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# 1-800-(Re)Colonize: A Feminist Postcolonial and Performance Analysis of Call Center Agents in India Performing U.S. Cultural Identity

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**1-800-(RE)COLONIZE: A FEMINIST POSTCOLONIAL AND PERFORMANCE  
ANALYSIS OF CALL CENTER AGENTS IN INDIA  
PERFORMING U.S. CULTURAL IDENTITY**

By

Kimberlee Pérez

B.A. California State University, Northridge, 2003

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August, 2005

Advisory Committee:

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The contemporary historical moment finds us in a web of globalization that spans the globe. While our interconnectedness brings us into unforeseen communications, we enter the conversation grounded in particular subject locations. Postcolonial subjectivities hold strategic memories of colonial violences as a means of survival and resistance while colonizing forces hold onto binary narratives of their own superiority. Globalization provides the context wherein decolonized and colonizing nations interact with unequal power resulting in multifaceted outcomes, one of which I argue is a re-colonial dynamic.

The phenomenon of U.S. corporate outsourcing to India is one instance where a re-colonial dynamic occurs. India's post-1991 liberalization policies facilitated its current relationship with U.S. corporations, many of which invested heavily in India's economy and telecommunications development. One facet of this investment resulted in the creation of call centers which provide customer service support to large corporations. Indian call centers supply customer service operations to U.S. corporations and Indian

workers interact with U.S. consumers on the telephone. The condition of employment for largely 20- to 30-something Indian workers, what marks the unequal power relations and re-colonial dynamic, is a performance of “American” culture.

Indian call center agents undergo training in “American” voice and culture to mimic and interact with the U.S. consumer while simultaneously erasing their Indian cultural identities. To understand the implications of this practice, I rely on the voices of Indian call center agents and their performance of U.S. culture in their work and training and its impact on their daily and cultural lives. The performances come from personal interviews with call center agents conducted by Sheena Malhotra and me in Bangalore and Mumbai, India, on film footage from Aradhana Seth’s documentary *1-800-CALL-INDIA*, and on media representations from U.S. mainstream media. Interweaving postcolonial and performance theories as the framework, I use Robert Scholes (1985) method of textual criticism which involves a three-step hermeneutic process of reading, interpreting and criticizing performances to deconstruct and analyze their pleasures and power. I rely on Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) theorization of ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry to understand colonial subjects’ complex negotiation of colonial forces.

From these performances emerge several themes and reveal the tensions between colonial forces of corporations and the complex negotiations of it through the performances of postcolonial subjectivities. While U.S. corporations outsource narrow constructions of what it means to perform “American,” embedded in notions of whiteness, Indian call center agents perform a much more nuanced understanding of U.S. culture. Call center agents also narrate the implications of call center work for their personal and cultural lives as they balance the tensions of high paying nighttime

employment with familial and cultural relations. It is a delicate negotiation from which emerge performances of postcolonial agencies in a re-colonial context. I analyze these performances for their agency and the oppressions of colonizing corporations to access the cultural costs on both sides of the line.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How do I even begin to acknowledge all of the people who made this thesis possible? The writing process, its solitude at times welcome and lonely, materializes in text what starts in connection and communication. While responsible for its outcome, this creation is not my own. I share its possibilities and its weight with a wealth of generous contributors; I find my teachers in embodied relations and multiple texts.

This thesis takes its shape from the guidance and direction of Kristin M. Langellier. Kristin, your professional and personal integrity, your rigorous commitment to and belief in the tools that performance and critical theories provide us continue to open my eyes and heart to new ways of understanding and engaging the world in the classroom, our academic communities, and in our daily lives, all political spaces. You continuously bring me back to voices and bodies, teaching me to listen closely and interpret critically with open heart and mind, a notebook always in hand. You guide me through the despair and delight that comes with writing. You bridge me to knowledge and extend my consciousness of living in the *Borderlands*. You nurture all parts of my growth, from student and teacher to a hot meal on a cool day in the warmth of your home. Thank you for everything. I know now that I ended up right where I needed to be.

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countless others along the way. Thank you for teaching me the politics of history and for helping me to develop a feminist methodology. In your classrooms I learn more from your students than any lesson I might have to offer. Your ever-ready political ear and open heart inspire me to continue the struggle for a more just world.

Prior to the guidance of my advisor and mentor, Kristin M. Langellier, the origins of this project began as an undergraduate student of Sheena Malhotra. My friend and mentor, Sheena nudged me in directions I never dreamt possible. She introduced me to her friends and invited me into her country. Thank you, Sheena, for your love, your fierce and unwavering friendship, and for teaching me what is possible when cultures and postcolonial subjectivities collide. Your belief in me, your patience and guidance are worth more than I can ever return, although I promise to keep trying. When I'm headed for a six, at the end of the day I know I can talk it through with you on the other end of the line or the other end of the couch.

Sheena introduced me to Aradhana Seth, who generously invited me to play a small role in her forthcoming documentary *I-800-CALL-INDIA* which addresses call centers in India. My immersion into the world of call centers began with Aradhana's film footage, and my conversations with her and Sheena began and continue to inform my analysis of outsourcing. Thank you, Aradhana, for your patience and your insightfulness as you continue to contribute to this emerging critical conversation.

My families of origin and of choice support and encourage this journey. I thank my parents, whose support and sacrifices made my education possible. What was not always available to you, you made sure that I would not do without. I thank especially my mother, who diligently clipped newspaper articles on outsourcing and recounted on the

phone to me all her interactions with call center agents. *Muchas gracias a mi hermanas-madres-professoras*: Sheena Malhotra for teaching me endurance and action, Aimee Carrillo Rowe for your spirit and vision, Julia Johnson for listening with wisdom and sight, and Robbin Crabtree for your leadership, support and your open home. Thank you to Isabelle Boisclair for seeing me and teaching me to trust in my own power. I thank Amira De la Garza for providing me with inspiration. Thank you Jerold Aram Arslanian for your friendship and song in beauty and love every step of the way. *Gracias a uno y dos*: to Erin Kearney for walking with me up all kinds of mountains, and to Jeffrey Wickersham for making me laugh. Thank you to the Malhotras for hosting me in India with love and kindness. I look forward to my return.

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## Chapter 1

### WHEN POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITIES COLLIDE

The sun shines and white fluffy clouds mark the sky. There is a hush over the campus; it is finals week. The warm breeze holds a charge I feel on my skin. Talk of war is on the air, this time in Iraq. But there is also resistance, fierce resistance here and around the world. We talk of the coalition of students, faculty and community that is forming. I ponder the connections to Viet Nam, wonder if this is what it must have felt like, and what difference a worldwide conversation would make. Our conversation gains momentum, anything feels possible. It is December, 2002. For a moment we are silent.

Sheena speaks into the silence with a new discussion. Do I remember Aradhana? Yes, of course. The filmmaker. She came to our class and we had such a great talk. Sheena continues with talk of 800 numbers, India, outsourcing. I try to follow along but make little sense of it. I have never heard of this before. What might this have to do with me, I wonder? The story unfolds. Aradhana has been filming in India and is leaving in two days to film more. She may be interested in taking on a student transcriber. We will all meet in two days.

In Aradhana's cozy home, the energy runs high. The story takes shape as two Indians and a Mexican American walk through the outsourcing maze. We hook up the VCR and the picture is run through with lines. Behind the lines we see what we need to see. The VCR is not from the United States and we need an adapter to translate the tapes filmed with Indian equipment. Caught in a web of globalization, we find ourselves in a technological quandary of incompatible machinery. Turning away from the screen, we

map out our strategy. I sign headlong onto the project. Sheena is already there. Aradhana leaves for India. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, collaborative communication is possible.

The sights and sounds of India fill my home. It is like nothing I have ever known. I strain to catch the words, push “rewind” over and over and over trying to get it right. Names of places I have never heard and an ancient language rush over me in waves. The tapes begin to tell their stories, I wonder about their lives, what happens with them. These stories become my stories to hold and to translate as I transcribe. Headphones feel like a natural extension of my daily existence and I think of little else. Sounds and words once unfamiliar become second nature and slip into my speech with Sheena. The movement and modalities of corporate America turn my stomach as their profits fatten the bellies of the wealthy. My anger grows as the war seems imminent and fuels the churning critique of outsourcing as I begin to make connections. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, criticism is possible.

Plans set in motion, I move from California to Maine with a ticket to India. My thesis will be on the U.S. corporate outsourcing to India that I now understand to be re-colonial practice. The assertion is clear but the argument still forms. I use postcolonial theory to interpret cultural performances of self and other. Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) theories of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity are the tools I use to make sense of embodied performances. Globalization performs in multiple ways and I harness it wherever possible. The Women’s Studies Department sponsors my talk on the subject and a student from India gives me the emails of call center agents in India. The adrenaline coursing through my veins, with my newly purchased hand-held tape recorder

and a couple hundred rupees in hand, I board the Air India flight from New York with an agreement for an interview. Rains in Delhi delay our flight to Mumbai and I miss my connection to Bangalore. Several hundred passengers stranded for hours in the Mumbai airport. I follow the others in a jet lagged daze. Twelve hours and I can get a flight, the air hostess informs me. Tears refusing to fall fill my eyes as I nod and make my way to a chair for my long wait. The air is warm and I have been traveling for over twenty-four hours. A twenty-something man from my flight approaches me. He recognizes me from New York and can commiserate. We are all exhausted and frustrated. He asks me what they have done for me and I explain that I am waiting for the next flight in twelve hours. Angered that they haven't offered a hotel, he escorts me to the hostess and pleads my case. Unable to participate I watch in silence. He negotiates me into the air-conditioned lounge and helps me use the phone, communicates with Sheena in Hindi and explains the situation. He buys me a cigarette before he is off for his flight. I smoke it in gratitude even though I have long since quit. I am grateful for his kindness and bid him farewell. It is December, 2003. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, cross-cultural connection is possible.

The memories of transcription in my imaginary, the sights and sounds in India are as foreign as they are familiar as I make my way through the trip. Once again I am sheltered by the generosity of the Malhotras, who treat me as their own. From Bangalore Sheena and I travel to Auroville, a self-sustaining world community established in the 1970s by an Indian man and French woman they call Ma. Standing outside the visitor's center, alone for the very first time in my trip, a small boy approaches. He looks the long way up at me and says in a firm voice, "I am from very far away." I smile and ask him

how far. "I am from Calcutta. Where are you from?" he answers in reply. "I am from very far away as well," I tell him. "I am from the United States." He grins back at me. His family surrounds me, two men and four women. They pose the two of us and begin to take pictures. We stand and smile at each other, shaking hands. This moment turns as the men question me about George Bush. I explain my resistance but they refuse my deflection and hold me accountable in conversation. It is lively and interesting and when Sheena joins us, we all part ways. I wonder what they think of me. In retrospect it remains a palpable moment of ambivalence. I reconcile my global privilege and the global network of people and places. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, consciousness is possible.

Back at the Malhotra's, I continue to negotiate my surroundings. At every meal the table is set with more cutlery and drinking glasses than I know what to do with. I first try to mimic the others, but they are all waiting for me to begin. A familiar working-class panic sets in and I don't want to embarrass myself. I make my move and breathe as we all begin to eat. I soon realize that other than breakfast, the silverware remains untouched at every meal. Why then, I wonder, do they bother with the elaborate place settings? The unanswered question returns as I immerse myself in India's colonial history and Bhabha's theories. Explaining mimicry as I visit a Women's Studies class in globalization, it hits me. The place settings are a performance in postcolonial mimicry. It is a proper English table which can be flawlessly performed and subversively rejected in the very same moment. My mind spins with the implications as I project back onto my visit. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, conversion is possible.

The three weeks of my first trip to India continue to unfold almost two years later. Most memorable to me are the stories told to me by Sheena's mother, Jamila Malhotra, whom I would come to call Jamila Aunty. A Muslim born in India, Jamila Aunty's father was chief of police during the Partition. A country split apart, Muslims were meant to go to Pakistan and Hindus to cross over to what we now know as India. With a good job and the roots of his family, Mr. Pathan stayed in India with his family. Jamila Aunty met Suresh Uncle, and the star-crossed pair entered into a controversial Hindu-Muslim marriage in India. I first met Jamila Aunty, a sharply intelligent and kind woman, on her way back to Bangalore after her only son's wedding. Her flight coincided with my trip to India, and I was put on her flight after my twelve hour layover in Mumbai. She found me in the crowded Mumbai airport, a crumpled heap sleeping on a chair too small for my six foot frame, the only white American in the lounge. I will always wonder what she thought of the mess she found and herded onto the bus that took us to the plane. Without blinking an eye, she picked me up and gave me a hug that brought me to tears and into her home. Aside from that first encounter, what always struck me about Jamila Aunty is the way she seamlessly moves from Hindi to English. While the others slip into Hindi in front of me seemingly without awareness of my incomprehension, she starts in Hindi and immediately repeats herself in English. Her middle child living abroad and her grandchildren living nearby, Jamila Aunty is a hybrid postcolonial subject. When postcolonial subjectivities collide, *corazón*<sup>1</sup> is possible.

In re-colonial times, when global capitalism facilitates the outsourcing of whiteness, Indian postcolonial subjects are asked to perform U.S. culture as a condition of their employment. U.S. corporations move their customer service and movable

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish word for heart.

operations to India. U.S. corporations outsource operations in order to reduce overhead and increase profits, not unlike the movement of automotive, manufacturing and textile jobs that left the U.S. borders some years back. The difference is in the communication relationship. Customer service work is telephone work and requires interpersonal dialogue and understanding. Its colonial legacy leaves India with a sizable number of English speakers. Therefore, India's labor pool burgeons with capable workers to take on customer service work. While the English of Indians is closer to the English of the British than to that of the United States, there are few barriers that would inhibit a cross-cultural dialogue. However, in the early stages of U.S. corporate outsourcing, it was in the best interest of corporations to disguise the offshore movement from the American consumer to avoid what would possibly be a corporate backlash against lost jobs. Therefore, training in U.S. culture, voice and accent morphed Indian call center agents into U.S. sounding speakers and masked their own Indian identities. While the actions erase Indian cultural identity on the telephone, postcolonial resistances of embodied subjectivities seep through the corporate veil in resistive and subversive performances.

In the chapters that follow I argue that U.S. corporate outsourcing to India and the compelled performances of U.S. culture are tangled in the complexities and oppressions of whiteness, global capitalism, transnational corporations and re-colonial practices. Chapter 2 describes postcolonial theories and India's postcolonial legacy and relationship with the United States. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for this project, what I call a methodology in crisis. Chapters 4 and 5 describe and analyze the training and work performances of Indian call center agents and their reflections on the call center industry in their lives and India's future. In Chapter 6 I conclude with my reflections on the



project and identify the need for future research on the call center industry and U.S. corporate outsourcing. I conclude this introduction with a narrative of what this practice looks like.

Imagine yourself negotiating an average day. You teach your classes, check your email, research and write to further your latest article. Gazing over your monitor into space, a picture of you and your mother catches your eye. You smile, recalling the memory. Then panic. Today is your mother's birthday. Not even a card in the mail on its way into your mother's open hands and waiting heart. Short a miracle, it will be the third year in a row that you have forgotten. Suddenly the annoying jingle from the radio commercial sounds inside your head. You pick up the phone and dial *1-800-FLOWERS*. Stacy, the agent with the faint drawl, with calm and expertise talks you through the perfect bouquet to be delivered to your mother this very day. Reclining in your chair, you breathe a sigh of relief and gratitude. Stacy has saved your relationship with your mother. You imagine Stacy to be somewhere peaceful and quiet, with time and energy enough to ponder flower arrangements worthy of mothers' birthdays. Stacy, you smile, anticipating the call from your mother as you settle back into work. Hanging up with you, Stacy stretches and yawns, prepares for her next customer. She checks her clock, several hours before first light. Stacy, whose real name is Sita, stares at her monitor in the dark of night not in Mayville, Indiana, but in Mumbai, India.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from publicity materials from *1-800-CALL-INDIA* (Seth, Forthcoming).

## Chapter 2

### POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY, CONTENTION, AND (RE)COLONIAL ACTIONS

Dominance initially begins as a manifestation of power by one person or group over another. It ensures its continuance through a mutual, albeit unequal, participation in systems of domination to the extent that individuals internalize and perform hierarchal relations and their constructions. Internalization over time results in power's normalization; disciplined bodies carry out upon and against themselves that which outside forces were once necessary to accomplish (Foucault, 1977). Building on Foucault's theory of power, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) argue that technological advances compound the cost of internalization as they "directly organize the brains (in *communication systems* [italics added], information networks, etc.) and bodies (in welfare systems, monitored activities, etc.) toward a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life and the desire for creativity" (p. 23). Power transcends bodies and organizes itself into systems of discourse. These systems of discourse simultaneously produce and are produced by the subjectivities constrained and constructed within them; they shift and strengthen at various historical moments. Discourse shapes subjectivities even as subjects embody agency with which to negotiate and transform the discourses that inform them. Understanding the tensions between subjects and discourse, movements and determinations of systems of power is the work of postcolonial criticism.

Postcolonial theories aim at and provide possibilities for understanding systems of power as they manifest in empires and acts of colonization, past and present.

Understanding modalities of power and the subjectivities and lived experiences such systems produce requires close attention to particularity and history, to bodies and their narratives as well as discourse as a means of accessing their intersections. This chapter begins with an overview of the major tenets and discussions within postcolonial theory as they apply to the call center phenomenon. I then address key points in Indian colonial and postcolonial history beginning with the entrance of Britain's East India Company and subsequent British colonization, including modes of colonial education. Following the colonial history I discuss Indian decolonial history post-1947 independence leading up to the 1991 liberalization policies that opened Indian markets to foreign investors. The entrance of U.S. multinational corporations in India and the outsourcing of service work to call centers in India establishes the transnational service relationship. This relationship, I argue, produces a re-colonial dynamic between the U.S. and India.

### **Postcolonial Theory: Origins, Debates, Placements**

A postcolonial methodology deconstructs the subjectivity-objectivity binary underlying knowledge production. It is a political project that takes a stand on an issue in the hopes of transforming it. It is a step away from traditional positivist notions of objectivity. It denies that there can, or even should be, objectivity in criticism. This is due in part to postcolonial theory's recognition of the political ramifications of speaking about or on behalf of those voices which are always already excluded from any academic discussion, whether because of access, intelligibility, visibility or even contemporary existence (Spivak, 1999). Feminist postcolonial critics speak on behalf of subalterns who lack access to academic spaces, spaces always already infused with (post)colonial relations of power (C. Hall, 1996; Kavoori, 1998; Shome, 1998; Spivak, 1999).

Universities and their disciplines do not exist in a political or historical vacuum. On the contrary, they are central to the production and continuation of state ideologies.

Therefore, postcolonial critics' interests dismantle positivist notions of objectivity in that they are not possible given the historical and contemporary conditions that constitute their current environments. Further, critiques also function as advocacy and judgment toward transforming oppressive practices which, in the absence of many of these criticisms, remain invisible and persistent.

While oppositional and resistant readings of dominant and marginal texts is the work of postcolonial criticism, there is a highly contested debate within the field over what constitutes postcolonial theory and what terminologies should be used. Multiple disciplines and interdisciplinary fields enact postcolonial criticisms in varying ways, and it remains a point of contention among scholars which disciplines can or should appropriate postcolonial methods. One thing embattled theorists agree on is that the academy, and the Euro-Western academy to be specific, is a space rife with imbalances of power whose criticisms are politically motivated and charged (S. Hall, 1996b; Kavoori, 1998; Shome, 1998; Spivak, 1999). Many self-identified postcolonial theorists and scholars not only speak on behalf of marginalized groups but also often come from those spaces themselves. Several postcolonial scholars are from previously colonized nations such as India and other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, or from Third World, marginalized and/or colonized spaces within the United States, for example, Chicano/a, African American and Native American scholars.

Postcolonial critics examine histories of colonization and the contemporary political, economic, gendered and racialized ramifications of colonial times in previously

colonizing and colonized nations in the post-colonial period, or after independence and the formation of nation-states and the current era of globalization. The origins of postcolonial theory precede their visibility and entrance into recognizable academic spaces. Most notably, postcolonial theories and criticisms mark and disrupt dominant historical narratives through refusing the binaries embedded in colonial logic.

Postcolonial critics sharply challenge the myths of traditional histories told through the lens of the colonizer. The state and its universities are inextricably intertwined and, with exception, scholarly tales are often filtered through this lens. The university as a site of knowledge production is a particularly contentious site, simultaneously produced by the nation state even as its intellectual labor informs national discourse. The relationships within ivory towers mirror relations of power outside its walls and those from within speak their challenges (Mohanty, 2003; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Spivak, 1999).

Postcolonial critics embody the exceptions as they speak from and through the margins – their texts foreground the agency of the previously colonized by centering their voices and experiences (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1999).

