literal spaces of home, Philippine call-center fiction's irreal literary domestic shifts subjectively register the real economic domestic shifts, more deeply incorporating the Philippines into the uneven networks of the twenty-first-century capitalist world-system.

As both literary interruption and economic reconfiguration, Philippine domestic shifts index what Neferti X. M. Tadiar calls the eradication of "the reproductive function of the nation" (*Fantasy-Production* 55). The inability of the Philippine state and domestic economy to ensure its citizens' social reproduction has pushed individuals "out of the country by the sheer absence of means of living" (55). But whereas domestic economic crises formed the main push factor for the massive out-migration exodus at the end of the twentieth century, the twenty-first-century development of a robust BPO industry—according to outsourcing advocates and populist politicians alike—pulls Filipino migrants home. While the rise of call-center employment appears to herald the return

of socially reproductive “means of living” to the domestic-national space of the Philippines, the concomitant rise of call-center fiction critically undercuts such nationalist optimism. Representing the most acclaimed works in this burgeoning genre, the short story, dramatic monologue, and novel to which I turn below each give the lie to the BPO sector’s promise of domestic restoration and familial reconciliation. Whereas the call-center industry imagines itself as the solution to the OFW fragmentation of home, family, and nation, Philippine call-center fiction reveals how these domestic tensions have merely been shifted by business process outsourcing. In recontextualizing the Philippines’ domestic openings to new global capitalist imperatives, these texts contemplate the possibility of escaping incorporation into the transnational information economy’s domesticating scripts.

Every evening, thousands of Filipino call-center agents leave home to begin their shifts as the spectral voices reproducing “reality” in the global north. In the dead of night, as they modify their accents, mask their locations, and traverse identities in complex performative processes of “authenticity work” (Mirchandani 8) and “deceptive mimicry” (Rajan-Rankin, “Invisible Bodies” 11), these technologically disembodied workers perform new, reconfigured modes of Filipino care.¹⁶ Displaced from the normative social rhythms of both domestic-familial and domestic-national settings, call-center agents are tasked with reproducing the new economic rhythms of postcolonial capitalism.¹⁷ It is only as these workers return home after their graveyard shifts, often emotionally drained from their “virtual migration” (Aneesh 67), that the rest of the nation begins to wake. Philippine call-center fiction casts its critical gaze upon these liminal moments when spaces and labors begin to blur, and it finds new settings for the continued disciplinary domestication of Filipino care. In their interpenetration of home and workplace, these fictions locate the reproductive resonances between OFW domestic labor and BPO customer service work. Against industry narratives that insist that the rise of Filipino business process outsourcing portends both national reconciliation and economic autonomy, Philippine call-center fiction critically puts such developmentalist calls on hold.

II. Domestic Openings

As one of the first works of Philippine call-center fiction, Endaya's Nick Joaquin Literary Award-winning short story "Shift" (1999), which was published in the esteemed University of the Philippines anthology series *The Likhaan Book of Poetry and Fiction*, poignantly contemplates the dissolution of human contact against the ironic backdrop of the BPO industry's attempt to valorize communication. "Shift" depicts the disintegrating romantic relationship of a call-center agent named Glenda and uses the disorienting demands of call-center labor to represent the growing emotional detachment within Glenda's home. Endaya's story shifts between Glenda's outsourced "International Customer Service" work in Makati (142), for which she helps American customers from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. Philippine Standard Time, and her daily recovery, the reproduction of her labor power, in the Quezon City apartment she shares with her boyfriend who works a normal daytime schedule. Sensing the emotional gulf growing within their shared domestic space, Glenda remarks: "We move in different time zones now" (Endaya 140). Glenda's graveyard shift causes, in Kalindi Vora's terms, "a type of social death, where the producer of affective commodities becomes cut off from the source of her own social reproduction through relationships with other people and society in general" (56).¹⁸ And yet, while the call center structures Glenda's social and temporal dislocation, Endaya's readers only perceive these isolating effects within the domestic setting of Glenda's home.

Painfully aware of the asynchronous gap between her own labor time and the "circadian and quotidian rhythms" (Isaac 424) of normative social time, Glenda most forcibly encounters these "different time zones" when she returns from her shift at the call center and notes: "At home, in our room, I am welcomed by the sight of [my partner] sprawled on the sheets, hogging the bed as usual. . . . My first few seconds in bed are also his last" (Endaya 145). As Glenda's relationship falls apart, she suffers from bouts of immobility at home. In her account of overseas domestic laborers living and working in "near-total confinement in their employers' homes," Tadiar claims most contemporary studies of labor's globalized movement and flexibility often overlook "forms and conditions of *immobility* in the age of diaspora" (*Fantasy-Production* 116;

emphasis in original). Remedying this lacuna, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan insists that readers attend to the formal contradictions that structure the call-center agent's "economic and social (im)mobility" (84). Doing so therefore recasts Glenda's feelings of trapped stasis within her domestic life as a consequence of her alienated BPO labor. Attempting to stave off emotional and physical immobility at home, Glenda paradoxically forces herself into the automatic routines of her call-center work in the dead of the Manila night. Just as Endaya's title alludes to two different notions of "shift"—Glenda's work shift at the call center and the emotional shift within her romantic relationship—the domestic setting in the story shifts between the two registers of domestic home and domestic economy.

Published at the turn of the twenty-first century, and representing a mode of call-center service work in which the Filipina agent, as auxiliary bank support, "handle[s] all the calls of clients who use their credit cards abroad" (Endaya 142), Endaya's short story links transnational economic exchange to interpersonal relatability.¹⁹ Historicizing "Shift" against the macroeconomic aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis symptomatically reveals the narrative's preoccupation with stasis, both as physical immobility and emotional fixity, as the fear of the regional recession and currency devaluation turning into secular stagnation within the Philippine domestic economy. "Shift" begins with Glenda waking up in the middle of the day, still exhausted from her graveyard shift the previous night at the Towerbank call center, panic-stricken that her body's "motionless state" is "def[y]ing all sensations of movement" (139).²⁰ When Glenda later tells her emotionally unavailable partner that she "tried to wake up and . . . couldn't move," he caustically dismisses her fear of immobility and tells her "you just think you woke up. . . . [I]t's all just a dream" (139). She refutes his indifference and claims: "That's different . . . you don't understand. This has been plaguing our family for generations" (140). After this curious use of the collective possessive determiner in "our family," along with the unclear pronoun referent, Endaya's narrative moves away from providing a familial history of immobility and leaves the particulars of "this" intergenerational plague unresolved. In this narrative silence, "our family" scales up extradiegetically

and gestures toward a more expansive *pamilya*, the *bayan*, Tagalog for people, town, and nation, that exists beyond the story's immediate narrative frame. Endaya's peripheral realism therefore blurs dreams, reality, and national history as it antimimetically imagines social totality. At the precise moment when the narrative opens and enlarges its representational horizon, Endaya's leitmotif of domestic stasis cognitively maps the Philippines' own intergenerational anxieties of plagued economic development and labor mobility.

