THE FUTURE OF FUTURITY

PURNIMA MANKEKAR & AKHIL GUPTA

Affective Capitalism and Potentiality in a Global City

THE FUTURE OF FUTURITY

THE LEWIS HENRY MORGAN LECTURES

Kathryn Mariner and Llerena Guiu Searle, Co-directors

THE FUTURE OF FUTURITY

Affective Capitalism and Potentiality in a Global City

PURNIMA MANKEKAR
&
AKHIL GUPTA

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2025

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Ihsan Taylor
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Minion Pro and Futura Std
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Mankekar, Purnima, [date] author. | Gupta, Akhil, [date] author.
Title: The future of futurity : affective capitalism and potentiality in a global city / Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta.
Other titles: Lewis Henry Morgan lectures.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Series: The Lewis Henry Morgan lectures | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024035208 (print)
LCCN 2024035209 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478031536 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478028321 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478060604 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Contracting out—India—Bangalore. | Labor mobility—India—Bangalore. | Industrial management—India. | Capitalism—Social aspects—India—Bangalore.
Classification: LCC HD2368.I4 M36 2025 (print) | LCC HD2368.I4 (ebook) | DDC 658.7/23095487—dc23/eng/20241217
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024035208
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024035209

To Lata, with love

Contents

Foreword

Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in October 2017. Their public lecture, "Future Tense: Capital, Labor, and Technology in a Service Industry," was followed by a workshop in which invited scholars and members of the Department of Anthropology provided feedback on the manuscript for this book. Formal discussants included Anne Allison (Duke University), Carla Freeman (Emory University), Kiran Mirchandani (University of Toronto), Andrew Willford (Cornell University), and Llerena Searle (University of Rochester). Mankekar and Gupta's lecture continued a tradition that began with Meyer Fortes in 1963. Since then, the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures have pushed the discipline in new directions and generated an archive of ethnographic and theoretical innovation. The lectures were conceived by Bernard Cohn in 1961 and have been organized and edited over the years by Alfred Harris, Anthony Carter, Thomas Gibson, Robert Foster, and Daniel Reichman. This is the first book in the series for which we have the pleasure of writing a forward.

In this book, Mankekar and Gupta examine business process outsourcing (bpo), an industry that provides services at a distance through technological mediation. Though employing only a small percentage of Indians, the bpo industry has an outsized impact, garnering widespread popular and scholarly attention since the first call center was established in India in 1999. Mankekar and Gupta's ethnography emphasizes the contradictions that

emerge as agents and clients build rapport over geographic, temporal, and cultural differences. BPO workers do not just recite scripts or memorize culturally appropriate greetings; they connect intimately with customers, comforting, supporting, cajoling, and advising them while fixing their computers or booking their holiday travel. Yet agents' relations with their clients are structured by their position as service workers: even as agents learn intimate details of clients' lives, they must refrain from judgment; even as they endure racist rants, they must not talk back "unprofessionally," lest they face material consequences.

In placing young Indian workers—many from oppressed caste and lower-class backgrounds—in positions of servitude to consumers in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the industry recapitulates and reconfigures colonial histories and racial ideologies that have cheapened labor in postcolonial nations. This labor arbitrage, fueled by transnational racial capitalism, today reverberates with echoes of nineteenth-century ideas about social development, including those of Lewis Henry Morgan. In *Ancient Society* (1877), Morgan sets out a vision of human progress that links technological capacity to intellectual and social development. As he grappled with the promise and upheavals of American capitalism, Morgan looked to the past to understand the development of property-based states from kinship-based societies, in the process creating a civilizational ladder that positioned certain groups as "behind" or "ahead" of others. Even if repudiated by contemporary anthropologists, these social-evolutionary ideas live on—not only in Marx and Engels's writings but in modernization theory and in widespread conceptions of development.

While capitalism may be organized more globally than before, as Mankekar and Gupta argue in the introduction, with capitalists in the Global South accumulating capital in ways that disrupt North/South, First World–Third World dichotomies, development discourses continue to shape people's social imaginaries. A linear notion of progress, anchored in the geographic unit of the nation-state, motivates an understanding of India lagging behind other nations in a race for economic growth and technological advancement. *The Future of Futurity* both grapples with this legacy and troubles it by attending to the experiences of those within the BPO industry.

In this context, India's BPO industry powerfully suggests that "catching up" is now possible. Mankekar and Gupta argue that the same uneven development that makes India a place to recruit service workers provides a scaffolding for Indian workers to aspire to new ways of life. The industry's high salaries (relative to other industries in India) allow for agents to strive

for class mobility, understood in India in relational and familial terms. Agents provide health insurance to their parents and pay for siblings' education while building middle-class lives for themselves and contributing to the upward mobility of the nation as a whole. Such striving is so ethnographically palpable that Mankekar and Gupta describe it as an "affective formation" of futurity.

However, in the lived experiences of bpo agents, futurity is tinged with uncertainty and anxiety, such that time is disjointed rather than unilineal. Rapidly changing technology and corporate needs make bpo work unstable in ways that shape agents' striving. As Bangalore sleeps, agents work to serve clients in different time zones, respond in real time to unpredictable interactions, and make do with a work schedule that wreaks havoc with bodily rhythms and clashes with religious and familial duties. These "disjunctive temporalities" configure agents' bodies—even as those bodies frustrate and exceed corporate discipline. *The Future of Futurity* masterfully traces relationships between global structures and agents' affective experiences, without reducing one to the other.

Llerena Guiu Searle
Kathryn Mariner

Department of Anthropology
University of Rochester
November 2023

Acknowledgments

We began this project in 2009 and concluded it in 2016. In conducting our longitudinal ethnographic research, we have depended on the generosity of many people who have given us their time, insights, and knowledge. Many of these people have also showered on us their hospitality and affection, without which such a long-term and intensive project would have been unsustainable. We are grateful to the owners, ceo s, c to s, and managers at the three companies who gave us permission to work in their organizations: they remain unnamed but our gratitude to them is immeasurable. This set of introductions offered us opportunities to enter the "shop floor" and sit in on training sessions of bpo agents, which, in turn, generated many of the insights presented in this book. It is also from this initial access to agents, supervisors, and other employees that we managed to draw the subset of employees who spent time with us in successive years and who gave generously of their time and energy to share their experiences, yearnings, aspirations, and anxieties. Our indebtedness is greatest to the people who continued to meet us year after year and offered us the gift of entering their lives and their stories. In this book, we have amalgamated the narratives and worldviews of several of our interlocutors into composite figures in order to protect their identities. While individual identities are shielded and individual biographies necessarily obscured, we have intended to portray

the multidimensionality of the lives of our interlocutors, their relationships with each other and their families, and their hopes and fears for the future.

Our friends in Silicon Valley and in Bengaluru were immensely helpful to our project, and we thank them for making this project possible. Among them, Arun Kumar and Poornima Kumar, Vasudev Bhandarkar, Saritha Rai, and Mr. and Mrs. J. K. Chandna were particularly generous in sharing with us their professional and personal networks. Without their help, we would have been unable to get access to the firms where we eventually conducted our fieldwork.