As Third World scholars increasingly make their way into First World university systems, they move into positions which allow them access to the means of critical knowledge production which runs with or against the grain of dominant theories. The movement of Third World scholars into First World academe travels with the historical baggage of their own educational systems already infused with colonial knowledge. Colonial powers established university systems in previous colonies which produced, imposed, and continued lines of knowledge through subaltern internalization (Viswanathan, 1997). The collusion of previously colonized subjectivities with

colonizing agendas, achieved through internalization of imposed hierarchies, indicates that a marginalized standpoint does not always ensure a critical consciousness or practice (S. Hall, 1997). Nonetheless, those scholars from previously colonized nations, whether living and educated in their home postcolonial nations or in diasporas among the previously colonizing nations, are credited with conceptualizing postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial theories gain much of their influence and criticisms from Marxism. Their contributions emerge from the cracks and blind spots in Euro-centric Marxist theories. Non-European nations did not follow the trajectory of European nations that Marx predicted, and therefore postcolonial theorists fill in the blanks from the lived experiences and shifts from colonial to de-colonial times (Dirlik, 1997; S. Hall, 1996b; Prasad, 2000).

Postcolonial critics negotiate, often personally, the messy aftereffects of colonialism and the multiple subjectivities it produces, moving in and through the systems that simultaneously define and reject them, desire and deny them. They refuse colonial binaries and assert the agency of the previously colonized and contemporarily marginalized, themselves a heterogeneous multitude who navigate visibility and orality on behalf of themselves as well as subalterns without the same access. Visible since the 1980s (Dirlik 1997), postcolonial critics enter into and extend a critical body of theory emerging from global and national resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Bhabha & Comaroff, 2002) to articulate the particularities and realities of colonial legacies. As Foucault (1984) states, academic theories gain their force and meaning only when they connect with resistance movements on the ground, with consequence for the lives of real people. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) explains that postcolonial critics render

transparent dominant narratives through a close listening and vocalizing of tales of difference by those who live them. Therefore, postcolonial criticism situates itself at the sites of particular bodies and discourses, histories and contemporary realities, across temporal and spatial locations.

### **Postcolonial Theory: Teasing out the Tenets**

In *Relocating Postcolonialism*, Ato Quayson and David Theo Goldberg (2002) identify three major lines of postcolonial theory. The first line derives from poststructuralism's deconstructionist tools necessary to dismantle colonial binaries (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002). Colonialism relies on binaries to neatly distinguish and establish hierarchies which stabilize and normalize power differentials. While colonial and traditional theories of knowledge accept the binary as normative – precisely what it was designed to accomplish – postcolonial theories interrogate unquestioned norms (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002; Stoler, 2002). Colonial powers initially imposed this system through force, military or otherwise. There are ontological and material consequences of binary distinctions: binaries result in the colonizing procurement of “geopolitical boundaries,” economic ramifications, and damaging psychic constructions of both colonizer and colonized (Chambers, 1996, p. 48).

Colonizing justifications rely on notions of themselves as intellectually superior to other nations. This logic lends itself to constructions of other nations as being in need of the colonial power for its good and development (Osterhammel, 1997). This particular colonial narrative paved the way for the combination of military and educational-missionary forces in colonized countries. In order to force colonial subjects to conform to colonizing missions, colonizing forces had to deeply understand indigenous cultures as

well as set up educational centers for their conversion (Kaiwar, 2003). Vasant Kaiwar (2003) chronicles the strategies aimed at the cultural fluency that colonizing forces sought as a means of infiltrating and dominating local cultures. Once enmeshed in local culture, colonial binary reasoning of self and other links the two together. Notions of self become intelligible only in opposition to that which self is not; self no longer an autonomous subjectivity standing on its own but inter-subjectivities inextricably connected (Frankenberg, 1993).

As we begin to collapse colonial binaries, Catherine Hall (1996) urges us to “ask new questions of old sources” as a way of demystifying some of these narratives (p. 66). New questions of old sources draw our attention to the intersections between colonization and whiteness (Ware, 1996). Colonial forces operate in collusion with whiteness. European and U.S. colonial projects link the fairness of white skin with the superiority and rationality of white minds (López, 2005). Vron Ware (1996) argues that the projections and internalization of whiteness require us to understand whiteness as distinct from its embodied performances. Whiteness is a powerful discourse, a system all subjectivities negotiate and learn (Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2005; Ware, 1996). That whiteness exists in the discursive means that white and non-white bodies alike necessarily perform acts of whiteness, as all our subjectivities in some way are informed by whiteness (Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2005; Ware, 1996; Warren, 2003). Colonialism’s link with whiteness leads to performances by both colonizer and colonized.

Colonial subjectivities take complex levels of investment in the colonizing presence and negotiate the tensions in various ways (S. Hall, 1996b; Prashad, 2000). As Bhabha (1994) theorizes, ambivalence is the simultaneous desire of and resistance to the



colonial presence. For primarily the elites, the colonial presence provides an opportunity for wealth and material gain (S. Hall, 1997). However, for elites and non-elites alike, the colonial presence enters at the cost of degrading, subordinating, or entirely erasing indigenous cultural identities. Resistance to the colonial presence manifests as internalization and reformulation of colonial ideologies. As colonized performances of colonial ideologies can by definition never achieve or occupy the same spaces as the colonial presence (hence the colonial justification for its presence in the first place), internalization mixes with resistance and materializes as mimicry and hybrid performances (Bhabha, 1994). Lawrence Grossberg (1996) argues for our attention to the material consequences of colonial subjectivities, as it is here that material particularities can be seen most clearly. We must understand the lived experience from the narratives of those who live it rather than as it is represented by colonial powers. Reframing hierarchies and disrupting dominance means that we must “ask new questions of old sources,” drawing on sources outside traditional canonical norms to get at the nuances of lived experience that otherwise might be overlooked and even erased (C. Hall, 1996, p. 66). Apt awareness to narratives of existence reveal the relations of power and resulting identity formations.

Postcolonial critics are equally interested in deconstructing the binary between bodies and discourse as a way of understanding identity constructions. As Stuart Hall (1996) explains, identity is understood as it is performed. Therefore, as speaking subjects producing rhetorical acts and texts, we are unable to disentangle ourselves from the discursive realities which inform our subjectivities, and we are connected to the histories in which we are produced. Our actions and texts are embedded in complex cultures and

systems of power in which we exist. Whether through our texts we advance cultural imperialism or negotiate the academy, we inextricably participate in those systems (Said, 1993; Spivak, 1999). Colonial discourse relies on constructions of difference as a way of inscribing its subjects as “less than” the colonized (Chatterjee, 1993). Toni Morrison (1993) explains that racist discourses of nations are communicated through the literature of the nation, regardless of the presence or absence of people of color or of what we might consider overt racist scenarios or phrasings. There are particular outcomes which reinforce discourses of dominance and hegemony and benefit from a particular construction of the world based in “Western” perspectives of colonizing privilege. This means that we must understand the production, process and outcome of texts and understand them in the contexts in which they are produced and understood. To summarize, the first tenet of postcolonial theories is to dismantle previously unquestioned binary logics (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002).

The second thread of postcolonial studies is the paradox of a field of study, which if successful, will eliminate the need for its own existence (Quayson and Goldberg, 2002). What this means is that while postcolonial criticisms critique systems from within them, they do so aimed at a radical political project of dismantling the very system that houses them. In order to theorize from a space of “an ethics of becoming” rather than a future which necessitates their disappearance, postcolonial scholars must imagine a future discipline that includes rather than erases their existence (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002, p. xiii).

The space of colonial studies in the academy is a site of much contention among scholars. Anandam Kavoori (1998) problematizes the positioning of these scholars in that

their training is commensurate with the dominant forces they criticize, questioning the effectiveness of a critique from within. He questions whether these voices have not already been compromised through the training they employ to level such a critique. Similarly, Dirlik (1997) is particularly critical of Third World postcolonial critics and their criticisms which he argues function only to ensure their niche in the academy: spaces among themselves, for themselves and about themselves. In "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism" Dirlik (1997) answers the question on the origin of the postcolonial posed by Ella Shohat with: "When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe" (501). In other words, when we join dominant forces we become agents of their agenda.

Arguing against the railings of critics such as Kavoori and Dirlik, Raka Shome (1998) positions herself with other postcolonial critics who counter that it is precisely the postcolonial situation that produces the immediate situation. She explains that colonial presences and their legacies result in postcolonial hybridity, or the incorporation and negotiation of the colonial presence (Bhabha, 1994). Such critics argue that given the reality of educational systems enmeshed in colonial legacies, there is little to do other than continue to subvert, resist and critique the colonial legacies of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and dangerous nationalism. In other words, we must continue to navigate oppressive systems the best we can as did our colonized forbearers (Bhabha, 1994; S. Hall, 1996b; Shome, 1998; Spivak, 1999).

Another point of contention among postcolonial scholars is the use of language to describe the "post-colonial." On one side of this debate are those who use the term "post-colonial" or "postcolonial," and on the other are those who eschew it in favor of "neo-

colonial.” Theorists hotly contest these terms as they tend to mean very different things with different consequences. Representative of the “neo” advocates who criticize the embedded and appropriated “post-colonial” scholar in the academy, Kavoori (1998) argues the prefix “post” is ambiguous in that it invokes a chronological temporality indicative of a time “after” colonization. He posits that the ambiguity of this term runs the risk of declaring a monolithic period after colonialism and does not adequately differentiate among particular experiences of colonial histories by continent, colonizer and colonized. From this side of the argument, “post-colonial” scholars are thought to be continuing the work of colonization in the academy. Against this, Kavoori employs “neo-colonial” as a much more aggressive, accurate clarification of the current time period. Embedded in the term “neo-colonial,” for Kavoori (1998) and others who claim this position, is both an economic analysis of the issue as well as the notion that the current state of affairs is one in which new forms of colonization continue to emerge.

On the other side of this argument are those whose conceptualization of “post-colonial” recognizes the time after colonial empires withdrew military occupations and the de-colonial era through independence when nations form their own particular global identities (S. Hall, 1996b; Shome, 1998). This position considers neo-colonial relations which emerge in postcolonial times. However, it does mark the end of traditional notions of colonial occupation while it considers its legacies in the imaginaries and material lives of previously colonized subjects (S. Hall, 1996b; Shome, 1998). Critics who embrace “post-colonial” theory’s epistemological underpinnings also posit that the “post” in postcolonial refuses a temporal shift from “old” to “new” forms of colonization. Like the “post” in “postmodern,” “post-colonial” does not deny the influences and legacies of the

time which comes before it (Shome, 1998). Rather, the postcolonial project interrogates the particularities of colonial legacies in ways which recognize the interrelatedness of colonized subjectivities and their negotiations of the postcolonial era. As the debate continues, and as a postcolonial subject myself, I continue to be informed, locate my understandings, and execute my criticisms from the “post-colonial” side of the debate. I address how my own complex subjectivities intersect and exist in this context in Chapter 3.

Quayson and Goldberg (2002) characterize the third tenet of postcolonial studies as its dispersal across academic disciplines. A discipline which “seems to locate itself everywhere and nowhere” is its greatest strength and weakness (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002). Postcolonial criticism’s existence “everywhere and nowhere” demonstrates how colonial forces permeate every area of the academy. It again points to the interrelatedness of the university as a site of knowledge both with and against the state and the roots of the university directly tied to the state. As Zane Ma-Rhea (2002) succinctly warns us, “The discourses of postcoloniality and postmodernity are also vulnerable to the very ontological formations they attempt to explicate. Can universities themselves be postcolonial or are they ontologically neocolonial or even anti-colonial in their attempts to apprehend dramatic global phenomena?” (p. 207). The university in its present formation, given its historical conditions of production, runs the risk of reproducing colonial conditions. At the same time, postcolonial theorists’ rigorous attention to particularities in multiple disciplines eludes to a kind of infiltration of the system by disruptive forces, with possibilities of producing resistant narratives.

Disciplinary territoriality and claims to possess particular knowledge sites produce destructive tensions which inhibit a transdisciplinary generation of ideas. The territorialism of division strengthens traditional academic and colonial boundaries; conscious collaboration, borrowing and exchange across area and traditional studies weaken those imperatives (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002). Interweaving postcolonial with other theories supplements and retrieves the nuances of lived experiences. Here I use performance theories to get at the embodied performances of postcolonial legacies. These are the possibilities and limitations of postcolonial theories, which I now put to use in examining the particularities of Indian colonial and postcolonial histories as they pertain to U.S. call centers in India.

### **Unraveling the Colonial Yarn: Post/Colonial Modalities in India**

Colonial nations weave binaristic narratives that depict colonizers as innately more powerful than the colonized. In the imaginary and activity of colonial power, binaries emerge as normative. Colonial states, and increasingly corporations, cloak themselves in the discourse of their power and traverse the globe like an ink stain that refuses to wash out, transgressing and traveling through cultures and economies. Spreading across cultures, binaries impose Orientalist self/other logic that materializes as “reality/appearance, truth/falsehood, male/female, centre/periphery” (Chambers, 1996, p. 48). Colonial powers assume the superior first half of the binary and relegate the colonized to the latter half. While binaries lurk rather elusively in the discursive, their effects constitute dire consequences for embodied subjects. We must rigorously fix our attention to the discursive and the lived experiences in order to dismantle binaries and crack open the hyphen. Deconstructions of binaries unravel their power and expose the

tenuous logic upon which they rely. Colonial binaries circle and intersect each other. In the outsourcing reality, binaries are colonial, racist and gendered. In this section I discuss the connections between colonialism and racism, what Alfred J. López (2005) refers to as the intersubjectivities of whiteness. In other words, while binaries assume distinct boundaries between self and other, they actually depend on each other for self awareness and identity formation (Frankenberg, 1993). I am particularly interested in the ways whiteness operates through nation formation and the subjectivities that emerge through globalized relationships.

The relationships between nations, the national imaginaries and the ongoing relationships between India and the United States provide an overarching frame for understanding the issues created by global capital flows and the demands made of global labor. The cultural dynamics and the discourses surrounding them inform each other, producing re-colonial subjectivities. The current project places the Indian-U.S. call center phenomenon in its historical, postcolonial context. India has long interested foreign corporations as a source of economic profit. Both prior to colonization and post-independence, foreign national corporations have occupied India (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004). Initially a trade operation linking state and corporation, Britain granted the East India Company a charter in 1600. However, as Betty Joseph (2004) explains, the East India Company's occupation was never entirely peaceful, and Britain's military forces were often relied on to resolve violent clashes between British and Indians. By 1784 with the Pitt's India Act, control of the East India Company was remanded to the crown and the company was dissolved by 1858 (Joseph, 2004). India became a British colony, serving the state's economic and colonial initiatives.

British state and corporate interests were facilitated in India through cultural infiltration and imposition. This was achieved primarily through control over language and the means of education. In 1837 English replaced Persian as the official language of India and established the University of Calcutta in 1857 (Ma-Rhea, 2002). British officers and citizens living in India needed to be able to communicate and negotiate Indian culture and language, and therefore the University of Calcutta functioned to provide cultural and linguistic education for the occupying British (Ma-Rhea, 2002).

The combination of instituting English as the state language and the establishment of the University of Calcutta also contributed to shaping India's identity as a British colony. Britain's intention was to maintain Indians as subordinate subjects yet conform them into consumers of English culture and goods (Ma-Rhea, 2002). Ma-Rhea (2002) explains that colonial universities are an extension of colonial binary logic. Colonial university systems insert themselves into colonized cultures paternalistically, holding themselves up as the model upon which colonized subjects should pattern themselves (Ma-Rhea, 2002). Language is a particularly important aspect of colonial education; "English can be manipulated to suit the needs of those who use it" (Wright & Hope, 2002, p. 335). Changing the state language meant that more and more Indians would have fluency and ease in English, with material and cultural outcomes. In and outside the university, the British disseminated their literature as a means of socializing and educating Indians into British cultural norms (Joseph, 2004; Loomba, 2002). Seven years after changing the state language to English, Indians fluent in English were favored for coveted government positions (Ma-Rhea, 2002).



However amenable some Indians coexisted with the Britain, colonization took its toll and the struggle for independence was a long time coming. Teresa Hubel (1996) discusses that different movements in India have always resisted colonial presences. In 1947 India gained her independence from Britain. The violence of the partition resulted in India and Pakistan as two separate states. At the same time, the post-World War II era emerged and “under the cover of the cold war, capital expanded, conquered new markets, and satisfied its lust for greater profits. In the end, lust won out” (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 82). India and Pakistan were split further apart as the United States allied itself with Pakistan, and Russia allied with India.

In subsequent years, the United States had little to do with India. Rajiv Gandhi, grandson of independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, was educated in the United States. When he became Prime Minister of India his agenda included forwarding India as a global player (Sridharan, 2004). India’s liberalization in 1991 dramatically shifted its global status and economic standing (Walton-Roberts, 2004). The United States and India were quickly in global and capitalistic communication. India’s liberalization policy opened its markets to foreign investment, saw its workers become highly desirable global laborers, and resulted in a middle class (Chopra, 2003; Sridharan, 2004; Walton-Roberts, 2004). During this time U.S. corporations invested heavily in the Indian economy and the U.S. government approved record numbers of foreign worker visas to Indian workers (Walton-Roberts, 2004). The entrance of U.S. corporations into India began a new era of foreign corporate interest which recalls the entrance of the East India Company. There were and remain multiple reactions to foreign capital, and it is primarily the middle class who benefit the most (Sridharan, 2004). While India’s complex relationship with foreign

national corporations is ambivalent, India's post-liberalization policies indicate their permanence (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004; Chakravartty, 2004). Post-liberalization U.S. corporations have been on the rise in India, and as time goes on more and more corporations outsource the business to India.

Motivated by India's low-waged and abundant English-speaking labor pool, U.S. corporations outsource customer service operations ranging from telemarketing and credit card sales to health insurance operations to call centers in India. While Hindi replaced English as the official language post-independence, a third of the population speaks English and English is the primary language of education and business (Wright & Hope, 2002). In the early years of the Indian call center industry, Indian call center agents' performances of U.S. corporate cultural norms not only met U.S. consumer standards, but they also functioned to erase the corporate offshore movement that was taking place. Many corporations were nervous about receiving criticism for taking their business and service operations out of the United States to a cheaper labor pool. Corporations were also nervous about how U.S. consumers would feel if they knew that some of their most personal information (social security numbers, medical records, credit card balances) was being "handled" by workers sitting in a "Third World" country across the globe. Call center agents undergo voice training to speak "American English" and "neutralize" their accents. They study U.S. popular culture and often assume names immediately familiar to U.S. customers. Rekha becomes "Rachel," and Sita becomes "Stacy." Call center agents in India perform and embody specific cultural markers in name, voice, accent and attitude to make them palatable to the American consumer on the one hand, and ready participants in global capitalism on the other.

In a global culture, performative voices and bodies are commodities (Cameron, 2000). The consumer culture of the United States mandates particular performances from customer service agents: efficiency, competence, politeness, understandability in voice and accent (du Gay, 1996). Advancing communication technologies provide the means to globally expand customer service work, interconnecting consumers and workers from different nations in a capitalist relationship. The success of outsourcing depends on the disciplining of Indian bodies and voices and their “Americanized” performances. The reality of working in an Indian call center is such that as a condition of employment, agents’ cultural identities are altered and made invisible. The performance of American culture masks the identity of the Indian agent from the American consumer, with varying degrees of success. The cultural identity of Indian call center agents becomes a site of contestation where a lived Indian reality clashes with the job training that mandates an American persona. A schism occurs at the site of the body which at once presents itself in materiality even as it performs a disembodied persona dictated by the terms of its employment. Intelligibility as, and in the service of, the U.S. consumer mandates the schism with multiple implications for service work and conditioning as re-colonial subject. Sometimes agents appear schizophrenic, switching between accents and names, corporate and home personas. The collusion of whiteness and the re-colonial practices of transnational corporations reminiscent of empire combine to accomplish this feat. The question at the personal and collective level becomes: what are and what will be the implications and consequences of this practice?

Wherever our raced, classed, gendered, sexualized, and national bodies exist, we all navigate an increasingly connected, globalized world. While corporations and

governments grounded in capitalist ideologies enjoy, tout and reap the benefits of globalization, others view it much more critically as a neocolonial, neoliberalizing force (McChesney, 1999). Partha Chatterjee (2004) reflects that, “I am told that the word ‘globalization’ was first used in the mid-1970s by American Express — in an advertisement for credit cards” (p. 83). Globalization is a force that unhinges our grounding in nations, localities and cultures to reinsert them into forces of capitalism (Grossberg, 1996). Lawrence Grossberg (1996) characterizes this moment not “as post-industrialisation but hyper-industrialisation” and calls our attention to cultural identities as they intersect with our locations in the global labor force. Globalization, then, is a force which posits people and cultures against the interests of hegemonic corporations and nations (du Gay, 1996).

The transnational realities which occur under globalization are embedded in unequal power relations. When the transnational realities consist of First and Third World, colonial and postcolonial nations, the relationships evoke and produce modalities of colonialism (Alexander, 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Mohanty, 1997). Postcolonial theory argues that in the era of globalization with corporations increasing their global power and control, lines increasingly blur between corporation and state (Alexander, 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1997). Not unlike colonial powers, transnational corporations impose themselves through progressive narratives of advancement and development in cooperation with existing infrastructure (S. Hall, 1997). While the relationship is mutually desirable, it is neither equal nor do its benefits span entire populations. Indeed, as Laura Ann Stoler (2002) explains, while in the discursive of the colonizing occupation the picture of modernity

and advancement was present, the lives of Britain's own subjects in colonies did not mirror the colonial narrative. Therefore, there was more than a modicum of disparity between Britain's colonial beneficiaries and those that carried it out in her name.