Waking up from the currency devaluation contagion in the immediate aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, former Philippine president Fidel Ramos attempted to allay American investors' fears of his country's economic immobility. In a 1998 keynote address to the Asia Society of Houston, President Ramos, while acknowledging that the financial "crisis [had] turned around 30 years of economic growth" ("The Asian Crisis"), implicitly appealed to the older, domesticating script of American colonialist tutelage through the didactic lesson the financial crisis offered the Philippines. He told the audience in Texas:

First of all, we Filipinos chose to respond to the crisis positively—to take to the heart the lesson it teaches—which is that global interdependence is a fact of life, and that global markets punish policy mistakes severely. The crisis may have induced one of our neighbors to close its financial markets to migratory capital. But we ourselves are keeping our own economy open to the world. ("The Asian Crisis")

In addition to doubling down on the liberalization of the Philippine economy that was the hallmark of his "Philippines 2000" presidential plan, Ramos reasserted the safety for foreign direct investment (FDI) by positioning the Philippines at the forefront of the burgeoning knowledge economy's "spread of the revolution in communications and information technologies" ("The Asian Crisis").²¹ This revolution was no exaggeration, since the first major economic sector in the Philippines to be privatized and deregulated under the Ramos administration was the telecommunications industry (Padios, *Nation* 15). Gesturing toward

a solvent Filipino economic future dependent on technologically mediated affective labor performed in call centers, Ramos' assessment of post-crisis fiscal policy attempted to forestall domestic economic immobility by shifting the Philippines' peripheral position in the global information economy and remaining "open to the world."

In Endaya's "Shift," the figural becomes an entry point into the multiple registers of the domestic. The obscured contours of the domestic economy's opening to globalized business process outsourcing only become visible through the aesthetic representation of Glenda's relational crisis within her home. Reflecting a bleak peripheral capitalist realism, Endaya's protagonist appears to escape the irreality of her body's immobility only by returning to the reality of the call center's imperative to remain "open to the world." Through this domestic opening, Glenda leaves her "motionless state" (Endaya 139) behind in the home and enters a space of imagined automated labor. As she begins "another fun-filled night as a cyborg," Glenda notes that when she goes "off to work, everything becomes mechanical" (142). Glenda's series of rote movements—"I punch in my identification code, swipe a card, don headphones, face the computer, and begin my shift" (142)—belies the artifice of her renewed mobility and reveal the gendered consequences of opening the Philippine domestic economy to the world.

As a figure for a feminized, post-crisis Philippine national economy, Glenda's desire for "wide open spaces to run to" (149) never manifests, since the domestic opening of home and economy primarily serves the interests of foreign direct investment. Glenda's feminized lack of autonomy therefore indexes how multinational firms exploit Filipina labor through what Tadiar calls "the libidinal action" (*Fantasy-Production* 45) of global capital and its masculinized demand for an "open relationship which economically means the letting down of protectionist barriers and 'liberalization' of imports, that is, easy entry and exit" (*Fantasy-Production* 44). Specifically writing about call centers, Tadiar claims that

[t]he burgeoning call-center industry attests to this subscription of Philippine labor as 'immaterial labor,' combining affective and cognitive labor in the production of profit for multi-

national corporations, but also—as in the hospitality industries of the past and in the current domestic and luxury-care services of the present . . .—in the production of bodily well-being and life values for a privileged class. (“If Not Mere Metaphor”)

The privileged demand that Glenda’s affective labor, itself stretched across the domestic settings of home and economy, remain “open to the world” reasserts an older, gendered logic of imperialist exploitation that situates the Philippines within an “overt system of post-colonial regroupings” (Poster and Mirchandani 14). At the story’s close, which also signals the end of her romantic relationship, Glenda amends her earlier lament about “mov[ing] in different time zones” by despondently saying: “We move in different spaces now” (Endaya 150). If globalized capitalism, according to Fredric Jameson and Carolyn Lesjak, compels “a ‘realist’ aesthetic as a matter now of space rather than of time” (Lesjak 35), then Endaya’s peripheral realism moves this collective “we” across interpersonal, national, and global spaces, shifting away from the emotionally disintegrating domestic space of Glenda’s home to the economically integrating domestic space of a national economy more fully opening to the capitalist world-system.

III. Domesticating Scripts and House Rules

As Philippine call-center fiction allegorically registers the domestic economy’s opening to the world, thereby analogizing call-center work to reproductive care (and coupling the BPO office with the home), affective labor becomes the link between these two otherwise unlike social forms. The literary mediation of affective labor—the production and maintenance of affects through, in Michael Hardt’s well-known formulation, “human contact and interaction” (95)—becomes the formal link between call-center labor and care work. Indeed, in the Philippines, the term “contact center” is often used interchangeably with “call center” (Tupas and Salonga 374). According to Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta’s generative reframing of BPO labor as care work that produces “intimate encounters” (18), call-center agents develop “affective repertoires—of courtesy, familiarity, friendliness, helpfulness, and, above all,

caring" (26). Both Philippine call-center agents and OFW caregivers modify the emotional or relational experiences of their clients and produce "affective commodities" (Vora 51).²² Call-center agents attempt to establish relational rapport in order to more effectively provide a given service to their callers, whereas overseas domestic caregivers perform the emotional labor attendant to elder-, child-, or healthcare.²³ Linking call-center labor, as care work, to the domestic space, Allan Punzalan Isaac observes that Filipino agents "provide small human moments in people's homes and handsets to make the quotidian possible for the first world" (416). Interrupting the ways in which Filipino affective labor is tasked with reproducing new social realities in the global north, Philippine call-center fiction troubles the BPO industry's "fantasy-production" (Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production*) of agents as reterritorialized overseas domestic caregivers.