This long-term project has also drawn sustenance from the feedback and support of colleagues in forums where we presented our research. One of our first full-length presentations from this fieldwork was at a workshop "Rethinking Global Capitalism through Intimate Industries," organized by Rhacel Parreñas, Rachel Silvey, and Hung Cam Thai at Pomona College on March 7, 2013. At that time, we were still in the midst of intensive fieldwork, and the comments and feedback we received from other participants and, subsequently, from anonymous reviewers at the journal *positions* were extraordinarily helpful in how we proceeded with our research. We remain in debt to Rhacel, Rachel, and Hung Thai for providing us with the opportunity to present observations and analysis that, at the time, felt to us preliminary. Purnima Mankekar would like to thank audiences at her keynote at the conference Global South Asia, in July 2017, organized by Ramaswami Harindranath at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

We presented the entire manuscript at a workshop that accompanied the Henry Lewis Morgan Lecture at the University of Rochester in 2018. We want to thank the then chair, Dan Reichman, and Bob Foster for inviting us, and an amazing set of interlocutors for giving us detailed and insightful feedback: Andrew Willford, Anne Allison, Kiran Mirchandani, Carla Freeman, and Llerena Searle. Other faculty at Rochester also were generous with their insights, including John Osburg and Tom Gibson. Early versions of chapter 1 and chapter 4 benefited from comments received during two panels at the 116th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2018: "Gender Politics: Engaging the Legacy of Sherry Ortner" and "Revisioning American Capitalism through a Cosmopolitan Lens: Engaging the Legacy of Sherry Ortner." We are particularly grateful for comments by discussants John Jackson and Anna Tsing and feedback from members of the audience. We thank Joe Masco and Deb Thomas for inviting us to submit a version of chapter 1, "Mobility, Emplacement, Translation," in their terrific edited volume, *Sovereignty Unhinged*, and for the outstanding feedback we received

from them and from anonymous reviewers that enabled us to strengthen our argument in the chapter and, beyond that, in this book. A preliminary version of chapter 4 was presented by Purnima Mankekar at the Gender Studies Colloquium at the University of Melbourne in July 2018. We are very grateful to Tamara Kohn for inviting Purnima Mankekar to present at this colloquium and to faculty and students who provided excellent feedback.

Versions of the chapters in this book have been presented at the following venues: the Anthropology Department at Deakin University, the Stanford Center for South Asia, the Culture, Power, Social Change (cpsc) interest group at ucl a, the University of Melbourne Anthropology Seminar Series, the egr ow webinar series, and the l se Anthropology Seminar Series. We are grateful to the audiences at all these venues for their thoughtful questions and queries that pushed our thinking further.

We have been fortunate indeed in our academic careers to have as our primary editor Ken Wissoker, whom we met first as an acquisitions editor at Duke University Press, and who later became editor-in-chief and editorial director. His keen eye for what makes an interesting theoretical intervention and his vast knowledge of overlapping fields has been a continued source of inspiration. Most of all, we thank him for his support in all our professional endeavors and personal adventures. We are grateful to Ryan Kendall and Ihsan Taylor for their diligence, patience, and hard work in putting together this manuscript in its final stages.

We cannot thank Cari Costanzo enough for her magnificent editorial suggestions and her insightful feedback on our manuscript. Our colleagues, staff, and students in the departments of Anthropology, Asian American Studies, Gender Studies, and Film, Television, and Digital Media at ucl a, and at the School of Culture and Communication and the Department of Anthropology (School of Social and Political Sciences) at the University of Melbourne have always been a source of support and intellectual companionship. We are deeply indebted to all our students and research assistants who have helped with the library research and with going over the manuscript with such care (listed in alphabetical order): Izem Aral, Bradley Cardozo, Hannah Carlan, Aditi Halbe, Nafis Hasan, Remy Kageyama, Janani Kalyanaraman, Sucharita Kanjilal, Derek Lu, Tanya Matthan, Sumita Mitra, Leah Nugent, Prahas Rudraraju, Tulika Varma, Donghyoun We, and Alesi Woodward-Hart.

We are grateful for the loving support of our friends across the three continents where we have made our home during the writing of this book. Our work would not have been possible without a wonderful set of friends

and interlocutors in Bengaluru: Saritha Rai, Namas Bhojani, Carol Upadhyay and A. R. Vasavi at nias, Devesh Nayal and the entire Nayal family, Nausheen and Ibraiz Siddique, and Sajai Singh and Sapana Taneja. In Los Angeles, Melbourne, and the San Francisco Bay Area, we have been supported and nourished (in every way) by Hannah Appel, Vasudev and Vrinda Bhandarkar, Aomar Boum and Norma Mendoza-Denton, Jessica Cattelino and Noah Zatz, Keith Camacho, Jane Collier and the late George Collier, Cari Costanzo, Andy Dawson, Erin Debenport, Rachel Fensham, Inderpal Grewal and Alfred Jessel, Lieba Faier, Laurie Hart, Chris Healy, Grace Hong, Dolly Kikon, Tammy Kohn, Arun and Poornima Kumar, Anna Laursen, Rachel Lee, Nadeem Malik, Kathleen McHugh, Aamir Mufti and Saloni Mathur, Sherry Ortner and Tim Taylor, Ravi and Ruchi Oswal, Haripriya Rangan, Sherene Razack and Larry Brookwell, Mukta and Harsh Sharangpani, Shu-mei Shih and Adam Schorr, Urmi Thakur, Karen Umemoto, Ethiraj Venkatapathy and Julia Jaroch, Sylvia Yanagisako and the late John Sullivan, David Yoo, and Audrey Yue.

We thank our families for their love and support: Aruna and Harsh Bhargava, Akash Bhargava and Elizabeth de Leon, Gauri and Amit Gangoli, Lucy Mankekar, Tara and K. P. Mohanan, and Rahul Aggarwal have always been there for us. Purnima is grateful to her sister Aruna for the daily "kavaj" of protection. Our mother Meena Gupta has been a source of love, support, and good humor. Veena Dubal (our beloved "Veenie Didi"!), you are the daughter of our hearts, our firstborn: we are so blessed that your love suffuses our lives. Purnima would like to thank her spiritual sister, Danielle Hart, for the walks, long chats, meals, shared confidences, and unstinting love and support: you have helped me weather many storms and celebrate an equal number of triumphs, and not a day goes by when I am not grateful for your presence in our lives.

Kamla Mankekar did not live to see this book come to fruition, but her fierce sense of ethics, insistence that a world of ideas and ideals is always worth fighting for, and feminist politics shape every word in the pages that follow. George Collier, much-loved mentor and loyal friend, we miss you: you are not with us, but you continue to be a beacon of integrity and dignity and shape us in more ways than we could ever express.

To Deeya Shivani, the light of our lives: your sparkling intelligence and wit, your resilience, courage, and integrity, and your infectious joie de vivre are nothing short of inspirational. You bring joy (and sleepless nights!), laughs and pranks, culinary experiments, and adventures to our world.

Witnessing your journey and your numerous triumphs has been the most precious gift we could ever have received.

We dedicate this book with love to Lata Mani, without whom Bangalore would never have become home. We thank her for always showing us a path forward no matter what our challenges, for her emotional and spiritual guidance, for all the love and support she has bestowed upon our family over the past several years, and, most of all, for the grace that she brings to all the spaces that she inhabits.

INTRODUCTION

Disjunctive Temporalities, Discrepant Futures

Preethi joined Serenity, the small business process outsourcing (bpo) firm where we began our fieldwork in Bengaluru in 2009, immediately after she received her pre-university course (puc) diploma.[1] Her mother had died while she was in high school and she had helped her father raise her three younger siblings. Preethi was energetic, driven, highly articulate, and independent in her thinking. Her father had disapproved of her joining a bpo; he had preferred that she seek a job in the multinational bank where he was a security guard. But she interviewed at Serenity and was recruited as an agent. Like all bpo agents, she worked long hours, usually at a time when her family was asleep. Depending on her shift, she would frequently get home just as her siblings were getting ready for school. Her father had forgiven her for working in a bpo because her salary helped pay for the tuition of her siblings. She hoped that they would go to college, something she wasn't able to do because her family couldn't afford it; she had also saved enough money to make repairs to their crumbling, two-room apartment. Still, her father remained deeply ambivalent about her job; he had difficulty accepting that she had to work at night. Preethi, meanwhile, was proud of her accomplishments, and especially that she could support her entire family. She could now hope for a more secure financial future for herself and her family, but she was also nervous about how long she could work at this relentless pace.