Likewise, the colonized do not represent a monolithic recipient of the colonial presence.

While imposing violence and disparity to some, those elite colonial subjects managed relationships with Britain to their own benefit (S. Hall, 1997). The tension in the relationship between colonizer and colonized functions for Britain to "determine what they did not want to be and who they thought they were" (C. Hall, 1996, p. 71).

Colonial discourse relies on constructions of difference as a way of inscribing its subjects as less than their colonizing counterparts (Chatterjee, 1993). The relationship, existing at the discursive level, ensures the production and re-production of the ideology at the level of lived experience (Chatterjee, 1993). Although India was never a colony of the United States, the relationship between the two nations dates back to colonial times when England mediated the relationship between its two colonies, preserving the United States as an extension of England's culture, power, and whiteness. Vijay Prashad (2000) describes the relationship between India and the United States as one of appropriation and subordination intricately connecting bodies and colonialist objectives. He explains, "that the orangutan at the Bronx Zoo in the 1920s was named Rajah (King) was not coincidental" (Prashad, 2000, p. 32). Rather, it was part of an intricate discourse which preserved white masculinity as superior to a brown other achieved through linking the idea of the Indian king, and by extension all things Indian, as less than human and therefore inferior and in need of rule (Prashad, 2000). Greed and power transform themselves into narratives of a benevolent patriarchy couched in an ethic of care and

development rather than its reality of power and domination. Similar incorporations of Indians in circus acts were not unusual during this time in addition to Indian swamis traveling and teaching in the United States, compounding essentialist notions of Indian bodies and culture as mystical in opposition to England and the United States as rational and modern (Prashad, 2000). Post-independence the United States and India continue their cultural and ideological exchange of film, consumer goods, corporate presence, ideology and other influences, ever careful to insert, appropriate, and borrow from the other while maintaining a clear sense of self. Therefore, most would-be call center agents negotiate a preexisting familiarity with the United States, one made even more ubiquitous through the liberalization of the Indian economy and emergence of satellite television in India since 1991 (Malhotra & Crabtree, 2001). The racist and colonialist discursive history between the two nations informs their relations and constructions of each other today in the outsourcing relationship.

While the United States has long relied on India as a source of labor for technological industries (Walton-Roberts, 2004), outsourcing crafts new ways to continue the U.S. reliance on those bodies for labor but by keeping them outside of U.S. borders. Outsourcing is partially made possible as a result of liberalization policies which opened India's economic borders in the early 1990s followed by vigorous national and international campaigns to entice investors (Oza, 2001). In the absence of literature on outsourcing call centers to India, the similarities between manufacturing factories and call centers provide a useful framework for analysis. The factory and the call center are similarly situated in their relationship to the United States, and both service U.S. consumers. The difference lies in the service relationship. While factory workers produce

tangible items for consumption, no material consumed product is produced by the call center agent. The service relationship exists interpersonally, and the “products” in some ways are actually the call center agent themselves: their performance of U.S. accents and their technical knowledge or sales skills; their consumption, performance and regurgitation of whiteness. In addition to service, what is being outsourced is whiteness.

Deborah Cameron’s analysis of call centers in the United Kingdom draws on personal interviews and training of call center agents. Her framework does not include a cultural analysis; rather, her attention is to the “stylization” of agents’ language (Cameron, 2000). Specifically, Cameron views the styling of language as a form of corporate control over and packaging of the worker (Cameron, 2000). Furthermore, Cameron understands the gendered styling patterns of workers as feminine or female, specifically, subservient and compliant (Cameron, 2000). The standpoint of marginalized groups means that in order for them to successfully survive and negotiate dominant cultures, they must have a deep familiarity and understanding of them (K. Hall, 1995). In the case of Indian call centers this includes both ease and familiarity with U.S. language and culture. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) argue that “one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language” (p. 7). U.S. corporations which mandate and privilege U.S. cultural performances necessarily use language as a form of control and oppression.

Consider the qualifications listed in a recent classified ad in *The Times of India, Bangalore* (2004) for call center agents: “Excellent English communication skills.” In other words, call center employment mandates that Indian agents be able to communicate in the English of British and Americans rather than the “english” of Indians (Ashcroft,

Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989). The continued exchange that is brought on by this transnational communication reifies and reestablishes the power differentials and the performances of hegemonic, dominant culture. What this means essentially to the Indian call center agent is that the English they have grown up speaking is no longer good enough, the English idioms they use are not understandable. In other words, in order to participate successfully in a global market, workers must conform to the 'American' way in the U.S. context where "speech" and "life" read race as white (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989).

It is imperative that we understand outsourcing as a re-colonial practice which is also inherently racist. The connections between practices of colonialism and racism/whiteness are absolutely inseparable and intricately connected (Shome, 1996; López, 2005). Arundhati Roy (2004) articulates this connection in the following passage, worth quoting at length here:

The call center industry is based on lies and racism. The people who call in are being misled into believing that they are talking to some white American sitting in America. The people who work in those call centers are told that they're not good enough for the market, that U.S. customers will complain if they find out that their service is being provided by an Indian. So Indians must take on false identities, pretend to be Americans, learn a "correct" accent. (p. 89)

The re-colonial dynamic that occurs under outsourcing links the oppressions and modalities of racism and globalization. These tactics are reminiscent of the modalities of Britain during colonial times, but with advanced technology. During British colonial times, the colonizer had to directly insert itself through military force and embodied



occupation. Outsourcing's re-colonial practice relies on advanced technology and Indian bodies to carry out their agenda. Indian labor was once highly desirable as a cheaper and highly educated labor force in the United States (Walton-Roberts, 2004). Ever-greedy corporations searching for increased profit coupled with the U.S. post-9/11/01 racist vigilance against terrorism join forces to reap the profits of Indian labor while keeping them outside U.S. borders. The dark, Indian night and the dark Indian subject are unacceptable to U.S. ears and eyes. Indian call center agents simultaneously keep their bodies and their identities hidden in the dark of night while U.S. consumers go about their business in the light of day. Indian subjects perform whiteness as a condition of their employment.

While a globalized labor force is often required to modify cultural performances as a condition of employment, the internalization of these dominant cultural performances weighs particularly heavily on Indian call center agents. In addition to training in voice and accent, call center agents undergo training in U.S. popular culture in order to be able to "pass" as American. The practice of imposing cultural performances recalls prior colonial tactics. British colonizing missions often focused their attention on imposing their culture on Indians, both as a way of justifying the colonial mission – the logic being that Indians need the British – as well as a way of socializing Indians into a mimicry of British ideological norms. This is the logic Foucault (1977) theorizes for how power functions, arguing that power once imposed transforms the dominated into carrying it out against themselves. The British achieved this socialization both through religious missions as well as through control of print media and colonial literature

(Chambers, 1996; Joseph, 2004; Spivak, 1999). Ania Loomba (2002) describes the way in which Shakespeare was employed as colonial education.

Contemporary corporate colonialism relies on the medium of technology, the bodies of others to develop that technology and then uses it against them to colonize them. Call center training deployment of cultural texts works at the level of modeling both American English and American ideals. It is important to note that most often the performance sought and taught is epitomized in the banter, accents and attitude of the popular television series, *Friends*. In personal interviews and in media representations, call center agents often name *Friends* as the show they were asked to watch and emulate in their training. While performances in call centers reinforce whiteness at its discursive and constitutive level, these mimicking performances can never fully achieve the dominant colonial performance, and therefore function to maintain their status as other through the Orientalist gaze (Bhabha, 1994). If we are to understand outsourcing as re-colonial practice, we must engage the questions of cost – psychic, cultural, spiritual – on *both* sides of the telephone line. We will have to unravel the colonial yarn and recast it in a resistant and de-colonial stance.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY IN CRISIS

The methodology for this project interweaves postcolonial with performance theories and applies them to the call center phenomenon and to specific performances of Indian call center agents as they are recalled through personal interviews and filmed representations, locating Indian postcolonial subjects in their particular historical, cultural and gendered contexts. Focusing on the fracture which exists when previously colonized subjects, who as a condition of their employment perform two separate and unequal cultural scripts, I interrogate the positionality of the Indian performative body. As the previous chapters lay out, I argue that the neocolonial practices of corporate outsourcing materialize in a re-colonial dynamic. I make this argument as I understand the movement, impetus, and resulting relations of outsourcing to be reminiscent of British colonial modalities of power. In other words, as Chatterjee (1993) reminds us, we must keep in mind the histories we exist out of as we consider our contemporary realities. Therefore, my analysis of interviews and filmed performances examines the ways Indian call center agents perform U.S. cultural identities and within this context negotiate the re-colonial dynamic. I pose the research questions: What U.S. identities are being performed by Indian call center agents, and what are the markers of the performances? What are the dynamics, consequences and politics of the performances? My analysis applies postcolonial, performance and critical race theories to the description and analysis of the performances.

The methodological choice to bring closer together two fields of study that mutually inform each other is to recognize the strengths and limitations of each and what is possible when they are brought together. Raka Shome and Rada Hegde (2002) discuss the always already interdisciplinary nature of postcolonial studies and its usefulness to communication studies. Postcolonial studies consider relationships under colonization: the movements, historical conditions, resistances and continuances in the lived experiences of the pre-colonial, de-colonial, and post-colonial times in their situated realities (Shome & Hegde, 2002). It complicates notions of location and geopolitical boundaries as stable rather than as sites which continue to change and emerge over time (Clifford, 1997). Too often, however, we anchor our analytic tactics to texts more than to bodies. Dwight Conquergood (1998) instructs us of the limitations and slippages of this textualist practice at the expense of relationality and embodied connections. He continues this conversation in “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research” (Conquergood, 2002) where he invokes Frederick Douglas’ invitation to listen in silence as a way to deeply understand conditions of oppression. He reminds us of the distinctions between privileged sites of knowledge and what Foucault describes as the “subjugated knowledge” of those “at the bottom of the hierarchy” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 146). Foucault (1984) argues that as theorists not only must we not separate lived experiences from theoretical constructions, but that we cannot even *access* theoretical constructions without bodies. This is not to suggest that texts are obsolete or less instructive than embodied performances. Conquergood (2002) explains, “I want to be very clear about this point: textocentrism — not texts — is the problem” (p. 151). Therefore, texts must not be privileged above bodies. Our close attention to embodied movements locally and

globally is particularly useful to consider the tensions, interconnections, and co-productions between the body and discourse (Alexander, 2002; Conquergood, 2002; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). The combination of performance and postcolonial paradigms from a communication studies standpoint reveal the complexities and nuances of transnational relationships and embodied movements in postcolonial times in order to further a critical and political stance.

The critical lens must turn on the approach as well as the reflexivity of the researcher herself (López, 2005; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Visweswaran, 1994). Therefore, researchers coming to this work should, do, and must continue to interrogate our own subject locations as we conduct research. Rather than linger in the illusory confines of objectivity we inherit from positivism, we must take ownership of the stakes and consequences of our research agendas. This includes being mindful of the ideologies that drive our assumptions at every stage of the research process, from formulation of the project to the relational processes of observation and dialogue and finally our representations with those we engage for study (Clifford, 1997; Conquergood, 2002; González, 2003; Lal, 1999; Rosaldo, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994). We must keep attentive to the multi-layered and simultaneous emergences of disciplinary production. As postcolonial and performance studies scholars historically contextualize those we study (Mohanty, 2003; Shome & Hegde, 2002), we must continuously historicize our disciplinary approaches and the moments and agendas from which they emerge. Even as political momentums urge our research agendas, so do our approaches hold political charges (Chambers, 1996). Historical and contemporary tensions co-exist and shadow every move the researcher makes. The mandates of postcolonial and performance

theories toward a rigorous, embodied self-reflexivity are made that much stronger when intertwining these approaches.

Both theoretical approaches incorporate a political impetus beyond critique toward radical social change (Conquergood, 2002; López, 2005; Shome & Hegde, 2002). Beyond problem-identification and criticism, which result in textual, academic publications which are exclusive and often inaccessible, this practice holds the possibility of real connections and border crossing. The borders of the ivory towers house and confine us as much as they protect and privilege *us* while they keep *others* out. Those left out too often exist as the objects of our study rather than our co-producers of knowledge (Clifford, 1997). Ian Chambers (1996) describes the “politics of listening – for a ‘truth’ that is always becoming” (p. 51). Again recalling Conquergood’s (2002) discussion of Frederick Douglas, the emphasis here must be on the relational process of listening empathically in order to understand the “Other” we seek to stand in solidarity with as we write. We are beyond the politics of objective research paradigms. There is no truth “out there” waiting for our unencumbered scholarly representations. Nor is there a “safe” distance that we should keep from those we engage and represent. Keeping intact our critical paradigms and boundaries, our work is highly relational with real transformative possibilities in our consciousnesses and in our interactions. While there are tensions and unequal relations of power in the research relationship, agencies disrupt any clear binary distinctions. We rely on each other for various reasons, political as well as material. Our research processes are co-constitutive. Chambers (1996) continues, “as authority slips from my hands into the hands of others, they, too, become the authors, the subjects, not simply the effects or objects of my ethnography” (p. 51).

Even as it is relational, the research process is complex. Universities and disciplines materialize from colonial powers. Academic movements often mirror colonial powers; we can no longer ignore the interconnections between the two (González, 2003). Stoler (2002) argues for a postcolonial methodology which is:

more than a reflection or legitimation of European power but as a site of its production, taking up Edward Said's call to examine the taxonomic conventions of colonial knowledge, how those conventions have shaped contemporary scholarship, and why students of colonialism had not sought to ask about them.  
(p. 13)

Why do we not ask certain questions? What questions remain unanswered and with what political and material consequences? What is at stake, and what might it take, for us to walk into the complex and often emotional work of understanding oppression? What is on the other side of this work? We must find new ways of bridging those gaps by turning the borders into *borderlands* of solidarity and dialogue with real possibilities for social change, as much material as ideological (Anzaldúa, 1999; Lal, 1999; Mohanty, 1997, 2003; Visweswaran, 1994). In this case, the claim to solidarity with call center workers is one I make tentatively.

While I speak about Indian call center agents, I certainly do not speak on behalf of them, nor does my speech claim to communicate their interests, representations or characterizations of the outsourcing situation. Jayati Lal (1999) reflexively discusses the limitations of representation and the classed and privileged distinctions between herself and the factory workers she interviews and the ways in which her location as First World research positions her against them. In other words, we must not make false, even if

hopeful, claims to solidarity that do not exist between ourselves and those we represent. Certainly I am not aware whether the few call center agents considered in this study understand the situation as a re-colonial one. In fact, many of them celebrate it as indicative of India's emergence as a global superpower (Friedman, 2005). This may well be interpreted in part as the ambivalence of resistant postcolonial subjectivities. Ambivalence is the simultaneous pull toward and away from the colonial presence (Bhabha, 1994). Colonial legacies and postcolonial experiences are laced with memories of violence and trauma. As a form of survival, narratives emerge that complicate and contradict. Rukmini Bhaya Nair (2002) argues that, "Everyone in a postcolonial society is trained in amnesia, or an erasure of conscience . . . because otherwise life might get unbearable" (p. 251). Narratives that manifest from postcolonial subjectivities are never entirely clear and as performative texts are open to interpretation. As a postcolonial subject myself, I interpret these narratives from a standpoint of social justice, corporate accountability and in the hopes of transnational solidarity and resistance. My claims to solidarity are mindfully made as a cultural critic in resistance to colonizing research practices. I attempt this through a methodology which relies as heavily on embodied performances and voices as it does on my own critical descriptions and analyses and through a theoretical framework which listens deeply to postcolonial subjectivities. The performative narratives that I gather and co-create with others are represented through my own cultural and ontological frameworks. Their stories fold into my stories and my stories with theirs. The stories I tell through my writing produce texts for which I am solely responsible. The tensions between representation, voice, and intention remain questions we must continue to engage.



The materialization of theory and practice in praxis calls for dialogues among and beyond our communities in new ways. Too long have scholars brought to our attention the exclusivity and inaccessibility of academic writing and practice (hooks, 1984; Kadi, 2003; Torres, 2003), the consequences and politics of representation and voice (Lal, 1999; Spivak, 1999; Visweswaran, 1994) and the privileging of literary texts over bodies and relations (Conquergood, 1998), regardless of their complexity (Quayson & Goldberg, 2002; Shome & Hegde, 2002). How and why would anyone outside of the academy find access to our texts? Those who do are few and far between. The work of making racial and gendered dimensions of these critiques fall too heavily on women of color and Third World women – not a coincidental occurrence but rather another extension of the interconnections between whiteness, the academy, and colonial powers. In “Learning from the Outsider Within” Patricia Hill Collins (1999) articulates the ways marginalized voices within privileged spaces occupy spaces from which we can understand the workings of oppression. She argues for our close attention to these voices. At the same time, attention to these privileges, their oppressions and transformations are the responsibility of us all and remind us of the need for self-reflexive research practices. We must all be willing to do self-reflexive “homework” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 101).

Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994) discussion of homework refers to the work that happens at “home,” distinguished from the work that happens in the “field.” This includes self-reflection about knowledge and ideologies that emerge during research practice. Her concern is what she views as a narrowing of methodological accountings that recount only the “successes” from the field rather than the more productive site of “failures” (Visweswaran, 1994). The “failures” of our work quite often reveal

epistemological underpinnings (Visweswaran, 1994), what Chambers (1996) refers to as a methodology which, “continues to reproduce the cycles of hegemony that subject the other to *my* categories, to *my* need for alterity [emphasis in original] (p. 54). Therefore, in doing our *homework*, we reconcile our assumptions and our approaches, our particular positions and our politics in ways that hold us accountable to those we enter into dialogues with about their lives and our subsequent framings and representations. While we may experience and subsequently characterize those we dialogue with as being generous with their time and their stories, we must also consider the cultural and power dimensions of how we come to those discussions. What are the relations of power embedded in our asking? Do we cross cultural barriers in our asking that preclude their denial? Visweswaran (1994) describes her ease and tensions of entering homes in India, a culture where visitors are often expected and rarely turned away. Therefore, from differing cultural frameworks there is often the possibility of misinterpreting accessibility and welcome, rejection and discomfort. We must keep in mind that our relations and representations are powerful and political, holding as much potential to be in transnational solidarity as to colonize (Mohanty, 2003).

I remain mindful of the connections between colonizing forces and the academy and my own academically centered location and its potential of colonizing those I write about. Maria Cristina Gonzáles (2003) connects the roots of ethnographic practices to colonizing forces, whose thick descriptions of cultural Others “were written in order to justify, legitimize, and perpetuate the colonization of those about whom the texts were written” (p. 78). I embody in this writing and practice the postcolonial ethic Gonzáles (2003) describes, ever mindful of the distinction between intention and epistemology on

the one hand, and practice and assumption on the other. The re-colonizing forces of multinational corporations with the power to mandate hegemonic performances of whiteness/U.S.-ness are compounded by media programming that mirrors those representations and expectations of the “Other” in the U.S. gaze and consumer culture. In other words, the re-colonial gaze occurs at the level of discourse and corporate practice, as well as the operations of U.S. consumers as represented through media. It is not my intention to add to the re-colonial process but rather to expose it as such, and in doing so to bring a closer and more ethical attention to it in our academic and other communities (González, 2003). Yet at the same time, intention and practice in the context of cultural and national differences and practices are often communicated and performed in ways that reveal ideologies embedded in systems of unequal relations of power.

In the weaving of postcolonial and performance theories, the practical method for this project draws primarily on ethnographic insights into research. I rely on the contemporary conversations ethnographic research practices engage about self-reflexivity in researching the “Other.” Much of my data relies on interpersonal interviews with Indian call center agents. My stay in India, due to semester and monetary constraints and obligations, was but three weeks long, certainly not long enough to immerse myself in any aspect of Indian culture, much less the call center industry, the focus of my study. Yet this brief stint was preceded by a year and a half’s work and conversations with Indian documentary filmmaker Aradhana Seth about her forthcoming documentary, *1-800-CALL-INDIA*. It is my relationship with Seth which facilitates my entry into the world of Indian call centers. As an undergraduate in December, 2002 my then professor, Sheena Malhotra, California State University, Northridge, introduced me to Seth. Seth

had been filming for over a year in call centers in India and portrays the lives of call center owners and agents and their families through interviews and live footage of training sessions and call center work. When first introduced to the issue of U.S. corporate outsourcing to India, I was unfamiliar with the practice. This was exactly as it was meant to be as it was in the interest of corporations to disguise this practice from the U.S. public. Seth's invitation to work on her film included transcribing and coding the approximately 30 hours of video footage over the course of seven months.