The affective commodities produced by call-center agents emerge from technologically mediated performances of care, in which "emotions are mobilized in pursuit of exchange values" (Padios, "Dial 'C'" 224). But only certain affective registers are commensurate with capital's valorization. Within the call center's "capitalist culture of emotions," anger, resentment, disgust, and apathy are unproductive feelings (Santa Ana 6). The privileged autonomy to express full affective ranges in transnational exchanges is decidedly one-way. Call-center agents are forced, through the scripted language of customer care, to domesticate unproductive emotions in order to more effectively perform the kinds of affective labor that produce value. This subjugated content of call-center work as structurally exploited affective labor is therefore facilitated through the formal delimitation of language—control emerges through the call center's domesticating scripts.

Martinez's "one-act call center monologue" (1), *Welcome to IntelStar* (2006), self-reflexively interrogates the artifice of scripted call-center conversations by appropriating and subsequently détourning the actual form of a call-center training orientation. A winner of the most prestigious annual literary prize in the Philippines, the Palanca Award, Martinez's extended comedic monologue is told from the perspective of a corporate trainer, a "Makati middle-management yuppie" named

Chelsea (*Welcome* 3). Set in a conference room in a towering office building along Ayala Avenue, *Welcome to IntelStar* begins with stage directions for Chelsea to “address the audience who ‘play’ the part of her new batch of trainees” (3). Speaking directly to her new IntelStar recruits and humorously teaching them how to provide “dedicated service” (13) to American clients, Chelsea’s mode of address draws attention to how call-center communication is formally delimited by corporate protocol. The literal scriptedness of Chelsea’s dramatic monologue recalls the common characterization of call-center occupations as “scripted jobs” (Hegde 178). While previous readings of *Welcome to IntelStar* focus almost exclusively on its satirical content,²⁴ I argue that an interrogation of Martinez’s striking formal experimentation reveals a critical unrealism that interrupts the domestic imperatives that more deeply embed Filipino subjects within the twenty-first-century capitalist world-system.

Welcome to IntelStar stages the performativity involved in call-center service work as literal theatrical performance, a choice that recalls Arlie Russell Hochschild’s research on the different types of sustained emotional work required in evoking and managing feeling. Martinez’s play satirizes the types of shallow performativity demanded of call-center agents through the self-reflexive literalization of “surface acting” (Hochschild, “Emotion Work” 558) as theatrical performance. As such, the monologue’s formal mode of audience address complicates the delineation between real and artificial affects in a manner more akin to Hochschild’s account of “deep acting,” or the emotion work that “is less likely to be experienced as part of the self and more likely to be experienced as part of the job” (“Emotion Work” 570). Because *Welcome to IntelStar*’s audience simultaneously inhabits the roles of extradiegetic narratees (detached viewers of the play) and interpellated call-center trainee subjects (peripheral actors in the play), Martinez’s metatheatrical form compounds the various levels and meanings of “acting” in a thoroughly experimental manner.

Martinez inverts the Brechtian unreality of the collapsing fourth wall, since Chelsea’s sustained interactive engagement with the audience is not an exception but the rule. Unrealism itself comes to seem real, to invert the

words of the Warwick Research Collective (76). As the play's audience is both scripted into its fictional narrative and hailed into its dramaturgical space, these acts of ideological ascription recall Louis Althusser's well-known claim that individuals "are *always already* subjects" (263; emphasis in original). Every moment of audience participation denies the agency of the monologue's peripheral actors by remaining rigidly didactic.²⁵ Without prior knowledge or consent, *Welcome to IntelStar's* audience members are "in-scripted" as peripheral actors in a manner dishearteningly analogous to Filipino call-center agents' conscription into the global knowledge economy as "always already" peripheral subjects.

Martinez most often stages these contradictions connected to the call center's domesticating scripts through the figural metaphor of the home. While *Welcome to IntelStar* begins by satirizing the practice of "Americanizing" agent names and by parodying accent neutralization exercises, the latter half of the training is devoted to the call center's "house rules" (Martinez 12). When Chelsea tells her audience that IntelStar "follow[s] very strict protocols" (14), it becomes apparent that the BPO firm's domestication of unproductive affects depends on house rules capable of "managing feeling" (Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* 35). Further tethering the Filipino home to the new house rules of global capital, Chelsea painfully reminds her recruits that the disorienting temporalities of call-center work have the capacity to turn familial domestic spaces into sites of profound social alienation. She commiserates:

I know it's hard for your biological clocks to adjust right away, knowing that our working hours here are not what you may call normal. Just when everybody's going home, that's the time you'll be going to work. When everybody is sleeping or spending time with family and friends, you'll be working on the floor. And when you get home ready to hit the sack, everybody else is up and about, ready to start the day. (Martinez 12)

Like so many other works of call-center fiction, Martinez reimagines the Filipino home as a space emptied of its socially reproductive capacity.

Going over IntelStar's house rules for "when the caller becomes verbally abusive," Chelsea insists that her audience stick to the script: "One,

you should always maintain your composure. Two, if you feel you can no longer handle the call, transfer it to your supervisor. Three, sincerely apologize to your caller. . . . Just let him vent. Do not butt in as he verbally abuses you. And try to apologize when there is an opportunity to do so" (15). Communication protocol functions as a "formal apparatus" that regulates the unevenness of affective transfer in transnational workplaces (Galloway 55). But this passage also implicitly links gendered subordination to call-center work when Chelsea uses the pronoun "he" to refer to her imagined irate caller. Linking the call-center agent to the domestic helper, Carina Chotirawe reads Chelsea's "choice of pronoun" as a reminder "that physical and emotional abuse is always prevalent as a sordid reality faced by overseas contract workers" (72). Compounding this gendered imagining, Chelsea subsequently recalls a past phone exchange that involved gendered slurs and the threat of sexual violence. Chelsea's extended description of this conversation, which she recounts almost verbatim, and the transfer of its attendant affects to the play's audience, formally reproduces a technologically mediated inversion of the "global care chains" that connect the Philippines to the world.²⁶ If care moves up these global chains, then Philippine call-center fiction importantly demonstrates how emotional distress can move down these same transnational links.