Preethi's imagination of her future was expansive: she looked at the possibilities that lay ahead with enthusiasm and confidence. She had already been promoted to the position of team leader and felt sure that she would one day become a manager in Serenity's hr division. Her feelings about the future were also laced with anxiety and apprehension. She worried about many things: being laid off, burning out, getting emotionally exhausted facing the constant disapproval of her father and community, and being able to marry someone who would support her in case her in-laws disapproved of her work in a bpo. She was, at once, excited and tense about what the future held for her.

The Future of Futurity will introduce you to people like Preethi, people that you are likely to have encountered but never met. If you live in the Global North, they are the people who call you when you sit down to dinner to offer a deal on a vacation, or the ones to whom you might vent while trying to resolve problems with a new computer. They are the intimate strangers who read your lab reports overnight so that the results are in your physician's inbox first thing in the morning. Or they could be the person calling you about your credit card debt. We are referring to the army of young men and women who are employed by a large industry responsible for the outsourcing of service work on a transnational scale. We draw on diachronic research with these workers in the outsourcing industry, commonly referred to as "agents," who live in Bengaluru, a metropolis in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, and perform affective labor for customers in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

But what is it like to be an agent in the sprawling bpo industry?[2] What does it *feel* like to perform affective labor for customers one has never seen and is unlikely to ever meet, including troubleshooting for them, attending to their needs, answering their questions, and putting up with their frustration? How does working in the bpo industry open up different pathways for navigating a globalized world and for imagining one's future in such a world? And what do these imaginings of the future suggest about the relationships between futurity, capital, and technology that shape the contemporary moment?

BUSINESS PROCESS OUTSOURCING AND MUTATIONS OF CAPITALISM

So what are bpos and what do they signify for the young men and women who work in these companies? *Business process outsourcing* refers to the provision of a range of long-distance services by Indian companies to

corporations in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other parts of the world. BPOs are part of the Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) sector where the performance and monitoring of labor is facilitated by information and communication technology. The ITES industry is founded on the communication of information and affect. Initially, data entry and data transcription projects (or "processes" as they are termed in the industry) were outsourced to India. Very quickly, ITES expanded to include customer service. The economies of big cities and some small towns took a new turn, and so did the financial prospects of hundreds of thousands of young men and women. The first call center was established in India by General Electric in 1999 (Solomon and Kranhold 2005); by 2015, BPOs employed almost 700,000 people and constituted a USD 26 billion industry (Reuters 2008).3

Accurate statistics about India's BPO industry are difficult to obtain because its data is lumped with the IT industry. The BPO sector's annual revenues in the 2020–2021 financial year were estimated at USD 38 billion, recording an annual growth of almost 8 percent (Nasscom 2018,2020; Press Trust of India 2020; *Economic Times* 2021). In 2019–2020, the total global market of BPOs was estimated at USD 221–226 billion (Grand View Research 2022; Phadnis 2020; Snowdon and Fersht 2016). In this industry, the largest firm had less than 6 percent market share (Everest Group 2019). We worked with three companies that we selected on the basis of their size: the largest company had 0.2 percent of the global market share but employed almost twenty-six thousand people worldwide; the second company had only 0.1 percent of the global market share with almost six thousand employees worldwide; and the third company was much smaller, with about a thousand employees at its peak. The last company struggled to stay afloat, went through a succession of CEOs, and we heard persistent rumors that its owner had put it up for sale. When we last checked, we learned that it had been shuttered, although it had not yet been sold.

Contrary to the image that "monopoly capital" dominates the industrial landscape, the BPO industry resembles ideal-typical models of competitive markets. Throughout our fieldwork we found a wide scattering of companies with a significant number of employees, each with a small share of the total market: unlike some older branches of manufacturing, three or four large companies did not control 50–80 percent of the industry. Secondly, no matter where companies were headquartered (United States, United Kingdom, France, and India are the leading countries), their operations were usually dispersed across multiple sites. Almost all companies in the industry

employed large numbers of people in India and the Philippines, but they also had smaller units in Central America (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador), North America, central and eastern Europe (Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland), the United Kingdom and Ireland, South America (Colombia, Brazil, Argentina), North Africa (Morocco), western Europe (Germany, France), and Australia. Therefore, large and small companies competed with each other in all of these different sites simultaneously.

Apart from being competitive and dispersed geographically, the bpo industry is global in two additional ways. First, and most obviously, the industry connects people globally through the circulation of information and affect. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, bpos manifest a distinct form of transnational racial capitalism that shapes the attribution of value and worth to the labor and lives of workers in Global South locations like Bengaluru, mediates processes of translation and mistranslation that shape their affective labor, and regulates their mobility, immobility, and emplacement. The offshoring of service work has, to some extent, reconfigured the pathways laid down by histories of colonization and imperialism, not least because former English-speaking colonies with cheaper labor (for example, India and the Philippines) have become the primary centers of bpo work (Bajaj 2011).The bpo industry is global in another sense. It started out using the difference between labor costs in the United States and in India and other parts of the Global South (labor arbitrage) to offshore back-office work and lower-end customer contact work (call centers). If one were reading Émile Durkheim in a global context, the rise of call centers and bpos was about the global division of labor, in which more routinized, Taylorized, office work was being done in a lower-cost location. But if one were to add to Durkheim a postcolonial lens, it would follow that the people doing the more routinized, low-cost labor were located in former colonies: their familiarity with the language, history, and mores of the former colonizers made them appear especially well-suited to the type of affective labor required for these jobs.4

bpos have enabled affective labor to be performed at a distance due to technologies of communication. The first technology to be introduced was high-speed telephone lines, followed by the World Wide Web and satellite communication technology. In recent years, the movement of consumers to new technology platforms such as mobile phones and tablets has made apps, chatting, and artificial intelligence (ai) more important. Offshoring was a logical outcome of the outsourcing that US firms had long practiced domestically. For example, since the price of real estate in San Francisco was so high, companies moved all their accounting, human resources, quality

control, and warehouses to cheaper, remote locations in the East Bay. However, when call centers were first exported to locations such as India, the big advantage for US companies to shift overseas lay not only in the much lower cost of labor (we discuss the *production* of lower cost or cheap labor shortly); more significantly, it lay in the fact that they could recruit people with a far higher skill set than the workers who worked in call centers in the United States (Mirchandani 2005, 108, 118). The first generation of call center workers in India were almost all graduates of elite schools and colleges. But when other types of companies such as banks, consulting firms, and others moved their operations to India, these higher-skilled workers were no longer attracted to call center employment and moved to more lucrative jobs. By 2008, the socioeconomic composition of call centers and bpo agents in Bengaluru had changed with college graduates comprising a tiny minority.

Our primary objective in this book is to diagram the fraught relationship between the lifeworlds generated by affective capitalism and futurity as an ontological formation. At a historical moment when a global pandemic compelled us to confront the fault lines of inequality and precarity, when a surge in authoritarianism has rendered fragile our assumptions about the state, civil society and liberal notions of freedom and choice, and when the planet itself is under threat, can we even imagine a future? What is the future of futurity in contexts of rapacious capitalism(s), the impunity of state surveillance and violence against marginalized communities, and the "great derangement" of the devastation of the planet (Ghosh 2016)? What is the relationship between bpo agents' aspirations and anxieties regarding their individual future and the generation of futurity as an affective-temporal regime? How might rethinking capitalism, in all its mutations and contradictions, enable us to rethink the future of futurity? And what might the future of futurity have to do with relationality and potentiality?

MUTATIONS OF CAPITAL

What kinds of distinctions do we invoke in our theorization of global capitalism, racial capitalism, semiocapital, and affective capitalism that threads through this book? In using these terms we reference an *assemblage* that has different, interwoven, and discontinuous components and, here, we sketch them briefly in anticipation of our arguments in the chapters to come. Bengaluru's bpos offer an exemplary lens to engage these processes in how they push back against totalizing, homogeneous, and universalist conceptions of "capital," which, in turn, is assumed to have a logic that is as inexorable as it

is homogeneous. *Our goal, however, is decidedly not to represent Bengaluru's bpos as a "local" or "particular" form of capitalism*. On the contrary, we aim to parochialize dominant assumptions about capitalism by asking: How do bpo agents' struggles, lifeworlds, and forms of becoming compel us to rethink how we theorize capitalisms in all their multiplicity and contradiction?