As anyone who has spent long, sometimes tedious, hours transcribing dialogue knows, it is an arduous and embodied project. There is the physicality of typing and holding one's body, often tensely, for long periods of time, and listening to unfamiliar accents and city sounds. The translation of Indian English was filtered through my ears, eyes, and cultural framework. Translation and transcription are physical and embodied processes that one does alone and with others. They are also political practices because they involve selections and interpretations that reflect our own cultural and ideological stances and consequences (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Chambers (1996) warns of the violence translation can impose and that our methodologies reconcile "that translation – mine of an other, an other's of me – is never a transparent activity but always involves a process of re-citing, hence cultural and historical re-siting, and is therefore a travesty, a betrayal, of any 'original' or 'authentic' intention" (p. 49). In this case, the conditioning of my eyes and ears through a lifetime immersed in U.S. culture intersected with representations of training of Indian call center agents.

Since December, 2002 Seth, Malhotra and I have spent many hours in an intercultural conversation. Our various social and national locations – Seth and Malhotra

are from different parts of India and I am from the U.S. Midwest – lend those conversations a richness that deserves some attention. My lack of knowledge prompted me to ask questions about unfamiliar cultural and corporate practices which I was being asked to code and comment upon. While we were commenting on the transnational and telephone relationship which emerges through the call center industry, our intercultural and embodied conversations functioned and continue to function in similar ways. There is necessarily a connection to be made between these simultaneous intercultural exchanges and the generative and provoking conversations which occur among the three of us. Our conversations and interactions emerge on a similar site of intercultural communication as the call center agents and their customers. The questions we had and continue to have for each other of each other's cultural practices reveal culture as a site of struggle over meaning; culture is not a given norm but a set of practices which shift and change over time and are particular to any given culture. Renato Rosaldo (1989) explains that, "although they often appear outlandish, brutish, or worse to outsiders, the informal practices of everyday life make sense in their own context and on their own terms" (p. 26). Our conversations reveal to us and to those we engage that the cultural performances we enact are culturally specific. Everyday cultural performances we come to enact and to expect as normative appear opaque to us; an outsider's questioning gives way to their transparencies and destabilizes them as normative. Rosaldo continues, "cultures are learned, not genetically encoded" (p. 26). These conversations and my work on Seth's documentary make up the homework Visweswaran (1994) describes as well as provide the foundation for what would become my eventual trip to India and the protocol for interviews Malhotra and I gathered. Visweswaran's (1994) framework leads toward

methodological configurations where homework bleeds into fieldwork; my work on the film informed my approach to and negotiation of my time in India and the interviews collected there.

In December, 2003 I left for a three-week long, semester break trip to India to conduct research and interviews along with Malhotra. A native of India, Malhotra maintains close contact with an extensive network of family and friends who live there. The performance studies paradigm that informs this research led me to desire my own embodied experience of being in India, to talk directly with call center agents, and to enter into the world of call centers beyond the experience of working with film footage. Rosaldo (1989) explains that, “we can learn about other cultures only by reading, listening, or being there” (p. 26). It is the embodied practice of *being* there that I sought to deepen my understanding of what it means to be a call center agent in India. The interview protocol was developed and approved by the University of Maine Institutional Review Board in October, 2003. While the interview protocol is specific in terms of categories of information, the questions are open-ended and the interviews were conducted in a dialogic fashion as consistent with feminist interview approaches (Reinharz, 1992).

Our access to interviews with call center agents came from both Malhotra’s contacts as well as from one contact that I made – in Maine. In September, 2004, I gave a talk on outsourcing sponsored by the Women in the Curriculum department at the University of Maine. In these early stages of my research I was framing outsourcing as colonial practice. An attendee of the talk was from India; a student friend of mine encouraged him to come to the talk and since he had friends in call centers he decided to

attend. I was put into email contact with him, and he agreed to put me in touch with some of his friends who work in call centers. I sent out several emails requesting interviews that resulted in one firm contact and agreement for an interview while in India. Matt<sup>3</sup> is a 26 year old college graduate. His work as a call center agent is in sales and customer service for a major U.S. corporation in Bangalore. Malhotra and I interviewed Matt on January 8, 2004 in Bangalore, India for about two hours.

After I left India, Malhotra conducted eleven subsequent interviews in Mumbai/Bombay between January 21 and 22, 2004. All of the interviews were conducted inside of call centers during their regular nighttime working hours. One of the call centers is an Indian company that contracts with multiple U.S. companies. The other call center is a U.S. corporation that has set up a call center in India to service its multiple customer service and sales processes. I discuss the distinctions between the two types of call centers further in Chapter 4. Malhotra interviewed four women and seven men, several of whom spent time in the United States as part of their training. Agents' work includes both outbound telemarketing as well as inbound customer initiated calls. Each interview ranged from half an hour to an hour in length. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, however, there were times that Malhotra and the agents would converse in Hindi. I transcribed all of these interviews and Malhotra translated Hindi where it occurred.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I analyze excerpts from the following eight of the eleven interviews. Here I focus only on those interviews with call centers who were interacting on the telephone with U.S. consumers. The three interviews that are not considered here

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<sup>3</sup> To protect their anonymity, I have changed the names and eliminated all identifiable characteristics of call center agents Malhotra and I interviewed.

are those with call center agents who do not work on the telephone, but rather on processes whose interactions occur solely in online communications via email chats. The excerpts I analyze are from the following interviews: Iqbal is the CEO of an Indian call center which contracts with multiple U.S. corporations. A native of India, he was working in London during the late 1990s when the call center industry began booming in India. He came back to India where he co-founded this company with two other people and it has been running quite successfully. Swapnil is a 24 year old college graduate who works for an Indian call center. Both his wife and brother work in call centers. Lawrence is a trainer for a major U.S. corporation. He is a college graduate with a background in economics. He spent six years working for an international airline before he joined the call center industry in order to apply his interests in finance. Rohit is a college graduate who for the past one and a half years has been working for a major U.S. corporation. Reema is a 23 year old college graduate who spent a year teaching before joining the call center industry. She has been working in financial sales for a major U.S. corporation for 8 months. Seema is a supervisor for a process that services retirement plans for a major U.S. corporation. She previously worked in collections for a credit card company. Punita graduated from college in 2001 and began working as a software programmer. She has been in the call center industry for almost two years working for a major U.S. corporation on outbound sales calls for that company's financial products. Anika has been working for a major U.S. corporation for four years. She graduated college in 2002 and spent time working as a clothing designer before becoming a call center agent. Kapil is a 22 year old Bombay native. He works for a major U.S. corporation in finance and sales. He has worked there for ten months and has been in the call center industry for two years. All of



the interviewees are college graduates. One lives alone and many live with their parents or with their spouses. All of the women are single and one is engaged to be married. All interviewees discussed their training and work and how they see it affecting their lives and Indian culture.

### **Method of Analysis**

I frame the interviews Malhotra and I conducted as performing narrative. The stories that emerge through these narratives paint pictures of a particular sector of twenty- and thirty-somethings who work in Indian call centers. The narratives are dialogic and prompted by generosity of time on the part of the call center agents and their curiosity about us and our project. Framing these dialogues as performance narratives relies on the approach to understanding storytelling as performed. As outlined by Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson (2004), performing narrative is embodied in persons, situated within particular material constraints and embedded in multiple and sometimes conflicting fields of discourse. Performing narratives is always political because performance both legitimates and critiques existing relations of power. Approaching interviews as narrative performance allows us to access them in such a way as to deconstruct the relations of power inherent in the conversations: the conversation between Indian call center agent and U.S. customers and between call center agents and U.S. researchers, one of whom is an Indian native and one a white-appearing U.S. national. Further, as Langellier and Peterson (2004) instruct, narratives do not reveal “truths” but rather unfold discursive practices and locations of narrators and the strategies they employ to navigate the dialogic terrain and represent themselves to others. Finally, Langellier and Peterson (2004) understand storytelling to be in and of itself a

performance, a performance of “daily life” as the title of their book reveals. What we can learn about culture through daily performances is a great deal.

To analyze the performances, I apply the method of textual criticism Robert Scholes’ (1985) outlines in *Textual Power*. It is three step process that involves reading, interpreting and criticism. Scholes’ method imbues cultural critics with a useful tool with which to evaluate narrative performances. Literacy in reading encompasses not just the characters on the page but rather the cultural and discursive codes we depend on to make sense of our experience (Scholes, 1985). The performance each text achieves is dependent on the performativity of all texts. This is less a linear process than it is a hermeneutic movement that spirals back on itself. Once a critic submits to the text and moves to interpretation and criticism, she re-submits to the text to re-listen and then returns to interpretation or criticism. Whether by virtue of choice or assignment, we engage in a kind of contract with the text, and in Scholes’ (1985) language, submit to the text, until such time as we are able or choose to shift the power the text has over us as readers. Scholes (1985) refers to textual power, the innate power of texts that come to life in the moment the reading relationship begins. In submitting to the text as a reader, the text assumes a command over us in the encounter whether to inform, outrage, antagonize, demean, humor or pleasure us. The intention of the text is inescapable as we become implicated in its power and agenda, as it is added to the text of the reader. This is the work Conquergood (2002) describes as a deep and intense listening to what the voices in the text have to say to us as critics. The irony of textual power is in its limitations (Strine, 1992). Textual power is limited in that it while its power is immediate in the moment of consumption, absorption and further production, it offers the reader a cathartic rather than

transformative experience. In other words, we can remain submissive to the texts and take texts at face value. While we must necessarily submit to and listen to what texts have to say to us, we cannot remain there. Our agency as subjects allows us to subvert texts through reading beyond their intention. In this and the next two chapters then, I first submit to the interviews and mediated texts to listen to the performances. I listen closely for what call center agents have to say in their own words.

In submitting to the text in reading, we rely on the discursive to identify and separate out the connections. Our ability to name what they are outside of the text is what Scholes (1985) calls interpreting the text. Interpretation is the work of historical contextualization in which to frame the text and understand the conventions and systems of meaning on which they rely. Postcolonial theory and Indian colonial and contemporary history provide the framework for interpreting the call center phenomenon. Here I consider performances of postcolonial subjects, call center agents' as well as my own performances, and place them in their historical and cultural context. I lay the historical foundation for my interpretation in Chapter 2's discussion of postcolonial theory and Indian history. In order to understand outsourcing as re-colonial practice, I there trace the modalities of the East India Company which led to British colonization of India and the performances of resistance which led to Indian independence in 1947. The opening of India's borders in the 1990s leads to the entrance of U.S. corporations and constitutes the outsourcing dynamic, which recall the movements of colonial powers, and which I finally argue establishes a re-colonial dynamic. The re-colonial dynamic manifests in cultural performances of identity. In the interviews I listen for performances of ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry in discussions of codes of call center service work. The process I

went through involved listening, and re-listening for meaningful moments and performances. What emerged are the themes that I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, themes of binary oppositions, contradictions and gaps.

In making this argument, I enact a criticism and political stance against colonial tactics and oppressions. This is again the work of postcolonial theory in that it is an always already political project (Spivak, 1999; Shome & Hegde, 2002). In reading, interpreting and criticizing outsourcing practice, I submit to the narrative performances as texts and read the voices of call center agents for their performances of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994). In reading upon and against narrative performances, we understand the re-colonial dynamic and postcolonial subjects' negotiation of it. As I discuss above, this is a criticism that I make in solidarity with call center agents as postcolonial subjects struggling against the oppressions of globalization and global capitalism. These moments are not always clear, and there are multiple readings of narratives that take us continuously back to the text, always in the hermeneutic of reading, interpretation, and criticism. It is a productive and generative process, as every turn brings new understanding and takes us to deeper meanings and resistances.

The interview Malhotra and I conducted together was in Bangalore, her birthplace and family home. We stayed with different members of the Malhotra family during my visit. As I would come to learn about Indian culture and as others have described (Visweswaran, 1994), families are generally large and extended, and a family's home is often a busy site of exchange and moving bodies, ranging from friendly visitors making social calls to those attending to service needs. The Malhotra family is no exception. In

addition to her parents, sister and sister's family, many live-in domestics assist the family. Her mother and sister run an upscale clothing design business, part of which is housed in a building adjacent to the family home. The Malhotra home is a constant whirl of activity, and as her only brother's wedding coincided with my visit, there were additional visitors both national and international came and went. After the New Year and half way into my visit and observations, we were able to attend to the business of interviewing.

After speaking on the phone several times with the interviewee, whom I refer to here as Matt, I left it to Malhotra and Matt to arrange the site of our interview and exchange directions. It was agreed that the interview would take place at the Malhotra family home. We arranged the interview on a day that we anticipated would be the least amount of family activity. On the day of the interview I was nervous, pacing and checking and re-checking the equipment. It was the day I was anxiously awaiting and I was finally going to talk in person with a call center agent after several months of watching, listening and thinking about what a call center agent does at work and outside of work. After a few weeks in India I was more interculturally comfortable, but I was still quite conscious of my cultural limitations. Even though as a function of his work he knew more about me than I him, I didn't want to offend or alienate Matt with my questions and interactions. By this point in my trip I had had many discussions with the Malhotra family and others about what Indians think of Americans. And while we were working hard to arrange more interviews, this was the only one that we had secured and I feared my entire thesis would hinge on getting this one "right." I feared the "failures." The small sense of confidence and the ease through which I had moved through two weeks in India

and my year-long work on Seth's documentary was evaporating. My interview was approaching and I was afraid that I would do it "wrong."

Upon reflection, I did many things that I wished I had done differently. My homework revealed many of the ideologies present in my approach and the limitations and privilege of my own culture and First World status. Bryant K. Alexander (2002) reflects that as we move beyond our national borders, our bodies move complete with their racialized discourses intact. He explains that as a Black, gay man moving through Japan, his interactions made it clear that he was not the normative (read white) American whose representations travel internationally, and that as a result he preceded his interactions with photos and the introduction of his partner (Alexander, 2002). The site and privilege of my white-appearing body translated into First World privilege and currency while traveling in India, regardless of the ways my white-appearing, queer, lower-middle class, gendered, and Chicana identity and politics facilitate my mobility within U.S. borders. This was a site of struggle for me which I continue to sort through and process as I do my homework. I moved with considerable ease in India and with ideological assumptions about Indian culture and the call center industry.

Our ideological assumptions come from cultural knowledge (Rosaldo, 1989) as well as from media (S. Hall, 1995). As Stuart Hall (1995) explains, "In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies" (p. 19). It is the power of mainstream media to dictate the terms through which the public understands issues of race and inter-national relationships (Shome, 1996). Mainstream media representations of call centers in the U.S. began market saturation in the middle of 2003. During Labor Day weekend in August, 2003 one

of the first extensive news programs about outsourcing was aired on PBS's *NOW: With Bill Moyer* (Brown, 2003). The timing of the initial program provides its framing and context as the phenomenon began to be revealed to the American public. Labor Day discussions mark shifts and changes in the work force and this particular workforce was being "lost" to workers in India. Shortly after this I began to notice more and more media attention being paid to the issue, both in news programs and print. Syndicated cartoons, news shows, and news articles were found and brought to my attention by many people in my life, academic and non-academic, ranging from my mentors to my mother, all eager to continue this emerging and critical conversation. In addition to my experience with Seth's film and the interviews in India, other data for this project consists of footage of call centers and call center agents as represented in U.S. mass media. These include TV newsmagazine programs, a *Discovery Channel* documentary, and one mainstream book dating from August, 2003 to March, 2005 and are specifically as follows: the "Foreign Service?" episode of *NOW with Bill Moyers* (Brown, 2003), the "Out of India" episode of *60 Minutes* (Wallace, 2004), *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman's (2004) documentary *The Other Side of Outsourcing* which aired on the *Discovery Channel*, as well as Friedman's (2005) recent book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. These programs include interviews with call center agents as well as performances of call center agents in training and at work in call centers. Here I rely on them for their visual representations of the training and performances call center agents undergo in call centers and for the interviews.

Mainstream media representations simultaneously maintain and collapse the distance between India and the U.S. by shining their spotlight on India and its multiple

subjectivities. The spotlight shines through the filter of whiteness and U.S. ethnocentrism (S. Hall, 1995). Whereas outsourcing's telephone relationship renders the Indian body invisible, media programs render those bodies hyper-visible. The hyper-visibility of Indian bodies functions on multiple levels. First, hyper-visibility functions to render U.S. corporations invisible. While it is corporate greed that initially facilitates the outsourcing relationship, the hyper-visibility of Indian bodies function as a tangible, material locus of blame acting as a smokescreen that distracts the American public from the elusive and disembodied corporation. U.S. consumers occupy ambivalent relationships with corporations, being employed by them and consuming their products. While this study does not specifically address or deconstruct U.S. media discourse on outsourcing, it is instructive that this discourse combines with my previous knowledge about outsourcing and contributes to the way I approached my interview with Matt.

Matt arrived at the Malhotra home at the agreed time, early afternoon. We set ourselves up on the front porch, exchanged pleasantries and checked the tape recorder. Mary, a woman who works for the Malhotras, brought us hot chai to drink. I knew that Mary is a Christian whose name comes from that tradition. I also knew from working on Seth's film and from U.S. media representations that call center agents regularly (and not voluntarily) change their given names and adopt Western-familiar names for their telephone work. This practice was, and remains, of particular importance to me and was at the forefront of my mind as I began the interview. At times a little knowledge can do a great deal of harm as my first exchange with Matt reveals:

K: OK, first we would like to start you know, basic. Is Matt your real name?

M: Yes.



K: It's your given name.

M: My real name. My name is Matt [says last name] [spells last name]

K: Right.

M: That's my name.

K: OK.

M: It is Indian.

K: OK, OK. I just –sorry, the only reason I ask is that it's through my, you know, sort of limited access to this industry--

M: Yes.

K: It's my understanding that people change their names often.

M: Quite often.

K: But your name is Matt.

M: My name is Matt.

K: I'm sorry [laughing, embarrassed].

M: No problem.

My first question to Matt reveals the assumptions and expectations I had before even beginning the interview. Although I had communicated by phone and email with Matt prior to coming to India, and he had always referred to himself as “Matt,” from the moment I secured a contact I assumed that “Matt” was a pseudonym for some more “authentic” Indian name. I perform laughter to cover my embarrassment at revealing my bias and Matt, Malhotra and I together begin our co-constitutive performance for another hour and a half. Beyond the embarrassment we see the prevalence of an ideology and my search as interviewer to find what I was looking for. What I initially conceptualized as a

failure actually turns into a revealing and instructive methodological moment (Visweswaran, 1994).

Surely this moment is embarrassing revelation, but I do not expose myself to demonstrate reproach or guilt. This admission is not meant as a guilty confession, nor does it ask for absolution. As López (2005) explains, such a movement reveals the interrelatedness of whiteness and colonialism. To crack open this connection, reveal it and transform it is my aim. What I hope to do with this discussion is to explore the epistemological underpinnings of First World researcher and how they manifest as cultural performances in relation to those with whom we interact and whom we represent in the emergent narratives. Shome and Hegde (2002), referring to Visweswaran's study and her subsequent discussion of failures, characterize these movements as revealing the ways in which "the history and memories of nationalism and colonialism shaped, constrained, and interrupted the project of her ethnography" (p. 259).

The above exchange between Matt and myself reveals my own ideologies as well as the narrative strategies we both adopt to negotiate our conversation. It reveals the complicated tensions of power between us as global citizens as well as the class tensions between Matt and Malhotra. The question of power here is slippery. On the one hand, Matt's presence at the interview was voluntary and generous. Yet I needed him in a way that he didn't need me. While my characterizations of his work as re-colonial may be valid, there was no request on his part that I speak for him. While I link myself in solidarity with him and other call center agents in the particular, material, global maneuvers of capital, I do not know whether he agrees with my assessments of the situations or whether he would choose to align himself with me. While I had been

“studying” his work for a year, he had been actively, daily, and in an embodied way engaging and performing “me” as U.S. consumer for much longer. His work and the historical, colonial context of his work – the British colonial encounter which brought English as a language into India which gives way to the “ease” of entry of U.S. corporations and their mandates of particular performances – are the conditions under which Matt and I find ourselves in the current situation. These are, in turn, connected to the modalities of powers of colonialist nations, whiteness and globalization. It is with this methodological reflexivity that the following chapters describe and analyze the narratives of interviews and media representations of call center performances.

This example of “performing narrative” with Matt illustrates my use of Scholes’ (1985) analytic method of reading, interpreting and criticizing that I use in Chapters 4 and 5 to discuss the interviews and mediated texts. I repeatedly listen, watch, and view texts for meaningful moments of performance. By “performance” I mean those embodied daily acts that each of us manifest in our daily lives. Performance is embodied action; it is productive and occurs in tangible and material ways. It includes all and any particular acts of individuals which have both intentional as well as unintentional motivations and outcomes. Performances occur in historical, material and culturally specific contexts. Performativity, its contexts historical, material and cultural, occurs at the level of the discursive, and it informs and is informed by the collective, repetitious performances at the individual level. Discourse informs and holds cultural norms, power relations, and meanings which are carried out in particular, individual performances. Even before we have the capacity to understand the language and its meanings we enter into what Robert Scholes (1985) refers to as struggles over meaning. However, even before our material

bodies enter into existence the struggle has already begun. Each particular action *must* be considered a performance which can *only* be understood within a predefined and preexisting discourse which therefore achieves and distinguishes this level of performativity from performance (Strine, 1998). Even as at the discursive, this performativity participates in the formation of our subjectivity, our subjectivities are not fully subordinate to performativity; in our capacity as subjects defined by the texts we engage, the agency we embody lends itself toward performances which can disrupt and redefine our subjectivities and thereby subordinate performativity to performance (Butler, 1990, 2004; Scholes, 1985, Strine, 1992). I look at embodied and repeated performances by call center agents in their daily lives, their call center training and work. Chapter 4 focuses on call center agents' training and Chapter 5 focuses on call center work and its cultural and daily life implications as call center agents describe and perform them. In both chapters I analyze the performances for the ways that they negotiate and often resist the re-colonial dynamic.