Teaching her audience how to detach their emotional interiority from their affective labor—what Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco reads as "the suppression of subjectivity" (19) and Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta frames as the "atrophy of . . . emotional identity" (13)—Chelsea states: "At the end of the day, it's all just part of the job, you see. It's just a job. I shouldn't get hurt and I shouldn't take it personally. I mean, he doesn't know me. He can't even see me. How can he even hurt me when he's on the other side of the planet? . . . If you ever get hurt, remember, they're just words—words mean nothing" (Martinez 17). Martinez's scripted lines undermine their own meaning as they self-reflexively ironize the monologue form that Chelsea, as singular *dramatis persona*, employs. Words mean everything because language affects its listeners, whether in one-act plays or transnational phone conversations. Chelsea's insistence that her trainees "never get too involved with any caller whatever the reason

and situation may be" (18) ideologically recasts the corporate domestication of workers' affects as self-preservation. Against the Filipino BPO industry's fictional narrative of call-center work as domestic reconciliation, Martinez's monodrama suggests that the call center's domesticating scripts, with their formal delimitations of emotional autonomy, preserve and deepen, rather than ameliorate, the affective distance between the Philippines and its diasporic workers.

Although it begins as a situational comedy, *Welcome to IntelStar* ends as a social tragedy.²⁷ In the final moments of the play, Chelsea recounts one last instructive example of the importance of maintaining the firm's house rules. A lonely Filipina immigrant in San Diego calls Chelsea to nostalgically reminisce about the Philippines. Simply wanting to talk, to *tsismis*, the elderly caller asks Chelsea if she is Filipina, a question which, due to protocol, Chelsea cannot answer honestly. But Chelsea's disembodied voice betrays her in spite of her adherence to the script, and the caller hails the agent: "You are! You are a Pinay. It's true what my *kumares* told me. . . . I can hear it in your voice. You are a Pinay. How is everything back there in the Philippines? . . . What is Manila like these days? I haven't come home for 20 years *na*. I miss all of my family back there" (17). Throughout this conversation Chelsea obstinately follows the house rules and repeatedly states, "I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information" (17), before finally hanging up on the diasporic Filipina caller. Foreclosing the possibility of transnational affective solidarity, IntelStar's domesticating scripts formally prevent Chelsea from emotionally inhabiting this caller's notion of home. In this moment, even more abstract conceptions of home—from the distant vantage point of diaspora—are emptied of human compassion, real care, and empathy. Ending this recounted exchange by reminding her new recruit listeners to "keep yourself distant" (18), Chelsea projects the final slide of her training presentation, which ironically reads: "IntelStar C.A.R.E.s. Creating A Rewarding Experience" (18). Explicitly satirizing the contradictions inherent within the BPO industry's instrumentalized conception of care, *Welcome to IntelStar* painfully dramatizes the call center's domestication of complex affective registers. Missing her family and wanting desperately to be reminded of home, Martinez's diasporic

Filipina caller in the United States picks up the phone, circumventing real geographical distance, only to experience the uncanny emotional gulf maintained by the Philippine call center's house rules.

IV. Domestic Disincorporation

Glenn Diaz's magisterial, Palanca Award-winning novel *The Quiet Ones*—the most ambitious work of Philippine call-center fiction to date—explicitly positions the BPO industry's house rules as the perspective of global capital and explores the possibility of critically apprehending the blurred domestic registers of home, family, and nation from an entirely different point of view. Despite *The Quiet Ones'* nonlinear plot, “waning of affect” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 10), and irreal experiments in narrative perspective, Diaz's insistence that his text is “realist, located in the everyday” (qtd. in Hosmillo) holds true because the novel ardently attempts to represent capitalist totality. While other Philippine call-center fiction also experiments with irrealist narratorial points of view, such as Despi's accusatory use of the second-person singular “you” throughout “Carpaccio (Or, Repentance as a Meat Recipe),” *The Quiet Ones'* formal shifts in literary perspective develop the genre's most sustained immanent critique of the Philippines' contradictory position within “the incommensurable geographies of global capital” (Deckard 369), thereby fulfilling the criteria for what Sharae Deckard calls the “world-system novel” (369).

The only section of *The Quiet Ones* that interrupts the consistent alternation between first- and third-person points of view with the rare, first-person plural “we” narrative perspective also happens to be the section set most fully in the space of the call center. Recalling Alan Palmer's narratological work on “intermental thought” in literature, Diaz's use of the first-person plural perspective formally registers how communicative labor performed in Philippine call centers depends on what Palmer calls “socially distributed, situated, or extended cognition” (427). But unlike Martinez's “you,” which formally incorporates the audience/reader into the domesticating logics of the Filipino call center, Diaz's “we” structurally prohibits our textual subsumption into that space. Whereas the American English “we” obfuscates the particularity between exclusion

and inclusion, Diaz's Philippine English "we" carries with it the more nuanced distinction between the two first-person plural pronouns of Tagalog: this "we" is unmistakably *kami* (we/us, excluding the listener), and not *tayo* (we/us, including the listener). And most importantly, Diaz's exclusionary "we" voices the collective perspective of the novel's multiple queer characters.

As the novel's queer chorus links the call center to nationalist development and economic reproduction, it also foreshadows the possibility of queer flight from Philippine society's domesticating scripts when they note that "[l]eaving the country—like death . . . was one of the few scenarios outlined in the *Manual* for which there were no 'Suggested Rebuttals'" (Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* 234). Speaking through a nonnormative collective voice, this irrealist perspectival shift challenges, at the level of literary form itself, the normative networks of capitalist reproduction and valorization that open the Philippine domestic economy and subordinate it to the global imperatives of business process outsourcing. By queering perspectival form, Diaz embeds in the narrative a critical skepticism of the constitutive link between "reproductive heterosexuality and national futurity" (Ponce 57). In this way, Diaz's formal experimentation engenders an immanent critique of the transnational call center's domestic exploitations, and the queer "we" emerges from this space of contradiction as a "dissenting motif" of "formal negativity" (Harvey 5). Just as Endaya's short story transfers nationalist economic anxieties onto the figural space of the home, and Martinez's play locates scripted control in the ideological architecture of house rules, so too does *The Quiet Ones* understand the home and the call center as parallel settings of domestic incorporation into the normative logics of capitalist reproduction. In what follows, I develop the notion of domestic disincorporation to describe the writing of a postcolonial queer negativity that Diaz positions against transnational capital's structural dependence on Filipino affective labor. Conditioned by the relative absence of collective bargaining within the BPO industry, domestic disincorporation registers the negative agency *The Quiet Ones* affords its queer call-center agents—and their uniquely incorporated affective labor therefore becomes the location from which Philippine call-center fiction imagines

the possibility of escaping the subordinating narratives of the call center, home, and nation.