Global capitalism refers to the uneven and contradictory expansion of capitalism geographically (Lenin [1917] 1939). Marx postulated that geographic expansion is an inherent tendency of capitalist development for three important reasons that reduce costs and increase competitiveness: capitalists look for cheaper sources of raw material, produce where the wage bill is lower, and sell where markets for their products exist to prevent the crisis of realization. Marx himself situated revolutions in transportation and communications infrastructure as the critical axis through which geographic expansion occurs, a phenomenon that he labels "the annihilation of space by time."5 bpos are an important example of these spatially expanding tendencies in capitalism because it was the introduction of new communication technologies that enabled this form of labor to be conducted at a distance, allowing companies to take advantage of lower labor costs by opening up back-office operations and call centers halfway across the globe.

The Future of Futurity is about how the disjunctive temporalities undergirding India's New Economy exemplified by bpos offer an opportunity to theorize the future of futurities.6 The changing nature of global capitalism provides us with one important axis to (re)theorize futures and futurities. Old geographies of capitalist firms from the Global North spreading in a colonial or imperial manner in the Global South are less persuasive now as compared with a few decades ago (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019). In many traditional manufacturing sectors, the expansion of firms from the Global South to the Global North is just as conspicuous as the movement in the other direction. Indian firms have grown into some of the largest companies worldwide in traditional manufacturing and are opening up or acquiring businesses in the Global North rapidly. For example, Tata Motors, one of India's largest conglomerates, has manufacturing units in Argentina, South Africa, Great Britain, and Thailand, and research and development centers in South Korea, Great Britain, and Spain. They produce Jaguar and Land Rover branded vehicles in Britain and commercial vehicles in South Korea under the Tata Daewoo label.

How might rethinking the relationship between the spatiality and temporality of capitalist expansion enable us to examine the future of futurity? A radically rethought version of the classical Marxist theory of combined

and uneven development may help us better understand the contemporary global capitalist system (Trotsky [1938] 1973, [1918] 2008; Van der Linden 2007). The theory of combined and uneven development was produced to account for the failure of capitalist development to close the gap between rich and poor areas of the world, between the First World and the Third World, between Global North and Global South.7 This is a geography—a shorthand—that we have become accustomed to in thinking about difference and divergence in the global capitalist economy. However, this territorially based view of rich and poor areas may have outlived its utility: we may now need a new geography of the production of wealth, poverty, and the middle class in which territorial space matters less than social space and temporality.8 The multiple futures of global capitalism do not index territorial entities like the United States, China, and India, entities in whose terms all our economic and political discourse is organized. New geographies of accumulation are creating and exacerbating pockets of steep inequality *within* societies rather than simply across them. Billionaires are multiplying most rapidly in what has been termed the Global South, while a sixth of the US population sinks below the poverty line (Credit Suisse 2015). These new geographies of inequality are the result of patterns of capitalist accumulation that create within countries a small island of wealth, a somewhat larger peninsula of middle-class prosperity (growing in India, China, and Brazil but shrinking in the United States, Japan, and Europe), and a sea of poverty in all places. Few analytic frameworks have attempted to explain the *simultaneous* rise of the superrich, the growth of the middle classes, and the creation of a class of desperately poor people. Yet, without such a framework, we can understand neither the position of those who work in bpos nor the wider context in which bpos have flourished nor where they might be headed in the future. In a situation marked by the emergence of discrepant futures, what can we say about futurity, about that which is immanent?

Our discussion of semiocapitalism draws on Franco "Bifo" Berardi and Michael Hardt to diagram the reconfiguration of capitalism with the manipulation of symbols and code; this, it has been argued, is part of the reorganization of capitalism that has become ascendant with the rise of computers, software, information technology, and ai.9 In *The Future of Futurity*, we make several assertions that fly in the face of dominant assumptions of semiocapital. Against conceptions of semiocapital as disembodied, we insist on foregrounding both the embodied labor implicated in affective capitalism as well as the inextricable entanglement of bodies, technologies, and organic and inorganic matter that are foundational to it. In arguing that

the labor of semiocapital is affective, we problematize assumed boundaries between cognitive, emotional, and corporeal labor engaged by bodies that are *formed* at the intersection of caste, class, race, and gender. Against the proposition that semiocapital is sustained by the uninterrupted flow of information across the world, we draw attention to the generation and circulation of affect that are far from seamless but are, in fact, beset with blockages and misunderstandings, missed understandings, and translations that fail. Additionally, far from assuming that semiocapital "transcends" location and place, we insist that the affective capitalism of Bengaluru's bpos is powerfully refracted by the city as an actant. Rather than simply providing a "context" or "site" for the establishment of bpos, the city's material infrastructures (including those that remain incomplete, in suspension, or in ruins), the resilience of more-than-human life forms, the recharging of religious and linguistic conflict, and the spatialities of the cruelties of caste and gendered violence are profoundly imbricated in the generation of affective capitalism (Sreenath 2020).

Our understanding of *racial capitalism* is indebted to the work of Cedric Robinson (2019, [1983] 2020), who has argued that capitalism builds on, exploits, and *deploys* existing axes of inequality rather than simply replacing it with class; class inequality is always already intersectional with other forms of inequality; and that the long history of racism is baked into capitalism from its beginning rather than an unfortunate byproduct or illegitimate remnant from the past. In the case of bpos, colonial logics of race are not simply reenacted or reproduced but are actively reconstituted. They are transformed—they change form—but they do not disappear. Our understanding of racial capitalism is deeply indebted to Asian American studies scholars who have long argued that labor and the attribution of value, and their implications for migration and immigration as much as for indenture and other forms of servitude, are always-already refracted by race (for instance, Lowe 2015; Glenn 1985, 1992, 2012; Hune 1989; Ong 1999). We draw on but also extend theorizations of intimate labor, care work, and affective labor performed by Asian bodies in a transnational circuit of service and servitude (Choy 2003; Gottfried and Chun 2018; Kang 2010; Parreñas 2001; Parreñas, Thai, and Silvey 2016; P. Sharma 2020) to highlight how the bpo industry is sustained by and reconfigures racial capitalism outside Atlanticist and Americanist frameworks of race.[10] These perspectives profoundly shape our theorization of the affective labor of bpo agents in Bengaluru who, while they do not physically migrate, engage in forms of virtual migration contingent on the extraction of surplus from racialized bodies emplaced

by transnational discourses of race, racialism, and value. In particular, our theorization of Bengaluru's bpos is in dialogue with scholarship on bpos and call centers in the Philippines, a country with a markedly different colonial history than India but which nevertheless offers valuable points of comparison and contrast with the forms of racial capitalism congealing in Indian bpos (Errighi, Bodwell and Khatiwada 2016). Engaging these histories of empire and coloniality hence enables us to track contemporary *mutations* of racial capitalism in contexts marked by affective capitalism.

In our theorization of *affective capitalism* we radically problematize assumptions about the "expansion" of capitalism into new domains of social life, and its colonization of consciousness. Affective capitalism is not "outside" other domains of sociality but is, fundamentally, coproduced with it; thus, for instance, the rhythms of affective labor are thoroughly entangled with the temporalities of the body, of ritual, and of family relations. At the same time, bpos depend on a form of value extraction predicated on the modulation of affect: affective labor is meant to produce affective states and dispositions. Of course, affective labor is not unique to bpos because it is the mainstay of several other service industries as well. However, the conjunction of affective work done across geographic and social distance represents a distinctive mode of surplus production that is typical of bpo work.