## Chapter 4

### THE OTHER END OF THE LINE:

#### TRAINING TO BE A CALL CENTER AGENT IN INDIA

How do we know, understand and communicate our cultural and national identities? We can access answers to these questions in the ways we perform our identities (S. Hall, 1996a). We perform identity in the way we talk, our personal relationships, the narratives we tell in daily life and popular culture, the food we eat and the wars we wage. Our daily embodied performances ebb and flow depending on social contexts. What we perform at work might differ from what we perform with family and with friends. Judith Butler (1990) argues that we only come to understand our identities as our performances bring them into being. Performance of identity repeated over time, understood as performativity, becomes normalized in discourse which in turn dictates acceptable behavior (Butler, 1990). However constrained by the limitations of gender, race, class, sexuality and nation, we embody agency with which to navigate the terms of performativity, reinforcing, bending, subverting and transforming norms (Butler, 1990, 2004).

Performances materialize in historical contexts. Colonial forces discipline colonized subjects into performances consistent with dominant norms. As my argument relies on the understanding that in the era of globalization, corporations increasingly replace colonizing countries (Alexander, 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1999), I apply Bhabha's (1994) conceptualization of the terms *ambivalence*, *hybridity* and *mimicry* to analyze Indian performances of dominant cultures

in call centers. As the following narratives and performances reveal, Indian call center agents navigate the re-colonial dynamic of U.S. corporate outsourcing in complex ways that simultaneously integrate, subvert and resist the re-colonial movement that occurs under globalization.

*Ambivalence* is the term Bhabha uses to characterize the simultaneous desire and hatred colonial subjects harbor toward the colonial presence as the colonizer conjures opportunities and access as well as oppression and marginalization (Bhabha, 1994). While conceptualized within the presence of British colonial rule, ambivalence applies to the current postcolonial and re-colonial moment. Ambivalence manifests in the U.S.-India call center phenomenon. India's high unemployment rate means that call centers provide an economic boost through the creation of jobs, albeit to a small percentage of the population. While open calls for call center employment may generate hundreds of applicants, very few applicants receive jobs (Friedman, 2005; *1-800-CALL-INDIA*). Further, the terms of call center employment require agents to conform to U.S. cultural performances, thereby performatively marginalizing their own cultural identities. However, the relationship between the United States as First World country and India as Third World country complicates this practice. Bhabha's theory of ambivalence here poses the question, at what cost does the United States dangle the carrot of industry and capitalism to India as a 'developing' nation? It is a complex desire on the part of India that foreign corporations enter its borders (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004; Chakravartty, 2004). The desired employment of call center agents at the cost of cultural erasure can be understood in Bhabha's terms as ambivalence.

Bhabha (1994) defines *mimicry* as the colonized subjects' performances which emulate cultural models of the colonizing presence. While the colonizing presence initiates, encourages and relies on its imitation, resulting performances by colonized subjects are always grounded in ambivalence and the subjects' own cultural standing. Bhabha (1994) explains, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" [emphasis in original] (p. 86). Embedded in how colonial mimicry produces performances which are 'not quite' are the normalized unequal power relations between colonizing and colonized nations, at once the justifying and relied on ideologies of colonizing practice which are simultaneously economically and teleologically motivated (Bhabha, 1994).

Performativity of mimicry results in *hybridity*. Hybrid performances, as they are a mixture of mimicry and ambivalence produced by colonial subjects, achieve "transcultural" standing in a third space neither colonized nor colonizing (Bhabha, 1994). The unequal power dynamic exists alongside the agency of the subjects, in this case the call center agents. Hybrid performances of call center agents are neither fully Indian nor American. They are performances of postcolonial subjectivities. Cultural performances that are neither Indian nor American, particularly when they remain unknown to U.S. consumers, have resistive potential. Indian call center agents may know Americans better than they know themselves. As they study and perform American identities, they incorporate a complex understanding of what it means to be American. Agents' narratives reveal that when their Indianness seeps through and reveals what is behind the performances, call center agents are left to negotiate the mixed reactions.

Shifting U.S. corporate operations to India fosters economic growth. However, the industry boom is simultaneously implicated in the complex globalized network which means the increased presence of U.S. culture. This increased presence reproduces the discourse of U.S. dependency and influence as a condition of India's participation in global capitalism. Call centers dynamically reiterate and reproduce the unequal power relations between the nations and has implications for the cultural identities of Indian call center agents. Through descriptions of specific performances and narratives, I now turn my attention to the ways in which Indian call center agents negotiate the world of call centers.

### **The Other End of the Line: How It All Began**

The call center industry in India began in the post-1991 liberalization of the Indian economy. The intertwining forces of globalization and colonialist nations turned the world's gaze toward India's open borders and a low-waged, English-speaking labor force. Foreign corporations eager to tap into new markets and labor, major U.S. corporations began setting up operations in India. Foreign and state investments poured money and time into advancing India's telecommunication and internet capacity (Chakravartty, 2004; Chattopadhyay, 2003). These investments led the way for the call center industry. Many of these operations were initially started in conjunction with Indians who had lived and worked in the United States, often times for the same corporations which were interested in expanding to India (Seth, Forthcoming). One successful Indian call center owner who previously worked for a major U.S. bank indicates that this experience is useful because a businessperson with a working knowledge of both countries can "understand both the markets. And if we started a



company with a U.S. base we would be able to attract U.S. companies to come do some work for us here in India” (Seth, Forthcoming).

India has two basic kinds of call centers. Some call centers are Indian-owned companies which contract with multiple U.S. corporations to maximize their services, profitability, and expanding potential. The same founder explains that call centers are “market facing, which means we will do work for many clients . . . . And then take this business to the next level where we are adding value to the client and not just doing the low end of the work” (Seth, Forthcoming). In this case two agents sitting in cubicles next to each other may receive or place calls representing different U.S. companies. Here U.S. corporations contract work with an Indian company dealing in call centers. The other type of call center occurs when generally large U.S. corporations actually set up operations in India under their own names. There are often different processes for one company: for example, a credit card company might offer loans and banking in addition to credit card services, but all their employees work directly for the U.S. corporation. The success and popularity of call centers in the customer service realm has led to expanded outsourcing of white collar jobs such as the processing of income taxes, medical tests and computer animation (Wallace, 2004; Friedman, 2005; Brown, 2003).

Sources often credit Jack Welch of GE Capital as originating the call center model. Welch visited India as early as 1989, and impressed with the advanced technological and intellectual capacity, set into motion his outsourcing vision (Friedman, 2005). Others followed Welch’s experiment. As of 2000, there were reports of over ten thousand call center workers, and projections estimate there will be over one million by 2008 industry wide (Friedman, 2005; Seth, Forthcoming). A CEO of a call center in

Mumbai informs us that GE's target is to outsource 70% of their operations to India. He said, "one of India's strength has been its manpower. We haven't had capital . . . but we've had manpower [sic]" (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004). India's middle class labor pool is highly educated and advanced in the technological sector (Chattopadhyay, 2003). The majority of call center agents are college graduates in an economy with high rates of unemployment, making them ideal candidates for call center employment.

Call centers are set up in large buildings, often able to accommodate 2000 workers per shift. Call centers often invoke images of a cross between a college campus and a corporate city. Security is high, and most surround themselves with fences and guards who monitor and record comings and goings of employees and visitors. When Malhotra entered one call center the guards confiscated her camera for the duration of her visit and questioned her about her tape recorder. Primarily 20-somethings work the phones of corporate America until their break times when they socialize and share meals together. Working what are known as processes, their work hours correspond to the business hours in the United States. This means that often times they work not during Indian business hours, but through the night. As night work often triggers the suspicion and concern of parents, particularly those with daughters wishing to be call center agents, most companies provide door-to-door car service. Shifts last anywhere from nine to twelve hours, and agents spend their time primarily within the call centers. While a daytime worker might use her lunch hour to take a walk or do errands, working the nightshift in a call center means spending most free break times within the call center compound.

In a business with an extremely high rate of attrition, anywhere from 20% to 30%

(Seth, Forthcoming), call centers aim at providing incentives for workers to stay. Some have their own training centers, cafeterias for feeding workers, gyms and recreation facilities for workers' break times, as well as ATMs and email services (Seth, Forthcoming). In addition, call centers often sponsor social events as well as monthly competitions with monetary and other prizes for workers who excel (Seth, Forthcoming; Matt, interview, January 8, 2004). The next chapter describes the work and daily lives of call center agents and the socio-cultural implications call center agents see as taking place in India as a result of the call center industry. To understand what it means to perform as a call center agent – to perform U.S. culture as a condition of employment – in this chapter I discuss the training call center agents undergo. It is a training which involves disciplining bodies, minds and cultural practices into U.S. cultural performances.

### **So you want to be a Call Center Agent: The Training Begins, and Continues**

How did you get your job? Did you stand in line for hours at a time with hundreds of others on a warm day, filling out paperwork, smiling and answering questions in a fashion that makes you stand out from the competition? Did you have a friend who works on the inside and arranged an interview? While some jobs are scarce in the United States, many of us don't have to go through what it takes to be a call center agent. Competition for call center employment is fierce. An AOL recruiter in Thomas Friedman's (2004) documentary *The Other Side of Outsourcing* reports that while they receive up to 700 applications per day, only 6% of applicants receive jobs. Interviewees in Seth's (Forthcoming) documentary *1-800-CALL-INDIA* estimate similar numbers, about one job for every one hundred applicants. When I was in India, the daily newspaper classified ads were filled with countless call center listings for open interviews on certain days. Many

call center agents subvert long application lines as many jobs are found through friends or word of mouth (Matt, interview, January 8, 2004).

Once in the door, call center agents undergo on average three to four weeks training in the job they will perform. Since every corporation has its own culture and goals, training includes an introduction to corporate culture which, according to one human resources director, “really is to familiarize you with the vision and mission of your company” (Seth, Forthcoming). Outside of the hotel and airline industries, the U.S. concept of customer service is relatively new to the Indian economy (Seth, Forthcoming). Training is split between learning the processes of a company, referred to as process or hard skills training, and learning performance skills – voice, accent and U.S. culture – referred to as soft skills training. Cameron (2000) argues that the soft skills of service work are gendered as feminine performance. Her discussion of call center agents’ training and performance in the U.K analyzes demonstrations of “*warmth, sincerity, excitement, friendliness, helpfulness, confidence*” prompted by mandates to “*create rapport*” and “*display empathy,*” all of which she connects to feminine cultural expectations [emphasis in original] (Cameron, 2000, p. 335). Therefore, the stylizing of workers into cultural expectations of femininity functions to socialize them into predetermined submissive service roles. When understood in a globalized context and the inequality between nations, this stylizing compounds outsourcing’s re-colonial scenario.

Additionally, there is a gendered dimension to the linking of “hard” skills to corporate work and “soft” skills to culture. It continues binary colonial logic that materializes as hard/soft, corporate/culture, U.S./Indian, each of which assumes an inherent masculine/feminine hierarchy. U.S. corporate outsourcing re-colonizes Indian

call center agents, and India as a whole. It begins with the call center agents and extends to the government to those who literally construct and service call centers. This particular outsourcing practice holds India in a binary pattern from which the U.S. emerges as a dominant force that Indians must negotiate. This particular discourse exists at multiple levels of re-colonial outsourcing practice. It exists from the relations between the United States and India, whose intricate web of government and corporate workings make the outsourcing relationship possible. It also occurs in the telephone relationship between call center agents and their U.S. customers. Finally, it exists within the bodies of Indian call center agents themselves, who at once negotiate the tension of their own cultural identities while performing other identities on the premise that their own are somehow unintelligible or unacceptable in global capitalism. While call center agents' embodied performances navigate the confines of an oppressive re-colonial dynamic, they do so with levels of agency that simultaneously incorporate and refuse re-colonial mandates. They are complex negotiations which lend themselves to more nuanced meanings when understood as performances. As they are postcolonial performances, Bhabha's (1994) theoretical contributions are particularly useful. To understand the training processes, I first discuss hard skills and then soft skills.

Hard-skills process training is tedious and ongoing work. Many of the processes deal in finances, from sales to collections, and laws that regulate these interactions vary from state to state. The laws change often and therefore training manuals, which U.S. corporations design and hand off for adaptation to Indian call centers, require agents to undergo continuous training to keep current with U.S. regulations. For Lawrence, an Indian trainer for a major U.S. corporation, this means often working fifteen hours a day

from five in the evening until nine in the morning. He familiarizes agents with the various state laws, called compliances, and teaches them to handle delicate requests from consumers, such as asking for their Social Security numbers. India does not have the Social Security system of the United States. In an age when news reports and advertisements raise fears of identity theft and telemarketing fraud, Americans are increasingly reluctant to give out their Social Security numbers to anyone. Agents often experience Americans as particularly averse when those who ask are in India. Training conditions agents to be sensitive when asking for such information, which some processes require on a regular basis (Matt, interview, January 8, 2004; Seth, Forthcoming).

Hard skills, while monotonous and continuous, is a small fraction of the overall training agents undergo. The majority of training is in soft skills of cultural performance. In order to familiarize Indians with U.S. consumer service expectations, corporate cultural training mixes with intercultural communication. As the old U.S. corporate saying goes, the customer is always right. Therefore, conforming to an American standard of doing business is crucial for outsourcing's success. This often means learning a different way of speaking and relating to others. In chapter one I discussed the U.S. consumer cultural expectations of efficiency, competence, politeness, and understandability in voice and accent (du Gay, 1996). While we may expect politeness, we also reserve the right to be informal, especially as compared to Indian culture (Seth, Forthcoming). Further, while U.S. consumers expect efficiency and politeness, telephone customers sometimes want to chat. Several agents narrate stories of callers more interested in conversation than products, and others describe callers who go on and on.

about their life stories and situations. Seema (interview, January 22, 2004) described a call with a woman that went on for two and one half hours. Even though the emotional story resulted in a sale for Seema, the duration was well beyond the four minute average. Supervisors on the floor often monitor agents' calls as they are in process. They have the ability to speak to the agents while they are on the line and prompt them to close the deal. Trainers use exemplary and too-long calls for examples in training of how to most efficiently handle callers. According to Iqbal (interview, January 21, 2004), CEO of an Indian call center, training call center agents means that "we need to get them to be less polite. In fact we at times stop people, cut them short." Rohit, who works for a major U.S. corporation, was trained for three weeks in both processes and voice. In handling calls, he says that he was taught to keep both calls and sentences "short and sweet" (Rohit, interview, January 22, 2004). "Short and sweet" is not an Indian conversational norm, and to cut someone off would be considered rude. Trainers employ various strategies for indoctrination into American culture, ranging from viewing popular culture movies and sitcoms to researching purchasing habits. While many go to the United States for training, for others the United States comes to them.

### **Proud to be an American?**

If any one of us were asked to describe what it means to be an American, I imagine that one would have a hard time finding how to begin painting that particular picture. Would you describe yourself as a proud American, tout the principles of democracy and a willingness to enforce it worldwide? Would you maybe offer a "freedom fry"? Would you start with history and Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World?" How would you deal with the violences done to Native Americans? With

slavery? How would you explain the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam and Iraq? If you were an Indian call center agent you might receive a crash course in U.S. history through Billy Joel's song "We Didn't Start the Fire," which spans decades of U.S. history in a matter of minutes (Kapil, interview, January 22, 2004). Perhaps history is not the best place to begin. Maybe you would rely on American notions of individualism and sketch out a portrait of your own cultural identity. Maybe you can trace your roots to indigenous peoples or European immigrants. How would you deal with issues of racism and whiteness, gender relations and the battle for gay marriage? It may be easier to describe what kind of person you are and what you do for a living. Yet again how would you handle issues of class, and how exactly might you characterize your personality? As "young" as the United States is as we currently understand it, our histories are quite complex. However, we rarely struggle with the contradictions of our histories. Instead, those in power spin narratives that portray the United States as a homogenous, benevolent force and world leader. Mainstream media is complicit in the generation of these narratives of "being American," and U.S. corporations rely on them to familiarize Indian call center agents with our consumer culture and practices. In this section, I look at the training call center agents undergo to "perform American" culture and its implications for postcolonial subjects.

All of the agents Malhotra and I interviewed described being shown mainstream U.S. movies to understand "American" culture. The majority of the movies and actors repeated over and over are white, from Julia Roberts to Tom Cruise. This representation compounded with the global image of Americans equals white (Alexander, 2002) would seem to translate into the agents' perception of a homogenous U.S. population and



accent. However, the reality is quite the opposite. Call center agents have a complex understanding of the diversity in the United States, as we see from our interview with Matt, who works for a major U.S. corporation in Bangalore.

The reason I got into this was, I told you I love talking and then somebody's paying you to talk – there's nothing like it. And I've always been like interested in talking to different people in different cultures. In America you get Spanish, you get Chinese, you get the Afros, you know? Different, different accents and you've got to like really be careful as to what you're talking and the way you're talking.

(Matt, interview, January 8, 2004)

Here Matt indicates his knowledge of the United States as home to multiple cultures. He knows that there are different cultures and ethnicities (Spanish, Chinese, African), as well as different languages, accents and levels of understanding American idioms and language. Even though he appreciatively engages the diversity (“interested in talking to different people in different cultures”), he proceeds with an awareness that he has to be “careful” in what he says, depending on who speaks with on calls.

Matt's reference to cultural multiplicity in the United States disrupts and refuses the homogeneity of the cultural models U.S. corporations outsource for agents' understanding. His own hybrid work performance puts him into contact with non-white cultural identities and accents in the United States. However hard corporate America tries to put on a white face, Matt's recognition displays a more complex reality. The embodied performance of call center work dismantles the outsourced global image of whiteness. Matt complicates what it means to “talk American.” By way of his postcolonial agency and ambivalence he understands and articulates what it means to be and to perform

American, and that one must do it with awareness and mindfulness of cultural diversity – likely better than some Americans.

Matt also communicated to us some of the ways he understands Americans and performs this cultural knowledge in his work. Not a movie fan, Matt really likes cars. Part of his training was an assignment to research, via the internet, self-selected aspects of U.S. culture. The following co-constituted performance, where I ask Matt to discuss his decision to study car culture, reveals his understanding and competence to perform U.S. culture:

K: Which did you choose?

M: I chose auto.

K: Yeah, you like cars?

M: Yeah, I like cars, I love cars.

K: So, like, what kind of cars Americans drive?

M: I like the big ones. I think Americans are guys who like big cars. We drive small ones.

K: Yeah, yeah. Like Ford trucks kind of thing, or like-

M: Yeah, those SUVs-

K: SUVs, yeah.

M: Yeah, I love those SUVs.

K: Explorers—

M: My mission is to get one Lexus—I forget the model—sx450 or something like that?

K: Uh huh. They have an SUV now, the Lexus.

M: That's the one I'll have. Uh huh, yeah.

K: Uh huh.

M: I love automobiles.

K: Uh huh.

M: Love the cars.

(Matt, interview, January 8, 2004)

In the above exchange, Matt and I demonstrate together our fluency in Americans and their cars with our references to particular brands of cars and trucks (Ford, Explorer, Lexus) and the affinity of U.S. drivers for SUVs (“I think Americans are guys who like big cars.”). The global perception of Americans driving sport utility and other large vehicles contributes to our reputation as a nation of excessive consumption. Even as it may be overreaching, as only particular and perhaps gendered (“*guys* who like big cars”), Americans desire and are able to buy and maintain large vehicles. This speaks to a reputation as a country that consumes a majority of the world’s oil supply. We may read into this exchange Matt’s recognition of this particular reputation.

We can also understand this as an ambivalent performance conceptualized by Bhabha. Matt distinguishes between Americans “guys” who drive “big cars” and Indians who drive “small ones.” Inherent in this statement is the dual gendered coupling of bigger with better and “guys” with cars, also an American construction. It may be that he was using the generic “guys” to refer to all Americans, but the gendered nature of his language here is notable. “American” perhaps indicates markers of masculinity in his construction. Matt’s desire to own a Lexus SUV communicates an ambivalent linking of himself, as call center agent excelling in his performance of American, with the U.S.

consumer and with me in the interview as his conversational partner. The exchange harbors a simultaneous incorporation and knowledge of U.S. culture and his easy negotiation of it in our co-produced performance.