In his ethnographic scholarship on queer subjects working in the Filipino call-center industry, Emmanuel David uses the term “queer incorporation” to describe how the “incorporation of queer and transgender femininities in corporate spaces creates new and often fraught relations among gender, sexuality, and industry and state ideologies” (“Outsourced Heroes” 385). David links queer incorporation to an expansive understanding of flexible labor and writes that “social difference, especially queer difference, gets leveraged in expansions of global capital” (402). The nonnormative gender identities and sexual orientations of queer call-center workers come to embody the nonnormative flexibility and precarity attendant to socially disjunctive call-center labor. Already performing technologically mediated affective labor for customer callers worlds away, David claims that queer and transgender call-center workers also perform another level of affective care for workplace colleagues by performing “a specifically Filipino queerness, a lightheartedness that yields comfort among workplace teams” (“Purple-Collar Labor” 188). Charged with caring for both callers and co-workers, these call-center agents experience a doubling of the demands on “queerness as an affective position” (Sarmiento 122) that gestures to the transnational (callers) and domestic (co-workers) spatial coordinates of their labor. In *The Quiet Ones*, a hyperbolic question about Philippine call centers is posed: “Why is everyone gay in this industry?” (Diaz 246). Endeavoring an answer through David’s notion of queer incorporation reveals the exploitative link between queer subjects’ nonnormativity and flexible labor’s contingency within a Philippine domestic economy uniquely subordinated to the capitalist world-system as the foremost global providers of socially reproductive labor. Domestic disincorporation therefore describes a radical act of reproductive refusal that hazards an escape from flexible accumulation’s linking of Filipino queerness to the transnational valorization of affective care.

The Quiet Ones is bookended by two interrelated sections that Diaz first published as a single short story, “Escape” (2014), in the prestigious Philippine literary and scholarly journal *Kritika Kultura*. These sections

follow Diaz's queer call-center agent protagonist, Alvin Estrada, as he flees from law enforcement after skimming over a million Philippine pesos from an American corporate client account. The narrative present, which depicts Alvin's fugitive departure from Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport, is interrupted by several flashbacks that recount the death of his mother, the dissolution of his family life, and the subsequent malaise engendered by these domestic losses. As a queer figure laboring within the Philippine call-center industry, Alvin's deception and embezzlement can be understood as the subversive disincorporation of his doubly-exploited affective labor from the intertwined narratives linked to the social reproduction of call center, home, and nation. But Diaz generatively complicates both Alvin's literal and figurative flight, suggesting that any attempts to escape these incorporative domestic logics are fraught with contradictions and consequences.

In the novel's "Escape" sections, Alvin's domestic disincorporation begins with the loss of his mother. Linking call center work to familial care, Alvin initially steals the corporate client's funds in order to pay for long-term cancer treatment for his mother, and when she eventually dies of cardiac complications, "that same morning, a seventh digit had appeared in the tenth bank account that he had created for the operation" (Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* 25). Upon this simultaneous financial gain and maternal loss, Diaz writes of Alvin's feelings: "That the figure stretched to such startling length sent a joy in his chest that settled next to the fresh grief. Strange bedfellows, this bliss and this anguish, and Alvin pendulumed between the two until he eventually found—or returned to—a taut middle ground, where he felt nothing at all" (25). Alvin experiences a mode of affective incongruity similar to Martin F. Manalansan's claim that "home and nation, particularly as they are embodied by the biological family, occupy a persistent yet vexed place in the lives" of queer Filipino diasporic subjects (186). Alvin ceases his embezzlement operation the night after burying his mother, and—feeling "nothing at all"—begins to disincorporate from his familial domestic home. Before the death, "for a time," Alvin, his mother, and his young niece "had formed what for him passed off as a family. Complete. Occasionally tender" (Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* 14). But after the funeral, Alvin returns to

the home he shared with his mother and his niece, Sophia, to find that, “[b]ack at the house, the lights in the kitchen and the living room had refused to turn on all at once. ‘Mumu,’ Sophia said, the word too close to ‘Mama,’ and Alvin looked around and nodded” (32). Interrupting the text’s realism, this acknowledgement of a spectral *mumu*, Tagalog slang for *multo*, or ghost, figures the absence of Alvin’s mother, and the home she kept for Alvin and Sophia refuses its socially reproductive function after her death.

Alvin’s estranged sister retrieves Sophia and reassumes the maternal role that she earlier relinquished. As his domestic-familial space empties out, Alvin becomes unmoored from domestic-national space, recalling David L. Eng’s suggestion that “queer entitlements to home and a nation-state remain doubtful” (32). Abandoning his emptied home, Alvin then quits his call center job, thereby refusing his continued queer incorporation within Filipino circuits linked to global capital’s economic reproduction. Understood through Harrod Suarez’s theoretical development of a “queer negativity augmented by postcolonial” relations (111), Alvin’s domestic disincorporation—his flight from the reproductive logics of home and homeland—must be read as a departure into the Filipino diaspora.²⁸ Removed from the domestic spaces of family and home, Alvin attempts to flee the domestic space of the nation-state by scaling up beyond the incorporating sites of familial, social, and economic containment. Through this process, Diaz’s queer domestic subject becomes a queer diasporic subject.²⁹

On the run from the National Bureau of Investigation, Alvin escapes Metro Manila by plane. Evoking new vantage points afforded to diasporic positionality, Diaz describes Alvin’s gaze out the cabin window:

Meanwhile: distance, the city losing form. From the intimate chaos of huddled buses to *here*, the safety of watching their roofs glisten under the sun. It seemed only yesterday when he was in one such bus, in the center of one such gridlock. Now he could note the coffin-like outline of crawling sixty-seaters. Now Manila could fit in the palm of his hand. (Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* 35–36; emphasis in original)

Alvin's exilic dislocation evokes Gayatri Gopinath's claim that for queer diasporic subjects, "viewing the (home) nation through the analytical frame of diaspora allows for a reconsideration of the traditionally hierarchical relation between nation and diaspora" (7). Finding diasporic "refuge in the multitude, the anonymity" (Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* 23) of all the airplane passengers leaving Metro Manila, Alvin ponders "the world he was on the verge of leaving" as "that world: of jackets and sweaters, of half-hearted accents, of dead mothers" (37). As his plane rises higher, Alvin's broadening perspective reveals a cognitive map of the Philippines' shifting position within the capitalist world-system. Diaz's peripheral realism renders this cartography legible, and Alvin's invocation of "the reality-altering power of his eyelids, to wake up from this" (17), allows readers to see the deteriorating Filipino domestic-national space as haunted by the otherworldly transmission of disembodied call-center voices, maternal ghosts in emptied homes, and nostalgic longings for dislocated families.