INTERJECTION

It is past midnight, and we are already exhausted—the long drive from our home to this bpo has been full of nail-biting moments. There are times when we have felt that our taxi will slam into another vehicle, a streetlamp, a building, the cart of a street vendor: our nerves are in shreds. We are being brought to the bpo by a van that transports agents to work. The speed of the van as it rushes through the city underscores the urgency of getting agents to work on time, for unpunctuality can lead to the failure of a process—an unmitigated disaster for the entire team. We are unaccustomed to the speed and marvel at how bpo agents cope with it. We will learn subsequently that speed, collision, and gridlock—literally and figuratively—are a fundamental part of their lifeworlds.

This is our first time on what we learn later is called the "shop floor," where agents do their work. We arrive disheveled and disoriented. It is pitch-dark outside, the blackness of the night a constant reminder of the slumbering city around us. But here, on the shop floor, the adrenaline—and tension—is palpable, much like a newsroom just before a deadline. The walls of the large room in which the agents are sitting are bare except for a poster that jubilantly announces the excitement and adventure of cruise travel (we have been

informed that the agents are working on a process or project contracted to them by a leading European cruise agency). These young men and women, most of whom look like they are in their early twenties, are sitting in small cubicles that crowd the room: the cubicles are placed cheek by jowl and are also bare, strangely bereft of any personal effects, photographs, or any other decoration. The agents are sitting in various postures that make visible the tension that runs through their bodies as they concentrate on the calls they're making, the packages they're supposed to sell, the deals they're obligated to clinch. The air is filled with electricity. Some agents sit crouched in their seats, almost as if they wish to disappear into them—it appears to us that they have failed to make a sale and their bodies display the fatigue, disappointment, and anxiety that seems to course through them. Every now and then the tension in the air is punctuated by claps, as when an agent is successful in selling a travel package to a client thousands of miles away from where they sit in their cramped cubicle. Once in a while, an agent rushes up from their seat, waving their arms joyously in a spontaneous, unrehearsed dance of triumph. A young woman, at most a year or two older than some of the agents, is the team supervisor and she makes her rounds, patting the shoulder of an anxious agent stooping over his monitor, his palm on his forehead, in despair because he has lost his client. A few more failed sales and he can lose his job. A young man sitting next to him turns to look at him sympathetically and clicks his tongue in support, knowing that he could be in his shoes the next night or even later that same night.

AFFECTIVE AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES

The bpo industry demonstrates how conjunctions between global capitalism, racial capitalism, and semiocapitalism produce affective capitalism as distinct assemblages. bpos hence offer extraordinary insights about the mutual imbrication of capitalism(s), futurity, and the building of lifeworlds. This does not mean that there exists some seamless integration of these aspects of capitalism—there is friction between them to be sure, and they articulate differently depending on the industry, its location, and its history, to name but a few of the factors that *generate* capitalism rather than are simply "impacted" by it. Although the bpo industry has neither the prestige nor glamor of software and higher-end industries such as business consulting and r&d industries, or the working-class credentials of mining, steelwork, or automobile production, it is exceedingly productive as a site to think about the multiple articulations of global capitalism, racial capitalism, semiocapitalism, and affective capitalism that characterize capitalism in the present.

Following the work of the Gens collective, we take it as a given that capitalism and other domains of sociality are coconstituted (Bear et al. 2015), with implications for how we can understand futurities. Capital*ism*—rather than *capital* as an abstract entity, which is assumed to have a "logic," agency, or will of "its" own—is never singular; nor is it distinct from sociality, emotion, and affect. Capitalism can be irrational, unpredictable, and, above all, supple—all the time *needing* to reinvent itself in relation to other temporalities and other socialities. Far from colonizing realms of social life from the "outside," it is intimately imbricated with sociality. BPOs underscore how the heterogeneous temporalities of affective capitalism generate distinctive futurities in various alignments and misalignments with the temporalities of the body and family, mobility and immobility, and translation and mis(sed) translation. The disjunctive temporalities of affective labor compel us to reconceptualize the *interweaving* of work and life in the futurities generated by affective capitalism.

The worlds and lives of BPO agents demonstrate the "braiding" of political and affective economies (J. Menon 2021). Policies of the Indian state, the demands of multinational capitalism, and the affective assemblage represented by the scrambling of past, present, and future in the chronotopes of Bengaluru have converged to produce formations of futurity that, while particular to this place, also provide a fecund site for theorizing futurity at this sociohistorical juncture. Bengaluru is not unique in how it enacts and represents the tense adjacency of different temporalities (T. Srinivas 2018; see also S. Srinivas 2016). The city represents itself as the hub of technological progress, but this reach toward a (post)modern future coexists with the invocation of a supposedly glorious past of Brahminical and Hindu supremacy in which "lower" castes are kept in their place; this is a golden age from which Muslims and other religious minorities have to be expunged (Assadi 2002; Gatade 2014). Neoliberal economic policies may well have spawned some of these fantasies of past glory which must then be "reclaimed" in order to build an exclusionary vision of national(ist) futures.

BPOS AND REGIMES OF LABOR

As contemporary instantiations of affective capitalism, BPOs are predicated on the circulation of signs, information, and affect.[11] However, the establishment of BPOs in Bengaluru is part of a long history of IT companies in the city; their distinctiveness, therefore, does not lie in their being harbingers of capitalism centered on the production and manipulation of symbols.

Besides, the creation and manipulation of affect have always been a part of capitalist economies (Hardt 1999, 96; Bear et. al 2015; Yanagisako 2002): affective production, communication, and exchange are generally dependent on human contact, whether this contact is actual or virtual. Furthermore, kin work, caring work, and other forms of invisible labor have existed both within capitalist labor processes and in pericapitalist spaces (Hardt 1999, 96; Tsing 2015). In other words, agents' engagement in care work is not unique to bpos.

What, then, is distinctive about the labor of bpo agents and why do we characterize it as affective? After all, every labor process has some measure of affect built into it—the pleasure experienced by an assembly-line worker in a finished automobile, the pride of a craftsperson in a beautifully produced garment, or even the frustration experienced by someone whose job is monotonous and boring. The labor of bpo agents produced commodities that were largely intangible—for instance, satisfaction, a feeling of being cared for, and brand loyalty. The products of labor were modes of feeling and, above all, a sense of connectedness with the company.

Affective labor hence lies at the core of bpo work for three reasons: Affect was the *product* of the labor of bpo agents. It was generated through the *confluence* of cognition, emotion, corporeality, and technology—agents' labor was predicated on affectively charged modes of connectivity and exchange with customers and each other. And the creation and circulation of affect in bpos through these interactions and the labor process was *generative*: it produced agents as specific kinds of subjects. The affective labor at the core of the work performed by bpo agents entailed their entire being. bpos hence differ from other offshore outsourcing industries in at least three critical dimensions: affective labor is central to the work process; affect is the chief output of this labor; and the laborer's connection to the customer is live and interactive, creating conjoined and disjunctive temporalities across disjointed locales. As part of the larger transnational service industry, bpos foreground how the production and extraction of affective labor from the Global South have become important mechanisms for capitalist reproduction (Parreñas 2001, 2005; Vora 2015).

Affective intensities charged the atmosphere of bpos in powerful ways. The demands on agents were intense and stringent. Each quarter, they were given a report card with a grade (A, B, C, D) based on their performance of affective labor. Agents consistently receiving the lowest grade for several quarters running were fired. Conversely, those receiving the highest grade were rewarded with promotions and bonuses. Bonuses were linked with

performance and were quite substantial. Agents who were outstanding performers could double their starting salary of inr 12,000 (approx. usd 175/month) in a year and be promoted to team leader in two years. Agents' grades were based on their Customer Satisfaction (csat) Scores. Skillful agents made the customer feel good even when they were unable to resolve the customer's problem. The ability to bring about a certain disposition in the customer was essential to being a good agent. If customers left the call feeling that they had been heard, that the agent was helpful, and that the company could be trusted, then it was more likely that they would have positive feelings about the brand. That is why the csat surveys often emailed to customers right after an interaction asked how likely they were to recommend that company to others and how likely they were to reuse the products and services of that company.