How call center agents come to understand U.S. culture predates their entry into this particular industry. All call center agents interviewed relayed some familiarity with the United States through its exportation of media to India (for discussions of U.S. media in India see also Malhotra & Alagh, 2004; Malhotra & Crabtree, 2001; Oza, 2001; Zacharias, 2003). Agents' discussions of U.S. culture in India are largely ambivalent. They sometimes refer to the U.S. presence as indicative of India's participation in globalization (Friedman, 2004). Certainly its presence is a condition of call center employment. Therefore, to characterize the U.S. presence in the negative would be a rejection or criticism of self. At the same time, call center work conflicts with some Indian cultural practices, including the norm of living with parents and spending daily time and holidays with friends and families. A strategic and ambivalent discussion materializes when agents are asked about U.S. culture, as Kapil describes:

Call centers are not the only places. Bombay can hear accent. We are influenced by Western culture, watch more Western movies . . . . We go to discos Saturday nights, hear accents . . . . Songs, R&B, hip hop is huge thing in India. It is. And try to understand what they are trying to say. *If you like the music you listen to it.* [emphasis added] You listen to try to understand what they are trying to say. *If you like the music you listen to it. If you like it you'll repeat it. When you repeat it you get the hang of it.* [emphasis added] I mean, I love Eminem, I love all the songs. So when I sing it, and I sing an Eminem song, I'm going to sing it the way

Eminem sings it. I wouldn't sing it the way an Indian sings it. There's a lot of cultural exchange that happens. Indian music is understood abroad. Cultural exchange. Going both ways. Madonna comes to India. . . . [We're] helping each other. If it's helping a particular country or person to grow, why not? And you're not stealing it from the person. You're not being illegal. You're not insulting the culture. You're not getting in any fights . . . Advantage if it works.

(Kapil, interview, January 22, 2004)

In the above passage, Kapil marks India as a multicultural, global society, with accents heard in more than call centers (“We go to discos Saturday nights, hear accents”). Even as he marks the Western influence in movies and music, he demonstrates his familiarity with it, his fluency in genres and artists (R&B, hip hop, Eminem), as well as his enjoyment and appropriation of it (“I love Eminem, I love all the songs”). That he sings Eminem's songs “the way Eminem sings it” and not “the way an Indian sings it” maintains cultural boundaries. Kapil characterizes Western influence as a “cultural exchange” rather than placing one over the other. He notes that “Indian music is understood abroad” as well and touts the benefits of cultural exchange as “helping a particular country or person to grow” that is an “advantage when it works.”

Kapil's discussion here teems with ambivalence. On the one hand, the practice of globally exporting U.S. culture assumes a colonial arrogance and superiority. It is a practice global capitalism necessarily facilitates, a practice that I refer to here as *outsourcing whiteness*. Outsourcing whiteness is the systematic understanding and portrayal of one's self as a homogeneous and superior culture, the United States' re-colonial modalities and practices of the violences of whiteness. However, Kapil's

performance asserts a particular kind of agency. In his and in previous narratives, there is a performative agency that, through mimicry (“So when I sing it, and I sing an Eminem song, I’m going to sing it the way Eminem sings it. I wouldn’t sing it the way an Indian sings it.”), refuses normative whiteness and turns it back on itself through articulations of U.S.-ness as more than white even as they demonstrate fluency in performing U.S. culture. These performances deconstruct and disempower whiteness even as whiteness is being outsourced for their consumption and emulation. Kapil’s particular performance reclaims and articulates his agency through ownership and mimicking performances of U.S. cultural icons. He claims them as his own and communicates desire as opposed to oppression inherent in the cultural exchange. “*If you like the music you listen to it*” is a phrase Kapil repeats over and over. He demonstrates performativity through the repeated performances that eventually “get the hang of it.” What emerges is not a pure performance of U.S. culture but hybridity that is neither Indian nor American. Kapil denies the oppressive outsourcing of whiteness by pointing to the fact that Indian music (and movies) also participate in global cultural exchange – albeit a very lopsided exchange. He characterizes cultural exchange as an “advantage” rather than a hindrance. Ambivalent performances of U.S. culture both reinforce and reject hegemonic constructions of whiteness and mirror back to us its fallacy.

### **Americans and their Rolling R’s**

If you are an American reading this paper, have you ever considered yourself one to roll your r’s? Re-read the previous sentence to yourself out loud. Ask a friend to read it for you. Notice the r’s and whether they are rolled. You may need to repeat. Not buying it myself, I repeatedly question my co-interviewer Malhotra on this. Every time she laughs

and confirms my rolling r's. She says I do this when I speak English – not hybrid Spanish. What sort of accent do you have? Is your accent nasal or clipped? Do you have a twang or a drawl? Do you speak fast or slow? Perhaps your accent is flat, or maybe you don't have one at all. Or do you? Where, then, can we locate an authentic American accent? Do we find it in the swaggering masculinities of Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise, or the feminine stylings of Julia Roberts and Jennifer Anniston? Where would we place the 'accents' of these highly trained professionals? Do they have accents at all? It is a whitewashed fiction that assumes Americans – whatever that might mean – don't have accents. Or that we can detect 'foreign' accents and make assumptions based on what we hear. We all know better than to assume. And yet we do it every day. Since you found out that U.S. corporations outsource to India, do you find yourself listening closer to the voice on the other end of the line? What does this reveal to us about ourselves? There are numerous diasporic Indians living in the United States. You may even know some. How do diasporas trouble our notions of accent? While some Indian call center agents undergo training to 'neutralize' their Indian accents, others assume American accents. These restylings result in hybrid performances neither Indian nor American. In this section I examine these hybrid performances of voice and speech and their implications for postcolonial subjects.

As postcolonial subjects with colonial histories, Indian performances are always already hybrid in nature. Hybridity presupposes an intense familiarity with self and other (Bhabha, 1994). When it comes to understanding English in all its manifestations, Indian call center agents' postcolonial subjectivities translate into complex understandings and negotiations. Seema's (interview, January 22, 2004) statement "the way they [Americans]

pronounce is so different. We tend to speak the way the British do,” acknowledges the colonial legacy. It takes ownership of her British Indian accent and places her as a global subject familiar with accents of powerful countries. Matt (interview, January 8, 2004) breaks the binary down further when he says that, “USA is a different English accent. And British, they have a very different Shakespeare kind of a way.” Kapil (interview, January 22, 2004) demonstrates a similar knowledge when he articulates the differences in speech patterns between Indians and Americans. He explains that Americans “stress on t’s, and c’s and p’s and how they roll their r’s.” These depictions of American accents by call center agents reveal nuanced understandings of different English speakers and all the accents they perform.

When asked for examples of the accents they are to perform (which differ from the ones they hear and understand as American), several agents cite the TV sitcom *Friends* and movies with Julia Roberts and Jack Nicholson as training models for emulating the U.S. accent. This voice training can be very effective as one owner of a training center describes here:

We, one of our favorites is *A Few Good Men*. We do clips of *A Few Good Men*. In fact, that was shown on ABC News, a couple few months ago, a before and after of our agents doing the Tom Cruise, Jack Nicholson courtroom scene. And luckily for us, *A Few Good Men* was never released in India so the majority of the people had never seen the movie. It’s our opinion that Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson speak the best English of any actors in the business and so what we do is we make the agents speak those five page, or six pages of script and then we make them watch the movie and then we make them redo it. And it’s unbelievable



transformation. It's unbelievable transformation. We do lots of exercises like that.

(Seth, Forthcoming)

We can unpack several things in this statement. First we see a reinforcement of an American accent with white men (Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson), despite the fact that Demi Moore also plays a lead role in this film. One distinction to be drawn out here is that while much of my emphasis has been on what U.S. corporations and media exports as representing the United States and its identities, here we see an Indian owner of a training center re-signifying the conflation of U.S. accents with whiteness and men, here Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson who “speak the best English in the business.” This particular owner, while born in and now living in India, has spent much of his life in the United States. As such, his subjectivity both as owner and as one returned from the diaspora, differs from those of agents who are born and raised in India. At the same time as he buys into the conflation, he tells us that the dominant and preferred construction of Americans as white and male is mirrored back to a U.S. audience through its airing on ABC news. In this statement we are privy to outsourcing's utilization of whiteness as a force that circles back on itself and the implications this has for re-colonial subjects. What the owner describes as the “unbelievable transformation” of call center agents' understanding and accent attests to the fluidity and mobility of postcolonial, simultaneously re-colonial, subjects. We see how repeated exercises in mimicry transform Indian subjects into performances of American speech through repeated memorization and stylized practices.

Performances, however, always remain hybrids whose transformations do not erase difference completely. For example, while Matt performs a sense of ease in

mimicking and communicating with U.S. culture and accents (possibly due to close ties to U.S. friends), he recognizes that “some of the Indians have a very Indianized accent, you know, South Indians especially. When an American calls they know exactly, OK, this is a call come to India” (Matt, interview, January 8, 2004). One CEO explained that accent training is designed less to conform the Indian accent to an American one than to “neutralize” the Indian accent in order to “soften the blow” of the cross-cultural interaction (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004). In other words, Iqbal articulates a masking of the accent rather than the complete “transformation” referred to by the training center owner in the above quotation referencing *A Few Good Men*. In Bhabha’s (1994) terms, to “neutralize” an accent assumes hybridity as its starting point, somewhere in between an Indian and American accent, but neither one completely. It is neutral and perhaps culturally unidentifiable. A “transformation,” however, is a damaging form of mimicry that turns an Indian accent into an American one which re-signifies a belief in U.S. global superiority. Both logics are damaging to re-colonial subjects. Transformation and neutralization assume that Indian accents, or accents of any kind, are unintelligible to United States consumers. Given the speech diversity within the United States, and particularly as identified by Indian call center agents, this reinforces a narrow whiteness-related construction of American accent and identity. Whiteness’ destructive discourse repeats and reinforces itself through mimicry and hybridity.

However, not all accents achieve the hybrid status. When they do not, and Indian bodies seep through the cracks between headset and caller, there can be tense consequences, as Matt suggests here:

M: The first statement the lady said was, “I’d like to talk to an American.”

K: So she said she wanted to talk to an American?

M: Yeah, she said uh, very sweetly she said, she said, "I'm sorry I can't understand your accent. Can I talk to an American?" This guy like he tried to convince her, like, "no ma'am. I'll try and help you. What's it regarding?" Then she said like, uh, "see son, I'm like an elderly lady and I don't understand what you are talking." Very polite lady, like she said, "so if you could put me onto an American that would be very sweet." And they go like – and we are the only segment throughout the world [for the product they sell]. We don't have anywhere to transfer her. [Kimberlee laughs]. So this guy stands up and says, "Matt, this is what this lady is saying." So I said, "OK, put her on to my extension." So she put her on and I'm like, "Hi this is Matt." Then this lady says, "the girl is very sweet. . . . But I really couldn't understand what she was saying. Where are you from?" [all of us laughing] Oops. "I said Round Rock. [pauses, all laughing hard now] Texas." I said "Texas" [laughing] And before she could say anything, I said – "OK, how can I help you." [all laughing] I had to take over the call otherwise she would really ask me about some places . . . and I said, "good. Let's get to the order." I completed the call. She was very happy in the whole thing. And then eventually I told her I'm an Indian but I couldn't tell her I am based here, because I already told her I'm in Texas. Right? Like oops, I screwed up somewhere. I said let's let it go as long as she is happy with the whole thing. It was fun. There are a couple of incidents like that.

As Matt indicates here, there are times when, despite training, some call center agents' accents are too "Indian" for the U.S. consumer to understand. The original agent's accent is unintelligible to the U.S. elderly caller so other agents step in and the call is eventually transferred to Matt. Without reconciling her complaint surrounding accent ("But I really couldn't understand what she was saying. Where are you from?") Matt tells her he is in Texas. Always in danger that he might be found out to be in India ("eventually I told her I'm an Indian but I couldn't tell her I am based here, because I already told her I'm in Texas"), he turns the call around and completes the sale ("I said, 'good. Let's get to the order.'").

What was a performative failure on the part of the female agent is transformed into a moment of hybridity by Matt's collaborative strategies. Malhotra and I perpetuate this strategy through our co-performance with Matt, and we all collude in duping the caller who by the end is convinced that the call comes to Texas. We all take delight in this duplicitous performance as Matt once again demonstrates his proficiency in American consumer culture. Not only does he convince the caller that he is in Texas, he takes control of the call and completes the sale. The performance is layered and complex, relying as it does on the ambiguities of agency (her performative failure, his success), of place (India, Texas), and time (the moment on the phone, the moment in the interview). Notably, Matt's postcolonial subjectivity here emerges as playful: "it was fun" rather than work, and Matt, Malhotra, and I share a big and prolonged laugh as "Americans" performing all together.

In order to achieve high levels of proficiency in U.S. culture, agents' training also focuses on embodied movements that discipline postcolonial bodies into re-colonial

practice. Despite the infantilizing potential of repeating tongue twisters and basic alphabet, most agents describe their training quite fondly. Punita recalls an exercise which had agents moving up and down in correspondence with the inflection of the phrasing:

My feet [emphasis on feet, long drawn out e] hurt. Take off your shoes [emphasis on shoes]. You know, it's intonation. When it goes up and when you come down. So we were asked to stand up and like you know get up, my feet [emphasis on feet, long drawn out e] hurt. Take off your shoes [emphasis on shoes]. My feet hurt [emphasis on feet, long drawn out e]. We had to keep saying this. We had two, three sayings like this. The sing-song kind of speech.

(Punita, interview, January 22, 2004)

Punita's example recalls the synchronization of bodies with voices ("we were asked to stand up and like you know get up, my feet [emphasis on feet, long drawn out e] hurt"). The inclusion of bodies in memorizing and performing stylized speech acts imprints the training in bodily memory to be recalled in phone performances. These efforts to stylize American English draw on, discipline, and coordinate body with speech. It reminds us of the embodied nature of phone center work that is beyond switching pronunciation.

Other sources reveal similar strategies to train voice and body to American modes. The opening scene of the *NOW* (Brown, 2003) segment on outsourcing portrays a rapid exchange of students repeating sequences of letters back to their trainers. As the visuals rapidly shift, the narrator's voice over introduces the segment with, "newly arrived immigrants to the United States? Not quite." The narrator continues, "these students are in India, half a world away, training for jobs *there* that were once held by

Americans back *here*, in the US.” We go to an image of a male trainer stretching a rubber band in his hand as he tries to visually demonstrate to his students the proper pronunciation of “abdomen” and “aerobics.” The narrator continues that the Indians are “learning to speak English with an American accent.”

Another scene presents a classroom of students with a different trainer standing and pacing at the front of the room with a white board on which she writes. The trainer asks the students about Little Rock, Arkansas, where it is and to “drop your jaw” when you say “Arkansas.” The trainer begins to write out the words of a rap song on the white board as the narrator voices over, “learning all about American popular culture.” The students and teacher get up in their jeans, sweaters, saris and turbans and begin swaying and singing, “hip, hop, hippity hop, I said hip hip hop and don’t stop rocking to the bang bang boogie, up jump the boogie to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat.” The song they are being trained on is “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang, one of the first “crossover” hip hop songs for white audiences. Also recall Kapil’s mimicry of Eminem’s music. The circularity of using a song that was originally a white appropriation of blackness as an educational tool to train brown, “Third World” subjects into whiteness is ironical. After completing the song there is much clapping and smiling as the scene ends.

In Thomas Friedman’s (2004) *The Other Side of Outsourcing* documentary on call centers, we see Friedman witness the training where agents are being taught to “flap the ‘tuh’ sound” so as to “not keep it crisp like the British” (Friedman, 2004), a reference to the colonizing influence of the British in India. The Indian trainer flawlessly flows in and out of British, American, and Canadian accents to demonstrate variations as she

gives the Indian call center agents a tongue-twister on which to practice. They try to repeat after her, encountering varying degrees of difficulty (Friedman, 2004):

A bottle of bottled water held thirty little turtles. It didn't matter that each turtle had to rattle a metal ladle in order to get a bit of noodles, a total turtle delicacy . . . . Every time they thought about grappling with the haggler turtles their little turtle minds boggled and they only caught a little bit of noodles.

Different agents are shown struggling over the passage, their minds being symbolically “boggled” by the twister, when Thomas Friedman steps in and offers to read the tongue twister to demonstrate an “authentic version” to the trainees. He does so, and reads the passage flawlessly, earning an ovation for his ability to read. In his book, Friedman (2005) comments that it is perhaps the first time he has received a standing ovation for “speaking Minnesotan” (Friedman, 2005, p.27). This performance is an immediate demonstration of the premium he enjoys, even over the Indian trainer who might be skilled in three speaking accents but can still be trumped by an “authentic” U.S. normative (perhaps not incidentally white and male) subject. It is a moment of ambivalence mixed with mimicry, as Friedman’s most basic ability to read is so desired and admired by the agents that they are in that visual moment virtually in a class getting trained to be *just like him*. Friedman (2005), however, cautions us against judging as objectionable the training of people to “flatten their accent in order to compete in a flatter world. Before you disparage it, you have to taste just how hungry these kids are to escape the lower end of the middle class and move up” (p.27). He continues to argue that “a little accent modification” may be the price they have to pay to move up the ladder and escape

India's socialist policies. Friedman's characterization here continues to infantilize Indians ("these kids") and maintain Indian subjects on the right side of the re-colonial binary.

This is the moment where Friedman provides the U.S. viewer with a context to see the people who are serving them, as U.S. customers normally only hear the disembodied voices of call center agents. What U.S. viewers see is being mediated through Friedman's gaze, and the context Friedman chooses is one which foregrounds their struggles to emulate an "American" identity, turning the Indian agents into a spectacle and simultaneously casting the U.S. subjective-self as the normative desired subject. This moment also functions to valorize the normative, the elusive average American-ness that can never be achieved by the Indian call center agent, which he (Friedman) performs with ease and authority, epitomized through his foregrounding of his Midwestern heritage. Agents' negotiation of voice and accent, their performative narratives, and their U.S. performances are fixed in ambivalent and hybrid spaces which maintain their agency even as they negotiate re-colonial times.

### **Hi, this is Stacy (or is it Sita?)**

What's in a name? And what is lost when you change it? We all know the saying that goes 'a rose by any other name . . . .' The United States has a long history of changing names. Registering themselves upon entering the United States, European immigrants with meaningful yet unfamiliar names often had their names shortened or changed altogether by lazy and racist bureaucrats. Others lost their names through the violences of slavery and the survival strategies of holocaust victims. Still others selected to change their names in exchange for the promise of upward mobility. Today it is not uncommon for Miguel to be known as Mike nor for Juan to pass as John. Some of us



rarely reflect on the costs of name changes and the discourses they rely on. In India, names are often indicative of religion. There are Muslim names, Hindu names, Christian names, and some that cross over religions. Names connect us to our histories, our religions, and our kin. From a postcolonial perspective, it is a racist and ethnocentric practice to expect Indian call center agents to change their names as a condition of their employment. It is a practice that perpetuates a false myth about 'American' identities and who gets included and excluded. It is a practice that, for at least the length of a nightshift, privileges narrow constructions of U.S. identities. It is an ambivalent performance wherein Indian call center agents mimic U.S. naming practices. In listening to their narratives, we will see what are the costs and the resistances embedded in mimicry of names.

While some processes do not require call center agents to change their names, the majority of interviewees indicate that this practice is often the norm. Not unlike discussions of accent and culture, agents' narratives involve various strategies that reveal moments of ambivalence and agency as well as colonial and re-colonial internalizations. Some in the industry argue that the name change is to ease business. Indian names, particularly those from the South, can be quite long and therefore changing the name to a shorter or more familiar sounding one relieves the agent from explaining or repeating her or his name (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004; Matt, interview, January 8, 2004; Seth, Forthcoming). Iqbal (interview, January 21, 2004) explains that changing the name "reduces the call length, which is a critical component, because we charge by the minute. You know. It ensures the call time is not too long because the person is trying to comprehend a complex Indian name." He goes on to indicate that "most of them would

prefer to do that because you know that way they're leading a separate life. That way they have a separate name and separate identity" (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004). While he initially reduces the change to money ("we charge by the minute"), in the next moment he attributes it to a compartmentalization and preference on the part of the agents ("you know that way they're leading a separate life"). Iqbal's construction here transfers ownership of the name change from the corporations to the agents. He depicts it as beneficial to them, a way of distinguishing and limiting the re-colonial hold U.S. corporations have on them. It maintains the identity of the agents at work and outside of work. While this practice demarcates the boundaries of work and life, there are other processes which go beyond name changes. Iqbal (interview, January 21, 2004) describes some companies that actually give agents entire life profiles in the United States, such as "where they went to college scripts" for their favorite hobbies and sports. Here Iqbal does draw a line in how far the fiction should be allowed to go. When it conjures fictitious life stories, he argues that the identity of the agent slips too far into assimilation and erasure of their Indian identities, and it is an act of resistance to the re-colonial dynamic on Iqbal's part to draw what is always a blurry line.

Some agents describe name changes that appear as an internalization of colonial myths of understandability. Every example is complex and open to interpretation; each performance can be read in multiple ways. Rohit (interview, January 22, 2004) reveals his belief that "people [are] more comfortable there if speaking to one of their own." This particular example can be read as Rohit's internalization of dominant ideologies, or it may be read as an articulation of his own preferred mode of communication in talking to *his* own. It may in fact be an acknowledgement of his own discomfort with the U.S.

consumer and an assertion of Indian culture. Seema (interview, January 22, 2004) told Malhotra that using a different name is “easier for them. Our names are twisted.” Here Seema distinguishes and reinforces the us/them binary and demeans her names as “twisted.” We may also read Seema as rejecting U.S. consumers and their inability to understand complex (“twisted”) names. If her training included being subjected to the tongue twisters we see performed in *The Other Side of Outsourcing*, we might understand this as a backhanded remark against that tactic. Punita’s use of her real name on the phone means that customers often get it wrong. Her unwillingness to correct them can be read in multiple ways as well. While she may be internalizing their inability, she may simultaneously be refusing an engagement where she is forced into teaching them about herself.

