

TRANSNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE

Transnational Rhythms of Work: A Review

Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global. By A. ANEESH. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015. x, 154 pp. ISBN: 9780822358466 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).

Answer the Call: Virtual Migration in Indian Call Centers. By AIMEE CARRILLO ROWE, SHEENA MALHOTRA, and KIMBERLEE PÉREZ. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013. xiv, 242 pp. ISBN: 9780816689385 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).
doi:10.1017/S0021911818001225

The 2017 Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded to three American scientists for showing conclusively how our circadian rhythms are synchronized with the Earth's revolution. According to the Nobel Committee's statement, these researchers were able to peek inside our biological clocks with exquisite precision. Experimentation with the genetic makeup of fruit flies unlocked the molecular logics of circadian clocks. But how do we explain the tangled economic, cultural, and political logics that seek to keep these very rhythms out of balance and reproduce the misalignments that these scientists deem risky for human well-being? Working the night or the graveyard shift is nothing new, and its perils have long been recognized. However, as the global economy expands its reach through the manipulation of time and space, circadian rhythms are being recalibrated in workplaces to the tune of markets both near and far.

The outsourcing of work to global sites is a classic topic through which to understand the social and political gravity of these temporal oscillations. In the call centers of India, where legions of young workers provide services to customers in the West, work patterns demand a chronic misalignment between lifestyles and circadian rhythms. These transformed workplaces with revised rules of performance and the risks faced by Indian employees have received coverage in popular discourse and also a fair amount of research attention.¹ The books *Answer the Call* by Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Sheena Malhotra, and Kimberlee Pérez and *Neutral Accent* by A. Aneesh add to these studies by offering a close examination of the conditions and politics that frame the organization of new forms of labor enabled by the yoking of global neoliberal regimes and communication technologies.

The two books featured here are noteworthy in that they are both rich ethnographic explorations of the complex work environments in call centers that contribute to our understanding of how the everyday lives of local communities are emplaced within global economic and racial logics. These contributions speak forcefully to what Doreen Massey terms the power geometry of time-space compression, which places different social groups and individuals in very distinct relationships with global flows and

¹A few examples include: Kiran Mirchandani, *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press of Cornell University Press, 2012); Shehzad Nadeem, *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing Is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).

interconnections.² While the authors of these two books speak from specific intellectual perspectives, their works serve as reminders that the global moment demands interdisciplinary scrutiny and dialogues. These books address the specificity of call center locations in India in great detail and at the same time provoke critical consideration of the asymmetries embedded within global flows and connectivity. They initiate a serious conversation about the particular configurations of outsourced labor in India and how they instantiate broader questions about the contradictions activated by global economic forces.

Answer the Call is an ambitious project based on Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez's extensive fieldwork involving interviews with forty-five agents, trainers, and administrators in Bangalore and Mumbai between 2003 and 2012. With vivid ethnographic details, the authors capture the pace of work in a call center and describe the service interactions that agents have with strangers in the West. The reader is introduced to the stories of agents who work under assumed names, balancing the temporal inversions that constitute the very logic of outsourcing. *Answer the Call* explores what these displacements mean in terms of social, cultural, and bio-political implications. The discussion mainly focuses on the formation of identities and the complex constitution of affect and experience in these sites of outsourced labor. Through a deft incorporation of feminist and postcolonial analytic frameworks, the authors argue that the work and the cultural contradictions faced by the call center workers places a great psychic burden on them. With stylistic facility, the authors use the narratives collected from their respondents to discuss a range of issues, including gender, popular culture, the reconfiguration of time and space, and the place of America in the transnational consumer imaginary.

Carrillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez argue that call center employees working across and against space and time are positioned in "virtual borderlands" or in the liminal space between India and America. This theoretical centerpiece of the book, carried throughout its pages, enables the authors to critique issues such as citizenship, nationalism, and the global spread of whiteness. Representations of outsourced labor in popular culture are analyzed through careful and critical reading of visual texts through the intersecting logics of gender, race, modernity, nationalism, Orientalism, and power. In so doing, the book discusses the subjects of race and the racism experienced by the callers with great nuance and historical insight, showing how imperial racial formations are reproduced in a global context.

Extending the idea of virtual migration raised by Aneesh in his earlier book, *Virtual Migration*,³ *Answer the Call* argues that the disconnects and disjunctures in the lives of the call center agents are comparable to diasporic experiences. While the idea of migration and crossing a virtual border is persuasively mobilized in developing and providing coherence to such arguments, the concept of diaspora with its genealogical histories does not offer as much critical pliability when transferred to this new context. Overall, the book admirably succeeds in its authors' stated objective to use the experiences of these communication workers in India to broaden the analytical reach and critique the underlying assumptions of cultural studies, transnational feminism, and communication studies.

²Doreen Massey, "Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space," in *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization*, eds. Avtar Brah, Mary J. Hickman, and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 27–44.