Being able to achieve a high level of connectedness and empathy on a call was usually correlated with high csat scores. Agents were trained to accomplish this goal. While most affective labor is based on bodily copresence, bpos were predicated on separating spatial proximity from affective intimacy (chapter 3). Using only the sense of hearing, the contact between agents and customers was in some senses a stripped-down version of face-to-face interaction; however, it was not for that reason less corporeal, nor diminished in its affectivity and no less material (chapter 4). Despite the fact that agents' entire interaction with customers was via a headset, their entire bodies were galvanized into action: they had to learn to inhabit their bodies in new ways. For example, they were trained to smile while speaking, to wear deodorant that their customers would never smell, and to adhere to a dress code at work that none of their customers could see.

How is the affective labor performed by bpo agents different from that of other segments of the (trans)national service economy—for instance, the labor performed by flight attendants, nurses, and workers in the hospitality industry? For one, it differs from the emotional labor of these workers in that it is not based on face-to-face interactions (cf. Hochschild 2012). What makes call center agents' jobs particularly challenging is that they have to manage emotions at a distance based on their verbal interactions with their clients or customers, many of whom live in cultural contexts vastly different from theirs. Affective labor in call centers also involves intense transformations in processes of embodiment: to cite just a few examples, the training of call center agents entails relearning speech patterns and the necessity of night work alters their circadian rhythms (chapter 4).

Finally, and importantly, while their labor by no means subsumes their lives or imaginations, it is affective in that it entails a profound reconfiguration of the ways in which BPO agents inhabit their worlds, indeed, in their processes of "worlding" and "world-making" (Das 2006; Stewart 2007). At the very least, it involves processes of virtual and imaginative travel (Aneesh 2015; Mankekar 2015): almost none of the workers we interviewed had traveled or, indeed, could travel to the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia. Their affective labor involves the ability to empathize and translate the lives of others in order to better serve them. To a large extent, their affective labor profoundly shapes their *capacities* to affect and be affected in the worlds in which they now move: in this sense, then, their labor manifests what Baruch Spinoza describes as the essence of affect.

Theorists of semiocapitalism tend to focus primarily on the circulation of information; the implication is that technology and the reflexivity of capital enable the flow of information across borders. However, neither semiocapital, thus conceptualized, nor affective capitalism entails placeless production: its modes of value production and extraction are *engendered* by the particularities of history and place. The growth of BPOs in Bengaluru is intimately related to the longer genealogies, multiple histories, and divergent futurities that have made this global city the place that it is. The articulation of place with forms of BPO labor creates a particular assemblage of affective capitalism and, hence, implicates how we may theorize futurities.

In academic literature as much as in popular culture, BPOs have set off enormous debates about the offshoring and outsourcing of service sector jobs in a global economy. Observers like Thomas L. Friedman (2005) have represented BPOs and the IT industry as evidence of the capacity of countries like India to leapfrog into the twenty-first century; other commentators have depicted BPO agents as new (neoliberal) incarnations of older forms of indenture and slavery (for instance, Ramesh 2004; we interrogate the racial underpinnings of such representations later in this book). Our research on the BPO industry in Bengaluru suggests that these assumptions are as totalizing as they are reductive. We began our research intending to investigate, over the long term, the cultural implications of BPOs: how working in BPOs had reconfigured the knotty relationships between work and family, and labor and leisure, for BPO agents. As we proceeded to untangle these relationships we realized that, of all the transformations that BPOs had brought about in the lives and subjectivities of agents, what had changed most radically was not just their imagination of the future, but the future of futurity.

FUTURES AND FUTURITIES

Futures and futurity are close kin (Campt 2017). The *futures* imbricated in development projects may bring into articulation discourses of past lack, present striving, and aspirations for a better tomorrow; narratives of past injury and current projects of ethnic cleansing and genocide may undergird an Islamophobic project of a Hindu nation that is yet to be achieved; upper-caste discourses of a purportedly golden age of the past inflame violence against Dalits, Bahujans, and other oppressed castes who allegedly no longer know their place; and rapidly rising inequality across and within geographies may lead democracies into populist and authoritarian futures.[12] *Futurity*, on the other hand, enables the capacity to imagine or strive for a future. As an affective-temporal formation, futurity is generative of action, aspiration, a drive to change things, and of emotions like passion, dread, longing, fear, or anxiety. Futurity as *immanence* implies movement and works on a temporal register by exceeding the articulation of what-has-been, what-is-now, and the yet-to-come and frequently dislodging linear temporalities by scrambling past, present, and future. Futurity as immanence is unlike futures, which may be defined by a fixed point or perhaps a horizon. Futurity gestures to the potentiality of conjunctures—the present as a conjuncture of the past, present, and future. Above all, futurity is ontological.

Most bpo agents that we interviewed were under the age of twenty-five and were experiencing upward class mobility for perhaps the first time in their lives: it is not surprising that they were concerned about the future. We had initially planned to use a semistructured interview protocol whose last three questions were to be about where agents saw themselves in the next two years, the next five years, and the next ten years. But we almost never explicitly needed to ask those questions because, in a typical interview, they would describe their hopes and fears about the future without prompting, and often nearer the beginning rather than toward the end of our conversations. Agents were eager to talk about the promises and perils that the future held for them, the trajectories that they had planned for their lives, and what they saw themselves doing after they had finished working in a bpo. Executives at senior and middle management in bpos were also preoccupied with the future. Instability was a constant in the industry, and executives at all levels had to prepare for rapid shifts in technology, the labor market, demand, and competition. At a conclave of senior executives organized by nasscom in 2009, Gupta observed that most talks dealt with the question of the future of the industry. What sources would result in new business?

How could the industry and individual companies expand? It seemed that everyone was preoccupied with the future. However, the stories we heard suggested something more than simply what kinds of futures different people in the industry imagined for themselves, for their companies, and for the industry as a whole. It seemed to us that there was something crucial that was not necessarily stated explicitly but that underlaid the articulation of discrepant futures.

What our interlocutors were gesturing toward was potentiality, emergent phenomena that did not yet have a name, and about becoming as a *mode of being*. What lay beyond words and feelings was futurity, an affective-temporal formation that was impressed on bodies and geographies, and on itineraries that were existential and material at the same time. A second-order phenomenon, futurity was not observable, but it was generative of those futures that could be articulated and for which feelings could be registered. If futurity is a quality of *becoming*, that which is immanent, it is analytically distinct from futures, which we conceptualize as individual and collective states or ends imagined, aspired to, or feared. Futures that may be linked with or expressed in terms of, for example, aspiration, optimism, or pessimism.

Futurity enables the production and imagination of futures. As affective-temporal potentiality, futurity propels agency and is productive of subjectivities. Futurity is embedded in duration (durée) and is characterized by qualitative multiplicity; unlike time, duration is immeasurable, ineffable yet inexpressible, incomplete, and continuously unfolding (Bergson [1910] 2015, 122). Futurity is implicated in processes of emergence that are fundamentally open-ended, nonnormative, and presubjective. Sociality is braided into futurity rather than anterior to it; yet, futurity is irreducible to institutions, political economies, state policy, or, in the case of bpos, regimes of affective labor. At a historic moment marked by climate change, economic volatility, and the disintegration of polities that aspired to coexistence and tolerance, theorizing the future of futurity is an urgent political project. Our research on affective labor, transnational capitalism, and the lives and worlds of bpo agents enables us to draw on the futures imagined by our interlocutors as an ethnographic site to theorize the articulations (and disarticulations) of discrepant futurities.