As we read narratives as performative strategies, storytellers always have a stake in their representations (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). When it is a media representation of Indian call center agents, such as I describe in Friedman’s performance above, it can function to make a spectacle out of the Indian call center agent as it masks and degrades cultural identities. As do all storytellers, media representations take into consideration their audiences when telling their stories. For example, the host on *60 Minutes* (Wallace, 2004) is shown sitting down with four Indian call center agents, asking them to tell us their real names and their pseudo-names. One agent says, “My real name is Sangeeta, and my pseudo-name is Julia.” The correspondent smiles: “Julia,” he says in a wondering voice, encouraging her to explain. Sangeeta smiles, nods and continues, “Julia Roberts happens to be my favorite actress, so I just picked up Julia.” The host smiles patronizingly as if to signal the ridiculousness of this young Indian woman’s desire.

Sangeeta demonstrates her fluency in U.S. culture, familiar enough to know Julia Roberts and to have favorites while the host encourages her with his patronizing smiles. This exchange that points to the hegemony of U.S. popular culture in the life of this Indian agent is typical of portrayals of Indian agents as westward looking, eager, smiling workers who constantly want to embody an American identity, who want to, in fact, become American. However, if we read against the text here, looking closer at “Julia’s” strategy, we might read it as an act of ambivalence that mimics and resists the host’s patronizing construction. As telephone work renders the bodies of call center agents invisible, the act of agreeing to an interview trains the gaze of the American viewer right onto the bodies that perform. The materiality of bodies turns back to re-signify speech in complex ways.

Similarly, the opening segment of *NOW* (Brown, 2003) closes with agents in the classroom introducing themselves as newly ordained call center agents dressed in Western clothing. A male agent stands in front of the class and announces that he, Rajeesh, is now “Russell.” A female agent proclaims, “Hi guys, I’m Shupti Gupta, and my new call center name is Carol Lopez.” She takes a bow as the students applaud her. Here the agents’ code-switching performances of Western style and names are applauded amongst themselves. While an American viewer might locate these agents as spectacle, if we take a closer look we may interpret the applause quite differently. Does the applause herald the success of these agents’ mimicry? If so, do we understand the applause as a triumphant resistance embodied in a performative moment, or does it signify the completion of the re-colonial accomplishment? Or is it possible that a critic may find both of these moments in the scene, depending on what one is looking for?

As Butler (2004) constantly reminds us, and as the narratives in each section of this chapter indicate, performances and their repetitions are always open to normativity and subversion, to interpretations both oppressive and resistant. Whether learning to perform, listen to and communicate with different accents in other countries replete with rolling r's and unfamiliar names, call center agents as postcolonial subjects negotiate the re-colonial dynamic. They do so with complex agency which manifests in ambivalent performances of hybridity and mimicry. Each re-colonial moment depends upon the colonial histories that inform it. These narratives cannot be reduced to a simple and neat binary nor to singular meanings and consequences. Instead, as I have attempted to show in my analysis, each moment embodies complex negotiations of oppressive and sometimes violent acts of global capitalism and its practice of outsourcing whiteness. Global capitalism and the re-colonial moments it affords U.S. corporations is at this moment a lived reality. The fact that agents have jobs that benefit their material lives is not insignificant. That they often negotiate the dynamic with pleasure is indicative of postcolonial subjectivities (Nair, 2002). Engaging co-produced narratives as performances leads us to more nuanced interpretations and to further questions.

## Chapter 5

### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CALL CENTER AGENT:

#### THE WORKDAY AT NIGHT

Advances in telecommunications technology make international calls possible. Admittedly, the wonders of this technology are beyond my grasp – satellites, cables, computers, high speed modems, analog and digital – all words I can pronounce but not explain. All I know is that when I pick up the phone, dial a few more digits and pay a few more pennies, I hear the friends that I do not get to see. We listen to each other with our bodies far apart and are likely to be in different parts of the day, if not different days altogether. This year my first wishes for a happy New Year came to me New Year's Eve morning from India. I heard the celebration sounds of my friends and their family, imagining the sights and smells of Bangalore while I snuggled under cover of frost in Maine. Their midnight was my mid-morning.

While it is telephone work, call center work is embodied labor. Call center work, like all other labor, involves disciplining one's body into prescribed norms consistent with one's job. Call center agents discipline their bodies into specific performances of voice and accent commensurate with U.S. customer service expectations. However, their bodies remain rooted in India and Indian culture. Call center employment pulls the body into two different directions simultaneously, with cultural as well as physical consequences. The most immediate bodily complications involve rewiring the body clock into nighttime alertness and daytime sleep. When night falls across India, the United States begins its business day. Call centers on U.S. processes constitute the nightshift. Every night call centers send out fleets of sumos (sport utility vehicles) to pick up and

transport the 20- and 30-somethings who work through the night. They work shifts that range from nine to twelve hours, take breaks and dinner in between, and speak into their headsets in communication with U.S. consumers. Many agents narrate this as the most difficult aspect of their work. Punita (interview, January 22, 2004) tells us that sometimes the “body is not having it.” The body resists drastic time changes. Overwhelmingly agents describe their and others’ experiences with headaches and vomiting associated with the changeover to working at night. However difficult the change in timing is, most call center agents adjust their bodies into schedules opposite most of India. While most agents discussed bodily complications and other complaints and critiques of the work when asked, they still spoke quite fondly of their call center work. They narrated memorable interactions with Americans and how they experience the shifts in their interpersonal and cultural relations and how they see India’s emerging role in global capitalism.

In this chapter I discuss the actual telephone work that call center agents perform and the interactions they describe with U.S. consumers. As such, I address outsourcing and call center work as performances in daily life with political consequences. As the U.S. public continues to become aware of outsourcing to India, there are changes in the ways consumers interact with call center agents. Interactions range from suspicion grounded in racist and stereotypical assumptions about “foreigners” in general and Indians in particular, to spectator curiosity about difference. Descriptions of calls carry implications beyond interpersonal, intercultural communications. Always keeping in the forefront of my analysis India’s colonial, de-colonial and postcolonial histories and the colonizing movements of transnational corporations, I analyze call center agents’

narratives in the context of outsourcing as re-colonial practice.

### **Performing Postcolonial Subjectivities in a Re-Colonial Context**

My computer recently had a virus. It was during finals week and I had not backed up my files in weeks. It was time to call the 800 number. While I am one of millions who put my name on the “do not call” list and detest telemarketers, I had high expectations when I placed the call for assistance with my computer. The agent’s faint Indian accent gave me hope for more than my computer. Could it be a research moment, I wondered? My heart racing, I casually asked for his location. He replied that he was born in India but is now in Canada. Unconvinced, I attempted a cultural insider performance and told him stories from my recent trip to India. He responded with stories of the upcoming snow storm and lamented the snow he would soon be shoveling. When I asked him whether he could get good Indian food in Canada because here I had to make my own, he invited me to bring some up to him. I tried my best to coax more out of him and he braced to wipe out my hard drive. I don’t know whether that agent was in India or Canada, but my performance of U.S. consumer ideologies reveal more than his location. In this section I describe and analyze performances between Indian call center agents and their U.S. customers, postcolonial performances in a re-colonial context.

Performing a postcolonial subjectivity in a re-colonial context comes with a certain familiarity with colonial modalities. While many call center agents are too young to have lived through Indian independence, it was as recent as their parents’ generation. Despite shifts toward a narrowing and conservative Indian identity, the narratives and spirit of decolonization continue in the cultural imaginary (Malhotra & Alagh, 2004). Furthermore, as postcolonial subjects, call center agents grew up in an era where Western



influence is prevalent (Malhotra & Alagh, 2004; Oza, 2001; Zacharias, 2003). Therefore, even prior to call center work, many call center agents have learned to negotiate U.S. popular culture. In their narratives about their work and in the work itself, call center agents perform a postcolonial ambivalence toward the presence of the United States and their telephone communications with its consumers.

Ambivalence manifests through distinct divisions between the work inside the call center and life outside the call center. Many agents discuss the inside-outside nature of the work and their negotiations of the lines that demarcate the borders of their performances. Several call centers encourage agents to remain “in character” while they are on duty, calling each other by their American names rather than their Indian names when on break and when interacting with each other. Additionally, other agents describe their employers’ encouragement of the workplace as English-only space and discourage speaking in Hindi. It is a way of distinguishing between themselves and the cultural others they perform, maintaining their Indian cultural identities intact and separate from their temporary performances of other. The following exchange between Malhotra and Seema is an example of Seema’s ambivalence as it materializes in confined mimicry:

Malhotra: How do you make the transition between Autumn and Seema?

Seema: Hi this is Autumn. Hi this is Autumn, how are you doing today?

Malhotra: When you leave the place, or break, are you still in Autumn?

Seema: When talking to colleagues we remain in pseudo-names. When we enter the company we are totally American. When we leave we are totally Indian.

Malhotra: What does it mean to be American within these walls?

Seema: It's great. Because I feel like if you want to talk to an American you have to be in their shoes. They feel like no people other than American can understand them . . . whatever their problems, a human being can share.

(Seema, interview, January 22, 2004)

Seema's description and performance of "Autumn" marks the boundaries of her dual identities. She embodies both personas while distinguishing between the two. When Malhotra questions Seema about her transition from Seema to Autumn, Seema answers by performing a stylized act, a redoing of her phone work in the immediate moment of the interview situation ("Hi this is Autumn. Hi this is Autumn, how are you doing today?"). Asked how she shifts between the two, Seema moves in and out of her Autumn performance to comment on the stylized performance and distinguishes between the call center space where Autumn exists and the outside where Seema returns. Overall, she says what she does and she (re)does what she does in a narrative performance of identity through mimicry of other and self.

Ironically, Seema and Malhotra's discussion takes place within the confines of the call center during her work time. She simultaneously performs Autumn while she describes and deconstructs Autumn. As "Autumn," Seema is speaking with another Indian, even though Malhotra is an Indian living in the United States and working in a U.S. university system. Together, the two distinguish between "Americans" while performing "Indian." Malhotra's query, "What does it mean to be an American in these walls?" is responded to with a reference to "Americans" as "they" and "them."

Seema's mimicry gives way to an interesting leveling of the global playing field within an unequal, re-colonial context. In a moment of postcolonial ambivalence, Seema's performance simultaneously critiques and humanizes Americans. On the one hand, Seema distinguishes Americans from Indians as a cultural group who need someone like themselves to understand themselves. The undertone of this statement is that Indians are more globally fluent than Americans and can understand and be understood in multiple contexts. She characterizes it as "great" that she can perform multiplicity, even though it is at the cost of her visibility and cultural specificity. At the same time, Seema recognizes the re-colonial context and global standing of the United States and India. She links the two together on the common ground of humanity which lends itself to a cultural transcendence and understanding, but which really only Indians are able to achieve. Within globalization and Western dominance, as the outsourcing as re-colonial practice reveals, Indians are the ones who have to transcend their culture in order to participate in the global economy. U.S. culture remains stable and static, relying on the performances of "Other" to reinforce itself.

Throughout the interviews other agents echo Seema's statement about their conceptualization of U.S. consumer comfort in speaking with one of "their own." In a similar moment, Kapil relates to his customers by relying on tropes of suspicion and lack of financial security while at the same time holding them at bay. He says one reason Americans do not trust outsourcing is that they "don't understand the process" and that for this we are "not to blame customers" (Kapil, interview, January 22, 2004). He elevates his standing over his consumers because he does understand the process that they do not. We may understand his reference to "the process" as both outsourcing and

the particular workings of his company. Either way, while he holds knowledge that others do not, he shields the U.S. consumer from any accountability for their mistrust. Here Kapil's performance recalls Seema's critical stance which simultaneously recognizes U.S. hegemony even as he recognizes its limitations – their lack of knowledge coupled with their suspicion, neither of which they are responsible for reconciling. This is an ambivalent moment, for, if Americans were to blame, Kapil's reasoning as call center agent and postcolonial subject locks him in an inferior relationship. He relies instead on his agency and resists an overt critique of power relations.

Instead of lobbying a critique which does not favor his subjectivity, Kapil locates himself on the same plane as the U.S. consumer (and performs U.S. individualism) when he says that not to trust the Indian call center agent is an “individual choice. If someone called me from Sri Lanka today and told me they could give me [the product his company offers] I would say “no way” [laughing] (Kapil, interview, January 22, 2004). In this phrasing Kapil places Sri Lanka below India on the global hierarchy. He empathizes with his U.S. customers and asserts himself as global consumer with the same savvy as them. However, when he does this he reinforces the racism that comes with the mistrust of Indians.

While most agents described interactions with U.S. consumers that read as racist, no agents we spoke to were comfortable with that language. In an exchange between Seema and Malhotra immediately after the one described above, Seema configures the “problem” of speaking to an Indian as not having to do with accent, but with Indianness: “We speak to 200-300 people a day . . . . It doesn't have to do with understanding, but it's about Indian” (Seema, interview, January, 22, 2004). She implies here that the vast

numbers of people she speaks to in one day (200-300) indicate her intelligibility. Therefore, those who do not want to speak to her have nothing to do with her accent and everything to do with her Indianness. While she says it makes her feel “bad. I can’t help it” (Seema, interview, January 22, 2004), Seema does not characterize the interactions as racist. When pressed on its racist implications, her reply resonates with Kapil’s: “Every person has that . . . . we are just doing our job, they are doing their job” (Seema, interview, January 22, 2004). Seema’s response reconfigures her emotional pain as a by-product of her employment. Ambivalence protects her from the ramifications of her feelings (“bad”) by reminding us that she is getting paid to do this. Even though she implicates U.S. consumers (“they are doing their job”), Seema deflects the racism and its power by characterizing it as a job one has to do to get by in a global community. Below I discuss the gendered dimensions of call center work, but what we are seeing in the call center industry is a real Indian cultural shift in middle class women entering the workforce. Seema’s ambivalent performance of “doing her job” reinforces her staying power as a call center agent despite its racist and emotional costs.

Racism as a systemic problem was often reconfigured as interpersonal mistrust by many of the agents. Matt described several calls spanning a range of U.S. responses to his location in India and interactions with Indian accents. Many of his customers complain that they cannot purchase their product from a call center in the United States, and he fields several threats of lawsuits against the company. He laughs off his descriptions of these calls, indicating that it is his perception that “suing a persona is not too much of an issue in the US [laughing]” (Matt, interview, January 8, 2004). Matt continues his performance in U.S. cultural fluency through his familiarity with the United States as

litigious society and the commonality of law suits, apparently nothing to be too concerned about. He goes on to say that some of his calls are from angry customers who happen to get a faulty product. The company's policy is to replace the product without cost, but often Matt is subjected to charges of *you* (Indians) cheating *us* (Americans). Similarly, he encounters reluctance on the part of customers to give out their Social Security numbers. Customers often demand his badge and extension numbers before giving him the information, and he attributes part of this to his location in India.

While racism and forms of Otherization often evoke pain and anger as Seema discloses above as "bad," many agents described callers who respond differently when they learn that the agents are in India. Some describe lengthy conversations of up to two hours long with people just looking to chat with them. Others develop longer-term sales relationships where customers contact that agent directly to make their purchases. When Indians living in the diaspora learn they are speaking with an Indian, either through accent recognition or knowledge of outsourcing, agents describe a longer and more personal exchange. Several agents describe American customers who assume a certain familiarity with Indian culture who then want to engage in a conversation about it, either instead of or in addition to their business, as we see in the following exchange recalled by Matt:

[laughing] I shouldn't be saying this to you, but then let me just – it was just a call, OK? He is saying like "Americans are very arrogant. They, the kids are like" – so he starts, I spoke to him for about thirty minutes. And I had to take care of my time, like my handling time, but then I had to like, "OK, you are a very sweet man." I just kept on talking. I had taken enough calls. And OK, it wasn't a very

busy day . . . . I just talked to him. At the end of the whole thing he says, “you’ve been such a sweet person.” A typical elderly person like, you know, he spoke very softly with a deep voice. Very respectful. He knew I was a young guy, he knew I was a young boy. But then like he would be like, “yes sir.” He was pretty cool.

(Matt, interview, January 8, 2004)

There are two performances that occur in this narrative. Matt co-performs his narrative with us even when he isn’t sure that he should (“I shouldn’t be saying this to you, but then let me just – it was just a call, OK?”). He also recalls a performance that he and the elderly man performed together that casts Americans as “arrogant” and Indians as “sweet.” Matt frames the pleasure he takes in this call (“He was pretty cool.”) through a narrative that justifies the time he takes (“I had taken enough calls. And OK, it wasn’t a very busy day”).

Matt’s performance is complexly ambivalent. On the one hand the elderly man juxtaposes Americans against Indians, characterizing Americans as “arrogant.” How do we read the claim of arrogance? From a postcolonial standpoint we may place arrogance on the other side of humility. To conceptualize Americans as arrogant, while holding the potential for critique, functions to stabilize their place on the binary hierarchy. Arrogant links with masculinity and dominance while on the other side of arrogance is humility, femininity and subservience. Cameron (2000) describes the service aspect of call center work and the expectations of empathy and understanding of the caller. In this case, while Matt’s service parameters should be limited to the products he sells, the customer appropriates the conversation with his expectation that it is appropriate to take up Matt’s time discussing culture. While the U.S. consumer may expect a particular level of

efficiency and professionalism (du Gay, 1996), it is also within their “right” to determine whether they want to extend that expectation to suit their needs. While consistent with Cameron’s (2000) discussion of call center work as feminine stylization, these asymmetries take on even greater implications in the re-colonial context of racial and cultural differences.

However, Matt performs his ambivalence through his demonstration of his control of the call and the pleasure he takes from it. His hybrid performance negotiates an Indian cultural respect for elders with his mindfulness of his sales expectations. This is particularly evident when Matt justifies his time and questions whether he should be telling us this story. Our encouragement for him to continue is yet another co-performed moment the three of us accomplish. He exercises his agency through his articulation that is it his decision to continue the call, and to continue the story of the call. With fondness Matt remembers the elderly man, and he appreciates the respect that the man affords him with his “yes, sir.” Every call agent’s description holds a complex mixture of ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry. It occurs in the moment of the call as well as in the performance that re-creates the call for the Indian and American interviewers. We all negotiate the re-colonial dynamic through our co-constituted performances, performing strategically and with agency. In the next section I turn my attention to the cultural implications of call center work for masking, shifting, and reinforcing Indian cultural identities.

### **Code Switching: Informing Performativity, Shifting Cultural Identities**

Whether you watch the show or not, chances are that you know all you need to know about the TV sitcom *Friends*. Like many other sitcoms and other U.S. media,



*Friends* is exported globally and achieves a high level of recognition. For anyone unfamiliar with the show, its basic plot surrounds the lives and romances of a group of 20- to 30-something friends in New York City. It may come as no surprise that this group of three men and three women are all white (the only ethnicity we are privy to is a pair of Jewish siblings and one with Italian heritage; rarely do guest roles feature people of color) and affluent enough to have large apartments in New York (this regardless of the fact that one is an out-of-work actor and all characters regularly lose jobs). They spend most of their time drinking coffee and talking about romances; they never discuss politics. Their complaints are about their parents and their anxieties surround whether they will become them. As egregious or innocuous as you might find the syndicated show to be, have you ever considered it to be re-colonial education in India?

In order to understand *Friends* as re-colonial education, I rely on Loomba's (1989; 2002) discussion of the use of Shakespeare and other British literature as a means of education, socializing, and conditioning Indian colonial subjects to British culture (see also Joseph, 2004; Nair, 2002). While agents and trainers overwhelmingly describe *Friends* as a training tactic for voice and accent, it is also an introduction into U.S. culture. The fact that the actors in *Friends* are all white is an example of the lack of actors of color on prime time television and functions to reinforce the exported representation of a hegemonic U.S. population. While many agents point to actors who represent a different age group (Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson), the significance of relying on a text that represents the culture of the same age group as the agents conditions them into work performances of U.S. culture that have the potential to bleed into other aspects of their lives as well.

The nightshifts of call center work complicate the social timings of the agents. Many agents discuss their parents' concern over their sons and daughters working at night. It is both because they are working at night and that it disrupts the large amounts of time Indian families spend together. Call center workdays are centered around U.S. holidays and schedules. While agents do not work on holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, they do not get time off for Indian religious holidays such as Ramadan (Muslim holiday) or Diwali (Hindu holiday). Agents describe this as a source of tension between themselves and their parents that they constantly negotiate. Most identify their parents as adjusting for the benefit and future of their children and, despite their misgivings about call center work, one agent assures us that her parents know call centers are a "happening place" (Reema, interview, January 22, 2004) and Seema (interview, January 22, 2004) says that her parents are now "very cool with the whole thing."