As a queer, nonnormative counterpoint to the Philippines' national mobilization of the decisively feminized and heteronormative logics that sustain the exploitation of Filipino affective labor at home and abroad, Alvin attempts to disincorporate from Philippine domestic spaces by escaping home, family, and nation. But ultimately this subversive disincorporation encounters its material limits as well, and Diaz fiercely refuses any neat narrative resolution linked to Alvin's flight. *The Quiet Ones* ends with Alvin—having lost all of his embezzled money and hiding behind his Americanized call center alias—as a wanted fugitive en route to India, ostensibly to seek employment in a call center there. Diaz's bleak ending returns readers home to the old capital of call centers and suggests that any disincorporation from the Philippine nation-state and its opened domestic economy remains fleeting; such attempts cannot resist reincorporation into the inescapable social totality of the capitalist world-system. Alvin's departure into diaspora therefore loses its initial emancipatory luster because his final flight, his last domestic escape, simply comes to metaphorize human capital flight away from the Philippines. In other words, from the somber vantage point of the diaspora, the disincorporated

Philippine call-center agent sees himself shifting back into a reincorporated overseas Filipino worker.

V. On Hold

The economic crises that gave rise to the overseas Filipino worker have not been resolved by the ascent of the Filipino call center. Instead, the rapid growth of the Filipino BPO industry signals the nation's domestic shift to new "means of managing the crisis" of global capital accumulation (Amin 72). But even this feels too optimistic an assessment, given the drastic temporal and social dislocations emerging from the glinting high-rises of the Makati, Bonifacio Global City, and Ortigas commercial districts of Metro Manila. Revealing the pretense behind attempts to rebrand the Filipino BPO industry as BPM, or business process management, Philippine call-center fiction's immanently critical gaze locates the nation's real position within the shifting coordinates of the world-system and powerfully denies national agency in managing capitalist crisis.³⁰ Instead, these texts recognize, in their call-center agent protagonists who are incorporated into domestic settings, the vestigial traces of OFWs as the "servants of globalization" (Parreñas). This literary genre therefore recasts the heralded rise of the Filipino call center as merely the domestic shift to new means of servicing the crises of global capitalism.

Although Philippine call-center fiction provides peripheral realist narratives that depict the uncanny lives and struggles of BPO-agent protagonists, it curiously spends little time in call centers themselves. That so many of these texts instead shift their narrative action to the more familiar setting of the Filipino domestic home betrays a deep suspicion of the long-term tenability of call centers to help facilitate the social and economic reproduction of Philippine domestic-national space. As I demonstrated in the sections above, this shift in literary setting radically undermines the ideological space filled by BPO-state rhetoric claiming that the burgeoning Filipino knowledge economy presages the nation's rise to core status within the capitalist world-system. Philippine call-center fiction therefore reimagines the suspended life worlds of postcolonial capitalism from the perspective of a technologically incorporated global south. As seen in Endaya's immobility, Martinez's emotional

distance, and Diaz's foreclosure of escape, these stories formally insist on narrative irresolution as a kind of literary underdevelopment, thereby placing the lives of their protagonists on hold.

Philippine call-center fiction's commitment to irresolution mirrors the sentiments of many Filipino call-center agents, repeated time and time again in interviews, that their work often feels like "dead end" employment of the "last resort" (Padios, *Nation* 66). Despite their relatively high wages, many call-center workers view their employment as a temporary stopover on the way to brighter but nonetheless deferred futures. But within the centers' cubicles, months often turn into years, and provisional deferrals become perpetual. The Filipino BPO industry now also faces the more expansive threat of automation, with chatbots and voice-based artificial intelligence services beginning to replace human agents. According to a 2017 Filipino BPO industry report, "just 15 per cent of the [BPO] sector's workforce were in higher-skilled jobs, exposing the vulnerability of many in the industry to greater automation" (Reed et al.). As the Philippine domestic economy has turned to a precarious, rapidly shifting BPO industry to mitigate its own crises of social reproduction, it is becoming apparent that the gilded corporate narratives lauding the rise of the Filipino call center are mere fictions.

Committed to the realist project of representing capitalist totality, however impartially, Philippine call-center fiction radically unsettles the incorporative logics of the global knowledge economy through a unique peripheral realism briefly interrupted by experimental forms and irrealist content. Shattering the calculated artifice of nationalist and industry narratives that position call centers as new catalysts for domestic growth in the Philippines, these moments of irrealist interruption—most often set in the home—figure crucial interpolations against interpellation into the ersatz reality of capitalist modernity. Philippine call-center fiction's critical reproduction of literary realism—specifically as a peripheral realism of real subsumption—interrupts the long history of Filipinos as an exploitable surplus of socially reproductive workers and powerfully demonstrates that what the global north mishears on transnational customer service calls as subservient silence is anything but. Nowhere is

this more apparent than in the dramatic, if tragic, ending to Martinez's *Welcome to IntelStar*. Relentless in pace, the play's aforementioned call-center trainer protagonist, Chelsea, moves rapidly through her comedic monologue, teaching her audience how to placate both American English and American callers. But once the training session ends, immediately before the stage directions call for the lights to fade out, the tone definitively shifts and the jokes stop. Dramatic realism returns as the audience trainees are effectively excluded from the script, no longer a part of the play. Alone on stage while packing up her training materials, an exhausted Chelsea shifts to Tagalog and utters the single longest non-English line of the play quietly to herself: "Tang-inang trabaho 'to. Madaling araw na, nag-ingles pa rin ako" (Martinez 19). *Fuck this job. It's already morning, and I'm still speaking English*. Shifting the directional flow of transnational affective demands, Philippine call-center fiction forces its readers to listen attentively to the real voices on the other end of the line. The new subalterns of the global information economy can indeed speak, and this contemporary Filipino fiction radically unmutes their languages of refusal.