Visions of the future are often produced by temporalities marked by struggles for dominance. Thus, modernization theory, which became dominant during the Cold War, produced a linear and teleological temporality that took nation-states from the first stage, "traditional society," to the most

advanced state, "high mass consumption." Modernization theory provided a vision for the future—advanced capitalist consumer society—buttressed by a confidence that this future was possible for the entire world. In an earlier era, futurists provided a model for a new industrial age, where speed and technology would intersect to change people's lives for the better (Berardi 2011,17–25). Futurists saw themselves as heralding an emergent phenomenon that they were convinced would become dominant: the future of their vision of industrial life reshaped by speed, power, and technology was never in doubt.13 Utopian visions of the future have always been accompanied by dystopian ones: the future age of modernity based on capitalist industrialization was questioned by many, from Luddites to Romanticists; the future imagined by nationalism was resisted not only by the ancien régime but by many who feared the loss of their regional, linguistic, or ethnic identity. Today, an emergent vision of the future, shaped by climate crises, the failures of global capitalism, and the exhaustion of optimistic versions of nationalism has cast doubt on whether the future has a directionality, let alone a teleology, either progressive or dystopian (Appadurai 2013; Berardi 2011). The future of futurity has itself been cast into doubt.

Our goal is not to evaluate whether these ideas of the future will turn out as envisioned. Each of these visions is the result of a struggle among discourses of futures that may align or collide with each other, or by the conviction that an emergent temporality will become dominant in the not-too-distant future. Visions of the future are encoded in mundane activities of governments, corporations, and citizens rather than solely in well-articulated ideas in the public sphere (Appadurai 2013). Public policies constitute investments in particular futures that the state tries to bring about. Or there may be moments when utopian and dystopian narratives are equally prominent and there may be a tussle as to which one will prevail.

Futurity, and its agentive potentiality, lie at the heart of our theoretical and political interventions in this book. When we first began fieldwork in December 2008, the United States was confronting a recession: people were losing their homes; storefronts were boarded up; the election of a new president brought some hope, but it was evident that the way out of the crisis was going to be difficult. In contrast, when we arrived in Bengaluru we were taken aback by an ambient sense of optimism, the crowded and busy markets and malls, and, even though it was often tinged by anxiety and nervousness, by the excitement expressed by most of the young people we met in bpos: the future seemed bright for all those who worked in this "sunrise industry." *And yet*, it was clear that there was much to be concerned

about. Youth in other sectors of the economy were in despair: unemployment and underemployment fueled the frustrations of those who had been left behind by the nation's march to the future. Farmers were committing suicide. Violence against minority communities, especially Muslims, and oppressed Dalit and Bahujan communities was surging.

Women in the bpo industry were venturing into uncharted territory with confidence and optimism, often in defiance of the restrictions and surveillance imposed on them by their families, neighbors, and community members. These women not only worked through the night but, when they could, created new pathways for themselves professionally and personally. Their lives, while marked by relentless labor, were not without joy or enchantment. They were able to imagine new kinds of futures for themselves and their loved ones. When they had the time and the means, they socialized with each other; they would window shop and dream; they partook of the pleasures offered by the enticing new world that they were now inhabiting. *And yet*, violence against women in public spaces was increasing. At the very beginning of our fieldwork, thugs from the Hindu nationalist organization, Sri Ram Sene, physically assaulted women in a pub in nearby Mangalore. This incident initially made our interlocutors fearful but, eventually, they refused to be intimidated: they persisted in seeking relief from their exhausting schedules in each other's company and, when they had the time and the money, in malls, food courts, multiplexes, and pubs. In 2012, while we were still engaged in long-term fieldwork on this project, a young woman was brutally gang-raped in Delhi; feminists and other activists took to the streets demanding that the streets be made safer for women. This incident shook the confidence of many women who had already been deeply unsettled by the murder of call center employee Pratibha Murthy in 2005.

Agents entered into dense social relationships with coworkers from cultural backgrounds completely unfamiliar to them. They forged solidarities and intimacies, webs of relationality founded on mutual aid and care for each other, despite the fact that they were often required to compete against each other. Some of them entered into intercaste and interreligious relationships in a manner that had previously been unthinkable. *And yet*, all through our fieldwork, Hindu nationalist vigilante groups were brutally attacking Muslim men for allegedly seducing Hindu women as part of a larger campaign against "love jihad," which these groups asserted would bring about a demographic shift in favor of Muslims. And Dalit and Bahujan men, and the dominant-caste women who entered into romantic relationships or

marriages with them, were violently attacked and often murdered (Chowdhury 2004, 2009; Mankekar 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Rege 1998).

The capacity to aspire generates ethical horizons (Appadurai 2013, 193). Our insistence on futurity is imbricated with ethics in more than one sense of the word: the ethical formation of our interlocutors, as well as our ethical commitment to them. Redefining, theorizing, and *holding on* to futurity is, for us, an urgent political project. We cannot abandon the project of futurity: the very vulnerability of our interlocutors makes it incumbent on us to pay closer attention to the nuances of their imaginations, aspirations, and fears about the future. Anxiety, anticipation, excitement, yearning, worry, desire, and despair: the copresence of these apparently disparate emotions was precisely what made their imaginations of the future tense. The emotions expressed by our interlocutors about their futures were indexical of futurity as an affective-temporal formation. What do heterogeneous and discrepant futures, imagined both individually and collectively by BPO agents, suggest about futurity? Ineffable, unnameable, and potent, futurity marked our interlocutors as particular kinds of desiring subjects. As is the case with other affective regimes, subjects are not the locus of futurity. Instead, futurity leaves traces on their subjectivities, shaping their desires, undergirding their fears, and making them excited and tense about what lies ahead.

INTERJECTION

Cynthia's life changed dramatically after she got a job as a BPO agent about nine years ago. The only child in a poor family, she had the opportunity to attend a church-run school and learn excellent English.[14] *She did not go to college and indeed could not even dream of studying further after she graduated from school. She applied for a job in a BPO and, after working as an agent for about five years, was promoted to a trainer. Because she worked in a small BPO, the security of her job depended entirely on the ability of her company to get contracts from overseas clients. Moreover, the kind of training she needed to provide constantly changed according to the clients' shifting needs. Then she fell in love with someone in an IT company. The pace of her work and the uncertainties surrounding her job made her feel that she needed to "take things a little slower" instead of "always being on the move." Sometimes she felt "dizzy," she added. She wanted to get married and have children.*

By the time we concluded our fieldwork, she had had a son and quit the industry altogether. "This industry has given me a lot," she said. "But I felt the industry is always changing and I always have to move too fast to keep up.

It just didn't work for me anymore. I had to take a break and it worries me to do so. But . . . we cannot keep moving all the time: it makes your head spin."

Cynthia is certainly not the first woman to quit a stressful job to take care of her family—in the chapters that follow, we will meet others like her. Nor was her decision to take a break unique to bpo agents. Nevertheless, her words foreground some of the ways in which disjunctive futures come into conflict. There were many instances when exhaustion, disillusionment, or shifting priorities of family meant that our interlocutors would pull out of the vertiginous lifestyle enjoined by the rhythms of their labor. The collision of the temporalities of affective labor with those of the body, social relations, and religious obligation could lead to burnout. Our interlocutors, after all, were never just laborers: even as work was central to their lives, shaped their imagination of the future, and left its mark on their bodies, it rarely, if ever, subsumed their lives. Sometimes the futurities surrounding affective labor would be out of sync with the futures our interlocutors imagined for themselves. When this happened, some of them (those who could afford to do so) would quit—even when it entailed downward class mobility. Ian Klinke (2012)asserts that the "times of others" are being erased under the continuing expansion of western modernity (677). We push back against the assumption that the rhythms of affective labor erase other temporalities because it reinforces the narrative of the teleological march of "global" capitalism. For this reason, while Cynthia's narrative might appear commonplace, we place it on record precisely because it gives us pause.