In Indian culture, it is quite common for people to live with their parents until they get married. Because of high unemployment as well as tradition, it is uncommon for middle class women to be employed. It is a new phenomenon that college-educated women are entering the workforce in greater numbers and that increasing numbers of Indians in their twenties live on their own and with friends. While most of the agents interviewed for this study live with their families, many of the agents portrayed in media representations live on their own. The mediated representations of cultural tensions may be a function of producing a more interesting text for a U.S. audience, but the reality is that more and more unmarried Indians in their twenties live outside of their family homes. It is not the work of postcolonial criticism to pronounce this cultural shift as good or bad. Rather, I place it in the context of the re-colonial dynamic to question what role

outsourcing has on this shift and how much of it is a condition of the U.S. influence on

Indian culture, and in this case, the agents' repeatedly being shown images of unmarried U.S. *Friends* living on their own and away from their families.

The gendered dimensions of this work play out in the cultural and monetary discussions of female agents. All of the female agents (but none of the men) interviewed mentioned the bearing their employment has on their lives in terms of increased monetary and individual independence. Seema (interview, January 22, 2004) attributes her shift in personality from an "introvert" to someone who is "outgoing" and "confident" to call center work. Punita (interview, January 22, 2004) describes her work with a sense of pride:

Being a girl, working all by myself in a night job, being accepted by the family.

Yes, yes, I do feel proud. When I see my cousins you know, they may sit at home, no late night, no working. You know, girls in my family don't work . . . . So when I see myself I do feel proud of my family that they have allowed me to go for a nightshift job. And trusting me so much is the first thing. You know, working nights and trusting the company. It feels good to have your own money and you know, just being by myself. I don't need to ask anyone anything. For anything I need. Even if I had to take care of my education in future, I know that I can depend on myself. I don't have to go on any kind of loan or anything which is a burden on my head. I'm working, I don't mind working like a whole week and then enjoying my weekend.

(Punita, interview, January 22, 2004)

Punita explicates the benefits of call center employment, significant in her individual and family relations. She distinguishes herself from the other young women in her family in that she is the only one who works outside the home and frames it in a sense of pride of both herself and her parents. Her ability to work outside the home means that her parents trust her as well as the company she works for, and this transfers into an increased sense of self (“It feels good to have your own money and you know, just being by myself”). At the same time as Punita links her pride to her family’s trust, it also gives her a sense of independence from them (“I don’t need to ask anyone anything. For anything I need”). From this standpoint she narrates multiple possibilities, including future education, without incurring loans or dependence on others. Her narrative maintains her pride in family even as she articulates an autonomous subjectivity.

The shift women undergo in working leaves them with a sense of mobility, as Punita describes above. It is a benefit that comes with labor, but at the cost of other social connections. Many of the women discuss the cultural implications of people getting into drinking and smoking as a result of call center work. Therefore, the celebration of freedom is balanced against the cultural costs of bad habits and missing out on friends and families. When speaking of the cultural costs – which are specifically gendered in her discussion – Punita (interview, January 22, 2004) says that she is “touchy about it. I’m sure most of the Indian women would be. Any Indian would be.” Punita’s statement marks women as holders of Indian culture, but as well indicates the overall importance of culture to India. It is another performance of ambivalence that is a negotiation of the re-colonial education. While agents benefit from their employment, they recognize its effect on their culture. To recognize this cost is to resist the colonial education and reformulate

its impact within re-colonial forces. Agents own their independence and their cultural fluidity. Their shifting cultural performances over time accomplish changes both of their own and other's making. "Performing American" marks what global capitalism makes possible.

**The Flows of Global Capitalism: "India is more than just elephants"**

Iqbal's (interview, January 21, 2004) statement that "India is more than just elephants" places India as a global player even as it recognizes stereotypes of India. That this stereotype is a carryover from India's colonial legacy plays into outsourcing as re-colonial practice. Re-colonial practice and global capitalism would have it both ways: to rely on India as a source of advanced and qualified labor and simultaneously to maintain India as a Third World nation. This double construction comes through most often through the colonizing gaze of media representations.

In order to be able to process the call center work, India must be able to attain and support technological and educational advancements. Media representations portray this capability. Friedman's (2004) *The Other Side of Outsourcing* takes us into the video conferencing room of Infosys, where a high-ranking executive comments on how he has the world at his fingertips through the forty digital screens in the room that connect him to counterparts and clients all over the globe. His physical location in India places India as a central site of globalization where the world comes to him. The image of the India as the space of global connectivity raises colonial anxieties about India as stable nation. The possibility of being connected so closely is framed from an otherizing space, a stance that fears this new closeness, particularly given the chaos and collapse that is presumed to be always possible in the Indian nation. One example of U.S. anxiety occurs in *The Other*

*Side of Outsourcing* (Friedman, 2004) when the viewer accompanies Friedman on his visit to slums in Bangalore, toured as a contrast to the shiny Westernized call centers. Friedman questions how a nation with such disparity can participate in the world economy and that is really the question some of the other television texts are asking: Is a country like India worthy and capable of doing the work of the United States, and what will happen if the U.S. economy gets too dependent on an “undependable” resource only to find that it has somehow collapsed? The repetitive framing of India as a country on the brink of collapse and chaos is a move that ironically pacifies the anxiety being produced by the close connectivity of the global labor force signified by the outsourcing industry. There is a reassurance in Otherizing India, in presenting India as always on the brink of reverting to the more “primitive” undeveloped space. The framing reassures the U.S. viewer that although India’s labor force performs many U.S. service jobs, the call center agents cannot ever fully become “us” or surpass “us.” Because there is always a possibility of India’s reversion to the primitive, the U.S. maintains its superpower hegemonic status. The television texts play on the fears and anxieties of the U.S. populace and then seek to reassure them by painting India as a country that might not quite cut it in the global economy. Indian call center agents’ performances mimic U.S. culture and in doing so re-signify each country’s globalized positionality and re-colonial hierarchy.

At the same time, viewers of mediated texts on outsourcing are reminded of India’s status as developing country. On *60 Minutes* (Wallace, 2004), for example, the narrator has the following voiceover laid over images of dire poverty, traffic and chaos:

And India epitomizes the new global economy. A country that often looks on the edge of collapse, a background of grinding poverty, visually a mess, and yet . . . . [here the images switch to US-style, corporate and professionally sterile looking spaces] whether you know it or not, when you call Delta Airlines, American Express, Sprint, Citibank, IBM or Hewlett Packard technical support numbers, chances are . . . . you'll be talking to an Indian.

This narrative maintains India as somewhere in between modern global player (the call centers that support outsourcing) and developing, but always Third World (the poverty), nation. The construction signifies its meaning through its ability to otherize and define India. It is a narrative that implies a fear of loss of control over U.S. corporations and its non-American workers. In some ways this media frame produces an imagined invasion by Indians who are insidiously taking over “the other end of the line,” for that is who answers the phones of “our trusted” U.S. corporations.

Another aspect of this anxiety centers on framing India as an emerging global superpower, modeled in the image of a mini-America, both by Friedman in his documentary and by many of his interviewees. There is some trepidation with which Friedman keeps commenting on how India is turning into a mini-America. In the documentary he comments that “you can’t leave home again, every place looks more and more like America.” Friedman references the “McDonaldization” phenomenon where U.S. popular culture permeates many areas of the globe. He evokes a paradoxical longing here – for a “purer” and more visibly different “Other” – to be maintained to serve the American tourists who should have some place different to visit in order to gaze at the other and stabilize a sense of self. At the same time Friedman champions globalization as

a panacea for all the “troubles” of the developing world throughout the rest of the documentary. However, this pure space is no longer really possible in the globalized world of the call centers. On the other side of that equation, many Indian executives and agents interviewed for the different television texts analyzed here seem to be rather happy about the “progress” that appears to be taking place in India. High ranking executive Raman Roy comments, “there’s this huge amount of nationalistic pride because we want to show that as a labor pool, as a work force, we are as equivalent, if not better . . . . than anyone else” (Wallace, 2004). Iqbal (interview, January 21, 2004) echoes this sentiment when he discusses the distinction between call center work in the two countries. He knows that call center work is devalued work in the United States and he discusses it as such. He argues that while no one in the United States really wants to work in a call center by contrast Indian call centers “offer better quality services to their customers. No one is talking about that. In fact, when you call up a company and you earlier had to wait 30 minutes in order for a rep to come on line, that call is now answered within a few minutes” (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004). Both performances tout India as a capable and competitive global participant with their references to nationalistic pride and a superior labor force. At the same time, Iqbal’s statement insinuates that India is willing to do the service work that U.S. workers do not want to do. His ambivalent performance seethes with national pride and resistance. It reformulates call center work into something that Indians can do better than Americans.

The levels of enthusiasm the Indian interviewees have for this frame of India as emerging superpower are quite different from Friedman’s reflections on the situation. Friedman (2004) comes across as very uncomfortable about the fact that India has



developed this highly trained and skilled labor force in *The Other Side of Outsourcing* and he echoes this sentiment even more blatantly in his subsequent book *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2005). His fears border on alarmist as he writes:

We need to get going immediately. It takes 15 years to train a good engineer, because, ladies and gentlemen, this really is rocket science. So parents, throw away the Game Boy, turn off the television and get your kids to work. There is no sugar-coating this: in a flat world, every individual is going to have to run a little faster if he or she wants to advance his or her standard of living. When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, “Tom, finish your dinner – people in China are starving.” But after sailing to the edges of the flat world for a year, I am now telling my own daughters, “Girls, finish your homework – people in China and India are starving for your jobs.”

(Friedman, 2005)

While we’ve seen the xenophobic logic which drives Friedman’s text in the anti-immigration rhetoric of Pete Wilson and others whose preoccupation is the “gaping hole of the border” (Carrillo Rowe, 2004), Friedman’s anxiety recasts border anxieties to subsume the globe, so that the U.S. *is* the global. The border, in effect, need not even be crossed because it is everywhere and nowhere. Outsourcing as re-colonial practice relies on India to mimic itself in order to stabilize its global positionality. However, the flows of global capitalism that trickle into India as a result of this practice mix with colonial legacies that know how to manage the colonial presence. Hybrid performances will never achieve the level of the original but they do incorporate it and resist it, which reformulates the terms of engagement (Bhabha, 1994). The re-colonial dynamic of

outsourcing is damaging and oppressive even as Indian call center agents' negotiations of and resistances to the colonizing presence destabilize and disrupt the re-colonial implications. In the next and final chapter I discuss these implications.

## Chapter 6

### RE-COLONIAL IMPLICATIONS, RESISTANCES AND REFLECTIONS

The overarching argument I make in this thesis is for an understanding of outsourcing as re-colonial practice. Through descriptions and analyses of call center agents performing U.S. culture, both in the immediate moment of the interviews and in their daily lives at work, the previous two chapters demonstrate negotiations to the re-colonial presence reminiscent of colonial strategies. Call center agents undergo intense training to prepare them for the telephone service relationship. The training consists of hard and soft skills. Hard-skills training teaches call center agents the mission and process of particular companies for which they work. Soft skills training indoctrinates Indian call center agents in U.S. popular culture so that they will understand and perform like the customers they interact with on the telephone. In order to exceed their understandability in voice and accent, U.S. corporations often mandate Indian call center agents to exchange their Indian names for ones more familiar to U.S. consumers. I argue that employment opportunities that hinge on corporate mandates of cultural erasure constitute re-colonial oppressions. Performing “American” has its consequences on Indian performative bodies. It sends the damaging message that in order to participate as a global player Indians must conform and perform a constructed and narrow version of U.S. culture. Global capitalism relies on outsourcing U.S. popular culture as a form of reinforcing U.S. global hegemony and re-colonial education.

The U.S. popular culture call center agents engage in their training communicates a narrow construction of U.S. identity for agents to emulate. Interviewees and filmed

representations consistently describe being shown films and listening to music which features white actors and performers. U.S. popular cultural texts represent American identities consistent and conflated with whiteness. However narrow the exported constructions of U.S. identity may seem, Indian call center agents consistently articulate nuanced and complex understandings of U.S. consumers. In their narratives, agents perform and re-enact their telephone performances of U.S. cultural identities. Their postcolonial subjectivities produce performances of ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry that negotiate and resist the re-colonial dynamic.

In their daily telephone work, the work they perform in the Indian night which corresponds to the U.S. business hours, agents describe their interactions with U.S. consumers. Agents recall telephone dealings with U.S. consumers that range from outright refusal to talk to Indians to consumers who are curious and fascinated with a cultural other. Agents' negotiation of consumer refusal to talk to Indians ranges from identification with consumers' desire to talk to cultural insiders rather than outsiders to expressions of the emotional pain that racism produces. Refusal to talk to agents relies on racist tropes of suspicion of cultural others, and Indians in particular. Consumers who engage agents as spectators hold Indian call center agents in a colonial binary pattern of self/other that maintains U.S. consumers, and their identities, as superior.

Overall, call center agents' ambivalent performances demonstrate their postcolonial subjectivities which, within the re-colonial context, possess agency and resistive awareness. In an economy of high unemployment, call center work pays quite well. For Indian women especially, call centers offer a sense of independence and mobility beyond what is a common dependence on their families. For India as a nation,

outsourcing places them on the global playing field, performing with high levels of quality, jobs that are less than desirable in the United States. India communicates to the world that it is, in the words of a successful CEO of a call center, “more than just elephants” (Iqbal, interview, January 21, 2004). Outsourcing boosts the Indian economy as it generates multiple levels of employment from call center work to call center construction.

However beneficial interviewees and filmed representations find outsourcing, it occurs on an unequal level between nations. The movements of U.S. transnational corporations that outsource recall previous colonial modalities. While they attempt to colonize culture, minds and bodies rather than land, the motivating factors of greed, profit and new markets remain the same. In mandating that Indian call center agents perform U.S. culture as a condition of employment is the colonial tactic of reinforcing hierarchies that justify oppressive actions. It is my argument that U.S. corporations outsource more than labor, but under these conditions they outsource whiteness as well. Training models rely on narrow constructions of U.S. culture as models for call center agents to emulate and understand as the U.S. consumer. Even so, as a result of their interactions with consumers as well as their own knowledge of the United States, Indian call center agents articulate a more complex understanding of the diversity that exists in the United States. That corporations continue to rely on narrow constructions of whiteness as representative of U.S. culture has multiple meanings.

Outsourcing whiteness as a means of representing the U.S. consumer functions to reinscribe whiteness as a national and global dominant norm. While many postcolonial theorists have made the connections between the forces of colonization and whiteness

(Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Gonzáles, 2003; López, 2005), López (2005) argues for a more thorough understanding of the movements of whiteness in postcolonial times. Understanding U.S. corporate outsourcing as outsourcing whiteness applies the connections López implies. The implications of outsourcing whiteness means that while whiteness gets reinforced as a hegemonic norm whose tentacles are reaching further and further across the globe, there is also a hint of desperation in the outsourcing moment. The desperation sneaks in when we see whiteness as no longer being able to afford the costs of its own service needs, and in a moment of greed and self-preservation it outsources itself to developing countries eager to reap the benefits. The loss of U.S. jobs results in lower prices. Like any other moment in capitalism, it is the poor who suffer while the gaps between rich and poor increase. As whiteness continues to expand it may also collapse. It continues to rely on others to re-signify itself. When the Indian body becomes visible it becomes a threat which throws whiteness into crisis.

The crisis is evident in the media representations of Indian call center agents, whose representations function to maintain them at the bottom of the re-colonial hierarchy. As the events of histories past and present indicate, that which is not a threat to us we do not consider in media. A case in point is the mainstream media representation of Arabs and Muslims since September 11, 2001, their hyper-visibility as terrorists delivered to the American public through media-filtered narratives. Similarly, in the case of outsourcing, it is media representations that construct Indians as simultaneously subordinate and threatening. In the same moment as India is offered as a threat, it is globalization that is framed as our collective salvation. Referencing India as the second largest Muslim country in the world, Friedman (2004) insinuates that globalization

should focus its attention toward an inclusion of “angry young Muslim” men in the Middle East. Characterizing the young men and women he witnessed in call centers as “kids with pride,” he concludes that “people like this don’t plow airplanes into buildings.” What Friedman insinuates here is that the events of September 11, 2001 and other anti-U.S. sentiment results from those that globalization ignores rather than includes. If they were to embody the “pride” that comes from being associated with the U.S. and global capitalism, then they would produce consumable objects, not terrorism. What call center agents “produce” is a whiteness which complicates and reinforces whiteness. Call center agents’ performances of whiteness reinforce it as the global norm.

However, these performances are a mimicry in the fact that their racialized bodies, their names, accents, and dress refuse complete assimilation. These fissures are where we see their Indianness seep through. Take for example, an Indian agent performing a hip-hop song in order to be able to do her job. The fact that she’s in a sari, or he’s in a turban and not half shirt and baggy jeans, disrupts the performativity of the completely re-colonized situation. Their ability to flow between their Indianness and corporate global citizen personas marks their performances as resistant. This resistance produces the anxiety and schizophrenic framing of the Indian call center subject in the U.S. media. These postcolonial subjectivities will not, and cannot, be completely contained. The performances themselves can only be mimicry, and as they are infused with ambivalence, they ultimately remain a mockery.

From the performativity of the re-colonial dynamic emerge concluding questions addressing the cost of outsourcing, which only time and perspective will reveal. Does U.S. corporate practice allow its labor force to step outside of performances of whiteness

and Americanness in its name? Or will outsourcing always rely on particular connotations of whiteness and Americanness? If so, how will U.S. nationalism continue its vigilant recasting in our post-September 11, 2001 world. In other words, if we expect performances consistent with “flatness,” then how is it that we see ourselves? Who is included and not included in this configuration? While certainly marginalized voices, including queer, poor, and of color bodies have never been considered in forming a U.S. national identity, it seems that we must consider how this practice – which expects a “white-sounding” voice on the other side of the line – functions. Our scrutiny must attend to both ends of the line, posing these questions, and many more, to this practice and national responses. What does whiteness do when its performance is mirrored back in performative failures? How does it resist? Will it collapse? These are questions that remain to be answered through further study of the call center phenomenon.

What this study contributes to the emerging study of outsourcing is a framework and methodology that interweaves two closely related theories not often enough in communication with each other. Postcolonial theories facilitate our understanding of subaltern voices and the other side of dominant historical narratives. It brings our attention to the modalities of power as well as agency of the oppressed. Performance theories are within and beyond texts (Conquergood, 2002). They bring our attention to the site of the body, the relationship of bodies to discourse and the ways in which performances have the potential to reinforce and disrupt oppressions as well as to inform new ways of being (Butler, 2004). These two theoretical approaches benefit from intertwining as they bring us to deeper interrogations of the conditions of oppression, the sounds of voices and movements of bodies, and the possibilities of our performances.



Methodologically speaking, this choice has often brought me in and out of moments of crisis. Listening, watching, repeatedly engaging interviews and filmed representations I found myself wondering at moments equally as rife with transnational solidarity as colonizing potential. With a complex postcolonial subjectivity of my own, I interpreted so many moments of resistance to the United States' presence in India. Along with Matt and Malhotra I took pleasure in simultaneously co-performing American, especially when that co-performance resulted in the mockery of the American consumer. These moments turned on themselves as I was reminded of my own globalized privilege and different investment in the outcome of our interview. In his daily life Matt's performances bring him a paycheck. In mine they result in texts that represent my interpretations of his performances. We may not hold the same interpretation. I remain mindful of the colonizing potential of my representation (González, 2003) even as I critique the colonizing corporations. Framing narratives as performance is one way to access the multiple and sometimes contradictory strategies present (Langellier & Peterson, 2004) in local-global and embodied relations. As scholars engaged with the voices we represent, we need to continue our discussions with subaltern voices and with each other when it comes to our representations and interpretations. How can performance further help us articulate and practice what González (2003) describes as a postcolonial ethic, an ethic of care and community?

These reflections and considerations take me back to where this project began. From the beginning to where it must temporarily end in textuality, this has been a collaborative, cross-cultural project. What I know now I retroactively apply to the events then, and the hermeneutic circle continues to move. The results of my postcolonial

performance in communication with other postcolonial performances remain with me, and I end with questions for future study. In addition to the methodological questions I raise, it seems particularly important that we closely examine the production, rhetoric and function of media texts as they make outsourcing hyper-visible to the U.S. consumer. This study aligns interview performances alongside mediated texts to articulate shared and dissimilar themes, particularly in the interest of hearing Indian call center agents' voices and seeing their bodies into our understandings. While I have considered some gendered dimensions of outsourcing, we need to pay closer attention to those gendered dimensions that will continue to be visible as outsourcing continues. As outsourcing continues, we must consider how its practices are changing and what effect call center agents' postcolonial performances have on the practice. As this study focuses on the voices of call center agents and some trainers, CEOs and founders of organizations, further research needs to be done on the workings of transnational corporations and the Indian elites that benefit from the practice. Along these lines we need to pay closer attention to India's changing economy, the still emerging middle class and the complications of globalization (Sridharan, 2004). Most of all, we need to keep the lines of communication open. We need to expand our communities beyond the spaces where we are most comfortable and can do the most damage. Our borders are oppressive only until we find ways to open them.

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