³A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

Aneesh's *Neutral Accent* also takes the case of outsourced work, the worker, and the graveyard shift as a point of departure to disrupt conventional understandings of inclusion and exclusion and to launch a broader argument about global transformations. Building on his earlier publications on the new paradigms of work that link labor and code, *Neutral Accent* further develops a highly original line of inquiry into the multiple registers of disconnections that underwrite triumphalist claims of global connectivity. He describes the “unhings” that happen in call centers related to speech, identity, place, and the body and concludes that globalization is “a force urging us not toward homogenization but toward new differentiations” (p. 4). Drawing on fifty interviews and participant observation conducted over the course of several months of working in a call center in Gurgaon, Aneesh attempts to answer the question “what makes communication possible in social worlds technologically integrated in real time?” (p. 7). He offers a rich description of the training processes where agents are taught to acquire what is claimed to be a neutral accent—one that cannot be linked to a place—and simultaneously taught to engage in the mimetic work of acquiring the accents of their American customers. Aneesh argues that the specificity of cultural communication is turned into a global communication form through the recoding of cultural inflections into neutral speech forms. He advances a powerful claim supported by his ethnography in the call centers that the pedagogy and cultivation of neutrality is a mechanism of cultural leveling or a systematic indifference to difference that is deliberately worked into the corporate communication project. His theorization of neutralization as the necessary but insufficient condition of communication is skillfully connected to the technological shaping and scaling of identities.

In the second half of the book, Aneesh pushes these theoretical contributions further to think about the proliferation of identities, and offers a new framework for studying work in the global digital economy. A discussion of the automatic dialing software that targets specific customers based on stored data profiles shows how these interactions between “personas or ghosts in the machines” (p. 83) led to disjunctures in global communication. He makes a compelling argument that the conditions of outsourced customer service are enabled by the predictive power of algocratic systems. Differentiating these systems from other forms of organizational governance, Aneesh comments astutely that the rule of code controls action neither by socializing workers to conform nor by disciplining workers but rather by strategically shaping the work environment. While his discussion of urban spaces, forms of call center work, and the worker and technology is incisive, its brevity leaves the reader wishing for more commentary on the overlapping of the various theoretical strands that frame the functionalization of life in late capitalism.

The transformations in the knowledge economy and the nature of its outsourced work are both situated at the nexus of complex social, cultural, and political issues. Both these books succeed in unraveling these intersections and teasing out the ways in which the pace of everyday life is impacted by the movement of global capital. While *Answer the Call* offers a detailed window into the real and imagined worlds of the call center agents and forms of exclusion written into the global economy, *Neutral Accent* uses the practices of transnational night work and the training in accent neutralization as a vantage point to theorize the disintegrations that accompany global integration. In particular, both address the conditions under which communication is both enabled and disabled in the call center industry and beyond. While both books offer ethnographic explorations of work settings in two Indian urban sites, they each have their own intellectual stamp and style. For an academic discussion, juxtaposing the contributions of both publications would be valuable exercise. For example, how would Aneesh's theory of neutralization complicate the idea of virtual borderlands advanced by Carrillo Rowe,

Malhotra, and Pérez? Or, for instance, how does the white male gaze discussed in *Answer the Call* accelerate the disintegration of the self that *Neutral Accent* raises? The strength of both these books is their ability to describe and deconstruct the complexity of labor structures in late capitalism, and their expansive critical optics should be of interest across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, gender studies, communication, and media studies. With the reversal of circadian rhythms in call centers serving as the key provocation, these two well-crafted books offer robust and distinct interventions into the volatile conditions of labor in a mediated global economy.

RADHA S. HEGDE
New York University
radha.hegde@nyu.edu

The Advocacy Trap: Transnational Activism and State Power in China. By STEPHEN NOAKES. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. 208 pp. ISBN: 9781526119476 (cloth, also available as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911818002966

In *The Advocacy Trap: Transnational Activism and State Power in China*, Stephen Noakes introduces readers to six transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and their campaigns to change China. Placing his study in conversation with other scholars of international politics, Noakes contends that extant literature has given short shrift to the ways in which strong states like China's can push back against global norms and the demands of transnational social movement actors.

Drawing on archival materials and what appears to be about eighteen interviews conducted between 2009 and 2013, Noakes presents his case studies over three empirical chapters. Chapter 2 is taken up largely with discussion of Falun Gong's development, its history of repression by the Chinese state, and the contending narratives put out by the organization's advocates overseas and the Chinese Communist Party inside China. While the organizational history will be interesting in itself to some readers, the depiction of the movement as a participant in global civil society seems to be downplayed in favor of a detailed treatment of its rise and repression in China. Given Noakes's overall goals, more explication of the organization as a transnational actor would have helped readers see its relevance more clearly. In the same chapter, he devotes about half as much space to the case of intellectual property rights (IPR) protection, but the level of detail about both domestic and foreign pressures supporting this movement is much more balanced. Ultimately, Noakes argues that the two otherwise very different cases—which had very different outcomes—are similar in that “state power and preference was a determinative factor in the results and process of each campaign” (p. 67).

Chapter 3 compares the international effort to campaign for particular configurations of HIV/AIDS treatment programs and the work of foreign actors to press China to abolish the death penalty. While the goals of the HIV/AIDS campaign were ultimately achieved, Noakes writes, China was less susceptible to the entreaties of the death penalty campaign, only reducing its annual number of executions, not abolishing capital punishment altogether. He cautions, however, that even the apparent “success” of the global HIV/AIDS treatment campaign in China cannot be solely attributed to