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Notes

- 1 A similar proclamation circulated within Filipino media outlets: "On December 4, 2010, the Contact Center Association of the Philippines proudly announced that [the] Philippines has become the call center of the world, with around 350,000 Filipinos working in call centers, against India's 330,000 workforce (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2010)" (Domingo-Cabarrubias 72).

- 2 See Chow; David's "Outsourced Heroes" and "Purple-Collar Labor"; Guevarra's "Techno-Modeling Care"; Isaac; Mirchandani and Poster; Padios's *A Nation on the Line*; and Stevens.
- 3 As social form, overseas remittances have also had profound implications for the production and circulation of Philippine anglophone literature. Nadal's work on "remittance fiction" locates similar pre-OFW remittance circulation logics in the formal diasporic tethering of Filipino creative writers studying in the US to the Philippine nation via *pensionado* and Fulbright programs.
- 4 In addition to Fabros, see Aldaba for a comprehensive history of the domestic economic policies that gave rise to Filipino business process outsourcing.
- 5 While outside the scope of this essay, it should nonetheless be noted that both the BPO industry and the literary prestige economy depend on the "translative power of English" as an unparalleled "linguistic currency" in the Philippines (Rafael 142). It is therefore quite significant that the rise of Philippine call-center fiction is almost exclusively a development within Philippine anglophone literary writing and relatively nonexistent in the other long traditions of Tagalog-, Ilokano-, Cebuano-, or Hiligaynon-language literatures (with a notable exception in Teodoro's short story collection, *Hasang: Mga Kuwento ng Pag-Ibig*). Call-center fiction written in Philippine English criticizes American cultural hegemony but still subscribes to the longstanding and highly contentious estimation of English as the preeminent Filipino literary "language of prestige and aspiration" (San Juan Jr., "Bakhtin" 541).
- 6 With the increased feminization of Philippine out-migration since the 1990s, much of this gendered nationalist rhetoric expresses concerns over the long-term social effects of "diverted mothering," or the shift from care for kin to care for employers (Wong 69). See Patel for an account of how the call-center industry has reconfigured the gendered dynamics of the "public-private sphere distinction" (10) in the Global South.
- 7 In attempting to locate the "domestic" continuity between the Filipino call-center agent and the OFW, I follow a similar argumentative logic to Srinivasan's critique of dominant New India narratives that position the hyper-visible emergence of the Indian call-center agent as a fundamental break from earlier modes of globally circulated Indian subjectivity. Writing against this figure's supposed novelty, Srinivasan generatively links the twenty-first-century Indian call-center agent to the late-twentieth-century expatriate Indian anglophone writer/theorist as marked cultural capital (84–85). Srinivasan's linking strikingly reveals how the character of the seemingly disparate labors of the Indian call-center agent and the diasporic writer/theorist, with their shared English-language mediations, each inform "India's legibility on the world stage and licenses its participation in the global capitalist order" (100).
- 8 Some of the older ways in which the Philippines and its citizens have been globally interpellated are as the world's largest "labor brokerage state" (Rodriguez ix);

- the “home of the great Filipino worker” (Guevarra, *Marketing Dreams* 1); “the servants of globalization” (Parreñas); and a “state-sponsored prostitution industry” (Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production* 33).
- 9 Parry asserts that “any inquiry into the generic modes and stylistic mannerisms of modern peripheral literatures since the nineteenth century is inseparable from considering the distinctive experiences of *modernity* in spaces *outside* Western Europe and North America, but *within* an imperialist world-system” (27; emphasis in original). Thus, for Parry, the term “peripheral modernism” must necessarily register “the extent and degree of the coercions visited on those societies that were seized for their natural and labour resources, or invaded for both material and political reasons [because] such determinants inflected the singular accents of the modernisms in these locations” (29).
 - 10 In addition to Cleary, Esty, and Lye and Goodlad, see Brouillette; Christie and Degirmencioglu; Deckard; Gunne and Lazarus; Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity*; Lazarus; and the Warwick Research Collective. According to the conceptual framework set forth in these recent materialist contributions to the world literature debates, realism refers less to an aesthetics of verisimilitude and instead, in the tradition of Lukács, to the epistemological possibility of representing social totality itself. I therefore agree with Esty and Lye, who insist that “where[as] classical realism maps national space as a working social totality . . . peripheral realisms approach the world-system as partially, potentially describable in its concrete reality” (285).
 - 11 Löwy defines “critical irrealism” as aesthetic modes “that do not follow the rules governing the ‘accurate representation of life as it really is’ but that are nevertheless critical of social reality” (196). The Warwick Research Collective importantly reminds us that “critical irrealism as theorised by Löwy does not, for all its investment in imagination and the imaginary, deny the existence of natural and social words independent of human perception or apprehension. This foundational homage to realism, or remembrance of it, gives critical irrealist texts the ability to articulate powerful critiques of actually existing reality” (83).
 - 12 In thinking through Philippine call center fiction’s irrealist interruptions, I am greatly indebted to Deckard’s generative framing of Löwy’s work, wherein she clarifies that “irrealist language and figuration function *less as eruptions of a repressed political unconscious than as the conscious expression of a negative critique of bourgeois social reality*, a critique in which oneiric, fantastic, or surreal forms repudiate the diabolical, machinelike reality of capitalist modernity” (Deckard 355; emphasis added). Against understanding the irreal moments of Philippine call center fiction as non-agential “eruptions of a repressed political unconscious,” I use the terms “interrupt” and “interruptions” to explicitly register the narrative and authorial intentionality undergirding these moments as “conscious expression[s] of a negative critique.”

