

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Kiran Mirchandani, *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012, 174 pp., \$23.95 paper (978-0-8014-7767-6)

Since at least 2003, Kiran Mirchandani's research has provided important insights into the social nature of customer service work. Her latest contribution to call centre studies provides a rich analysis of the cultural dimension of employment in India's information technological enabled services (ITES) sector. Based on over a hundred interviews and research conducted between 2002 and 2009, *Phone Clones* explores political economic questions rooted in the global call centre industry, as well as the construction of authenticity in the growing service economy. An analysis of working conditions *per se* is only one piece of a much broader unpacking of nationalism, identity, surveillance, and processes of commodification that define the well-surveyed call centre phenomenon.

From the start the book is remarkably clear with its intent. "What happens," Mirchandani asks (p. 1), "when you need to be yourself and like someone else at the same time?" Transnational service workers respond by performing an elaborate set of "largely invisible activities," which the author terms *authenticity work* (p. 1). Since the majority of India's call centre professionals interact with British and American customers, identity and authenticity are at the forefront of international customer service. Authenticity, for the author, is largely determined by how an act or behaviour is declared authentic by an authority, be it a manager, a company, or a foreign customer.

The "phone clone" is in fact the purposeful emulation of an ideal call centre worker who is "both close to and distant from customers in the West" (p. 3). Simultaneously, these work experiences and identities are shaped by and in turn shape the transnational interactions. This is a process, the author insists, that is characteristic of a range of service-related activities that cross national borders.

Mirchandani's study is a reminder that the globalization of work is not determined by technological or market forces alone. National history is as much a contributor to India's IT infrastructure as is the global network of telecommunications. While the emergence of India as an information technology superpower is associated with the neoliberal economic reforms introduced in the early 1990s, the book traces this history

back to the 1960s, when US companies began experimenting with the establishment of operations in India. Needless to say, most of these initial ventures failed and it took decades before high-tech companies installed permanent facilities in the country. Part of this recent success is attributed to the Indian diaspora living in the United States who facilitated the formation of permanent economic linkages between the two countries.

What makes the globalization of IT/ITES remarkable is that the transnational outsourcing “allows the state to import the work without the body,” as Mirchandani observes (p. 20). This is true of certain industries, like call centres, but it is also the case that Indian firms with facilities in the United States are the leading applicants of temporary foreign worker visas drawing skilled Indian labour to the US. Such is the complexity of the global services economy.

Discussion of hierarchies and borders also helps to shape the uniqueness of *Phone Clones*. In the first instance Mirchandani recognizes that hierarchies exist *between* the Indian customer service agents and the Western customers, but also *within* the Indian call centre workplace. For example, many companies continue to enforce language training to undo what Mirchandani describes as the “universal deficiencies of Indians’ use of English” (p. 38). Training also works to eliminate employees who are unable to achieve the “correct embodied performance” — that is, those who are unable to conform to the expectations of Western customers. To this point the author defers to a definition of *aesthetic labour*, which represents the commodification of “dispositions” that are possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment (p. 37). Here, Mirchandani addresses the operation of hierarchies enacted *through* the training process, where accent is recognized as a signifier of education, geographic origin, and most importantly, as a signifier of class (p. 49). This description is a component of the three borders that shape the operation of transnational customer service — class, citizenship, and production.

Whereas “class borders” designate social status, consumption power, and professional status within customer service work, Mirchandani’s classification of citizenship borders recognizes the phenomena of transnationalization and “virtual migration” (p. 25). Her conception of “production borders” extends this paradigm to questions of production and social reproduction, the evolution of global cities, and interactions with Western customers. To this last point *Phone Clones* offers some insights to what is called “hate nationalism,” the antagonism prevalent in the United Kingdom and the United States towards the offshoring and outsourcing of customer service work to India and elsewhere.

While there has been a general acceptance, however reluctant, that call centre employment is being increasingly performed offshore, the au-

thor maintains that racism and nationalism fuel some of the responses by customers, unions, and politicians to the globalization of service work. Mirchandani demonstrates this by drawing attention to campaigns initiated by British unions, like the Communications Workers Union, that have focused on keeping “British jobs” at home. Racism, she argues, is the *effect* of “workers’ failure to become familiar with their customers in the context of supposedly legitimate national interest of the West to protect jobs and prevent outsourcing” (p. 8).

Phone Clones also offers the reader some novel insights about the fetishization of call centre work, which the author depicts as created through “*aestheticism* (depiction of the workspace as a pristine space of equal opportunities), *productivism* (organization of work in terms of scripts, teams, and performance appraisals), and *consumerism* (construction of work as fun)” (p. 82). The result, for Mirchandani, is the generation of a “cloning culture” or kinship between India and the West.

The book ends with a snapshot of unionization efforts amongst the relatively privileged call centre workers in India. Brief attention is given to UNITES, the one trade union that has had moderate success at organizing this fragmented and resilient group of employees. Mirchandani’s attributes these failed unionization attempts to the “culture of organizational impunity” that IT/ITES companies have managed to sustain. When comparing the choice between leaving a company voluntarily or being fired for raising issues about pay and working conditions, one customer service agent’s response is telling: “Either you drink poison or get yourself shot.” The fear of being blacklisted appears to function as an effective social control mechanism that mutes employees.

Phone Clones is a refreshing contribution to the field of the sociology of work, sociology of culture, and gender studies, and an appropriate textbook for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses related to these fields. The book is also an appreciated addition to existing research that tends to focus on the call centre labour process and mechanisms of managerial control. For scholars who are attentive to affective labour, globalization, customer service employment, political economy, and India’s place in the transnational ITES market, Mirchandani’s book is a must.

University of Regina

Andrew Stevens

Andrew Stevens is Assistant Professor, Faculty of Business Administration, a co-editor for the labour blog *Rankandfile.ca* and teaches in the areas of industrial relations and political economy. Some of his work has appeared in the journal *Work, Organisation, Labour, and Globalisation*, *Renewing International Labour Studies* (ed. Marcus Taylor, 2010, Routledge), *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (eds. Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco, 2010, Lexington Books).
Andrew.stevens@uregina.ca