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The Commodification of Affect in Indian Call Centers

From the perspective of the international division of labor and the striated system of value through which it reads bodies, outsourcing can be understood as a process of redefining human bodies in accordance with the way that capital itself moves at this historical moment. This paper investigates the ways that the nature of value produced by care and service work, labor that has been historically feminized, is entangled with the vital energies of workers. To this end, it develops the emerging category of affective labor, bridging existing scholarship on care work performed by domestic workers and the relatively new research field of outsourced customer service work in India. Labor power is usually defined as the investment of human vital energy into an object for exchange, yet in service and care work, there is no physical object to receive this energy. In the case of the work of love, comfort or attention, it is difficult to determine the boundaries between work and leisure, or between the labor and persona of the worker. This is exacerbated by the alienation resulting from the invisible nature of the work, by immigrant status, or by the electronic transmission of labor in the Indian case.

This project works to understand the production and transmission of care and attention from India to the US through outsourced customer service labor in terms of the commodification and consumption of human vital energy. Labor power is usually defined as the investment of human vital energy into an object for exchange, yet in service and care work, we cannot discuss a physical object as the repository of this energy. This paper explores the potential for understanding the exchange of affective commodities between the US and India through a lens of biocapital. The indefinite nature of what constitutes biocapital provides a space to think of care labor as a direct product of lived human life that is invested directly into another life, a category in which organs, tissues, and bioinformatics are already understood. I engage with the growing literature on biocapital to think about how value is produced by care and service work, and how this work impacts the lives of those who perform it.