- 13 Speaking about Philippine literary realism's twenty-first-century transformation by "new media," celebrated Filipino anglophone novelist Charlson Ong observes: "It can't be helped. Our [Filipino] reality is really virtual, much of it is cyber anyway, and it will be determined by the platforms that are going around" (qtd. in Garcia 273).
- 14 See Marx for the distinction between formal and real subsumption.
- 15 Galdon's survey of the Philippine novel in English, which broadly sketches "the movement of the novel from romanticism to realism from 1921 to 1975" (11), describes the continued postindependence development of realism in the 1960s and 1970s as Philippine anglophone literature's "period of awareness" (7). I suggest instead that it is only after the "crisis of representation" (San Juan Jr., *Form* 168) engendered by OFW experiences in the 1980s and 1990s, and their literary mediation via the peripheral modernism of OFW reproductive fictions, that we witness a Philippine realism fully aware of its own historically determined conceptual possibility.
- 16 In her research on Indian transnational customer service labor, Mirchandani lists the complex and myriad ways that call-center agents perform

authenticity work by simultaneously constructing themselves as foreign workers who do not threaten Western jobs, as legitimate colonial subjects who revere the West, as real Indians who form an offshore model workforce providing the cheap immobile labor needed in the West, as flexible workers who are trainable and global, and as workers who are faraway yet familiar enough to provide good services to their customers. (*Phone Clones* 8)
- Rajan-Rankin describes "deceptive mimicry" as the "ability to hold short conversations that include references to the customers' cultural context" ("Invisible Bodies" 11).
- 17 In their introduction to a special issue of *ARIEL* on "Literature and Postcolonial Capitalism," Naruse, Xiang, and Thandra develop the concept of "postcolonial capitalism" as a means "to disarticulate postcolonialism from anticolonialism and examine contemporary capitalism from a postcolonial perspective" (5). Understanding the rise of the Filipino call center necessitates thinking through this critical framework. While the Filipino BPO industry's development undoubtedly depends on older US circuits of imperial control in the Philippines, it nonetheless is "not reducible to the single experience of colonialism" (Naruse et al. 6).
- 18 Both Vora and Aneesh use the term "social death" (Vora 56; Aneesh 93) to describe the social alienation associated with graveyard-shift BPO work. However, this definition should not be confused with the term's more well-known use, as exclusionary ontological violence, in Patterson's work.
- 19 Interpersonal relatability has become a central object of study in the social science research on Philippine call centers. Padios uses the term "Filipino/American

relatability” to index “the ways Filipinos and the Philippines have maintained an affinity with Americans and America—from popular culture to the educational system—during and since colonization” (*Nation* 5). Arguing that the burgeoning BPO industry both exploits and reproduces this cultural affinity, Padios claims that “Filipino/American relatability has been transformed into a type of social capital and cultural resource fueling the Philippines’ neoliberal aspirations and supporting its new national narratives, and thus a primary way the nation-state reconfigures the meaning and value of Filipino labor and culture in the contemporary era—but often with contradictory consequences” (*Nation* 5). While the Filipino BPO industry has rebranded the Philippines in a manner that obscures older feminized narratives of exploited diasporic labor, Philippine call-center fiction, through its figural capacity to analogize, depicts an inherent proximity—another kind of relatability—between twenty-first-century Filipino BPO service work and earlier modes of Filipina reproductive labor.

- 20 Glenda’s increasing bodily immobility mirrors the way in which Rajan-Rankin characterizes the call-center body as “absent-present” (“The ‘Authentic Cyber-tariat’?” 35–36).
- 21 First outlined in his 1993 State of the Nation Address, Ramos’ much-heralded “Philippines 2000” political economic plan set the goal of the Philippines achieving newly industrialized country (NIC) classification by the year 2000. Ramos’ multi-point development agenda is replete with the same kind of neoliberal deregulatory rhetoric as his 1998 keynote address: “The economy *must be open to all* who bring in new capital, new knowledge, new ideas, and new levels of efficiency” (“Second State of the Nation Address”; emphasis added). Throughout the Ramos-era 1990s, feminist activists from the GABRIELA network consistently maintained that the “Philippines 2000” plan structurally depended on the domestic and transnational exploitation of Filipina women (Largoza-Maza 63).
- 22 Vora defines the “affective commodities” produced by call-center labor as the “personalized attention and the comfort of a continuing relationship with the service provider” (51).
- 23 Analyzing both the merits and limitations of earlier Marxist and feminist theories of affective, immaterial, emotional, and care labor in relation to the specificity of call-center work, Padios productively develops the concept of “relational labor” to describe “the labor required to positively identify with, signal proximity to, and effectively communicate with others, particularly in ways that meet the demands of capital” (*Nation* 9).
- 24 See Ancheta, Chotirawe, Serquina Jr., and Tiatco for close readings of *Welcome to IntelStar*’s satirical content.
- 25 *Welcome to IntelStar*’s audience members are encouraged to participate throughout Chelsea’s call-center training, but this audience participation mainly takes the form of reciting Americanized pronunciations of common conversational English phrases used during customer service calls (10–11).

- 26 Building on research first developed by Parreñas, Hochschild uses the term “global care chains” to describe how capital extracts “emotional surplus value” through the transnational transfer of care work (“Global Care Chains” 130). Hochschild uses the following example to illustrate the structural links between global care chains: “(1) an older daughter from a poor family who cares for her siblings while (2) her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a migrating nanny who, in turn, (3) cares for the child of a family in a rich country” (“Global Care Chains” 131).
- 27 In his analysis of the “troubled intimacies” at the end of *Welcome to IntelStar*, Serquiña Jr. arrives at a similar conclusion when he claims that the play’s ir-resolution suggests that the “possibility of transforming the industry despite its capitalist nature . . . remains just that—a possibility” (63).
- 28 Suarez’s generative reframing of queer negativity departs from Edleman’s “out-right rejection of a social that is predicated on heteronormativity” (Suarez 112). Building on critiques of Edleman, Suarez theorizes a postcolonial queer negativity “not included within a progressive narrative that forgets empire . . . [nor] the racist terms of that empire” (113).
- 29 Becoming diasporic, Alvin becomes what Mendoza, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work on nomadology and deterritorialization, calls a queer nomad: “an ambivalently nonheteronormative, itinerant, undisciplined body irreducible to national form” that “charts a line of flight through heteronormalizing discourses” (816).
- 30 The Information Technology and Business Process Association of the Philippines (IBPAP), the main organization attempting to rebrand Filipino business process outsourcing (BPO) as business process management (BPM), justifies this shift by claiming that “[m]ore than 30 years down the road, the industry now offers more complex and varied services that go beyond traditional call center work and utilize digital platforms and solutions” (“The IT-BPM Industry”).

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