We cannot keep moving all the time: it makes your head spin. We are interested in what an *in*ability to "move all the time" suggests about the relationship between futures, as imagined by individuals and collectives, and futurity as a mode of orienting oneself in the world. Furthermore, movement as a modality of navigating a rapidly changing world can be experienced as disorienting and unsettling; some futures may not be desired or coveted. Futurity as immanence implies movement. At the same time, the movement in futurity is not about a particular future. Futurity is indifferent to whether the future involves rapid movement or relative stasis.

TEMPORALITY, DURATION, AND MOVING TARGETS

Over the course of seven years of fieldwork, we were frequently struck by how rapidly the bpo industry kept changing. Some of these changes were mirrored in the different names by which the industry represented itself. In

1999, these businesses primarily did back-office work. Subsequently, voice processes became dominant, and they came to be known as call centers. By the time we began our research in 2008, this name was replaced by the term *business process outsourcing*. BPOs encompassed both call center labor and back-office work. Around the same time, Knowledge Process Outsourcing became ascendant: this entailed, for instance, reading pathology reports and MRI scans for hospitals, preparing briefs for attorneys, and assisting certified public accountants. Shortly thereafter, the abbreviation BPM (for business process management) became commonly used and, in some instances, customer-facing businesses began to be referred to as contact centers.

At the time of writing this book, technological transformations are being driven by the intersection and articulation of three changes. First, internal changes to BPO processes are being driven by artificial intelligence, Big Data, and analytics; second, changes in consumer behavior are being led by the increasing use of apps, tablets, and mobile phones; and third, the firms that contract to BPOs are demanding that they minimize costs, decrease consumer migration, and increase brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. The four major actors in this industry—the contracting corporation (for example, British Airways or Verizon); the BPO hired to perform customer contact, with operations in India, the Philippines, or another location; consumers mostly located in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia; and the city of Bengaluru—each have their own future trajectories in technological, organizational, and social space. Transformations in the industry respond to the articulation of these futures because they respond in the present to where they think they are headed in the future. The anticipation and production of sociotechnical futures recast the present actions of all the actors in this relationship.

What has been striking to us in studying this industry over several years is the speed of its transformation from year to year. For example, one of the companies where we did our fieldwork now operates in a manner that bears almost no resemblance to what it was doing in 2009, and similar rapid technological change is sweeping the entire industry. After our first year of intensive fieldwork in 2008–2009, when we returned to Bengaluru every subsequent summer, we would confront a transformed landscape. We chose to conclude our study in July 2016 because we realized that the industry as it existed at that moment was on the verge of momentous transformation. The city was changing at breakneck speed and the BPO industry was reconstituting itself ceaselessly. The changing names of the industry were not simply changes in nomenclature. They were symptomatic of the constantly

mutating and transformative nature of capitalism and its divergent temporalities of duration, pause, movement, and stasis.

Rather than getting frustrated and overwhelmed by the task of studying a moving target, we decided to train our ethnographic eye precisely on these apparently contradictory forces of movement and stasis, duration and change, acceleration and pause inherent in the industry—and in the lives and worlds of our interlocutors. bpos enable us to track the global expansion of affective capitalism for the extraction of surplus value; as we have noted, the initial objective of setting them up in India was to profit from labor arbitrage—the difference between the cost of labor in metropolitan and peripheral regions (for instance, the United States and India, respectively). For bpo employees, the future, simultaneously full of possibility and anxiety, beckoned.

The temporality of change also extends to the socioeconomic composition of bpo agents. The middle-class graduates initially hired by the industry left it for more lucrative pursuits, and by the time we began our fieldwork in Bengaluru in December 2008, the industry was hiring primarily from what has been termed the aspirational classes. Most of these young people had only a puc diploma and came from either lower-income backgrounds or from the precariously lower-middle class. Their parents were bus drivers, auto-rickshaw drivers, welders, domestic workers, and clerks in government offices. For most of these young people, unlike those who came from wealthier backgrounds, working in a call center was not "time-pass," something they did to have fun or earn pocket money while they awaited admission to college or repeatedly sat for entrance exams to the Indian Institutes of Technology (iit s), medical schools, and other elite colleges. As will be clear from the rest of this book, the incomes our interlocutors earned were crucial to the financial stability of not only themselves but their entire families and, often, their broader kin network. Contrary to (middle- and upper-middle-class) media portrayals of bpo agents as irresponsible individuals and profligate spenders, their salaries helped to provide for the tuition of younger siblings, pay off loans incurred by the family, contribute to the marriages of siblings and cousins, and, most importantly, support their parents and grandparents in their old age. bpo agents from middle-class backgrounds, whose parents were school teachers, college professors, army officers, middle-level bureaucrats, or bankers, would also join bpos to supplement the family income while going to college, but for the duration of our fieldwork, most of our interlocutors were from socioeconomic backgrounds that were considerably less privileged.[15] In some cases, the entry of middle-class youth into bpos

was precipitated by the unexpected death or incapacity of their fathers. At an interview, when asked why he wanted to join a BPO, James explained that his father had died unexpectedly and because of that he had suffered a "mental setback." He worked with his uncle in a family business, but his brother urged him to leave Nagaland in northeast India and come to Bengaluru to make a career. He had tried unsuccessfully to pass the entrance exam for an engineering college, and this is why he sought a job in a BPO. Another applicant, Venkat, had worked with his father in a real estate business in Bengaluru, but when his father met with an accident, he was forced to look for work in a place where he could earn a steady income.

We also interviewed several young women who worked in a BPO at night and attended college classes during the day and, for most of these women as well, their BPO salaries were crucial to the financial stability of their families. A considerable proportion of our interlocutors came from oppressed castes but only a few self-identified as Dalit (Guru 1998).[16] Our respective caste positions played a crucial role in how we came to understand caste in the worlds of BPO agents. As mixed and dominant caste subjects who have been raised in India, our lives and family dynamics have been powerfully shaped by caste, even as we have benefited from our respective caste privileges in numerous material and intangible ways: over the course of our lives as Hindu South Asian/American subjects, we have learned to be *attuned* to how caste, as a particular kind of subject position, is inhabited. Additionally, our previous fieldwork in rural and urban India respectively sensitized us to the politics of hierarchy, disclosure, exclusion, and naming as well as the physical, psychological, symbolic, and material violence producing and surrounding caste. As a result, even when caste was not explicitly discussed, we were often able to glean the caste positions of our interlocutors from their biographies, family histories, last names, eating habits, and, at times, their bodily habitus.[17] On some occasions, our interlocutors' caste was revealed by where they lived: as we describe in chapter 1, Bengaluru has historically been segregated by caste, and new patterns of urban development have only partially changed the geography of caste in the city. At other times, the occupations of their parents and other family members would indicate their caste position.

The self-representation of BPOs stresses meritocracy, a flattening of hierarchies, and a relatively egalitarian ethos. This self-representation is in keeping both with neoliberal disavowals of structural disadvantages and systemic violence, as well as with liberal notions of modernity. All the senior managers, CEOs, COOs, and owners of BPOs that we came across were Savarna or of dominant castes: their own caste positions were invisible to them, and

herein lay their caste privilege. Aditya Nigam (2019) has pointed out that the invisibilization of caste has historically been central to the (Savarna) modern Indian self: "The erasure of caste involved not merely its proscription or 'repression' from public discourse, in any obvious sense, rather, it was built into the formation of the self, seen as something that this 'modern Indian' had already left behind in some remote past" (122).

Many of the BPO agents with whom we worked closely did not want to talk about caste: this occlusion of caste is the result of many factors. For one, as we have just noted, the ostensible invisibility of caste is a product of the enduring structuring power of caste rather than its disappearance. Analogous with (but distinct from) the nonmarked normativity and hegemonic supremacy of whiteness in the United States, the very silence around caste produces and consolidates its power (Deshpande 2013; Soundararajan 2012).[18] Caste thus emerges as the "problem" of oppressed castes and not of those of the dominant caste: caste, as the Other of the modern, always belongs to the "lower" castes (Pandian 2002, from Mosse 2020, 1232). As Sucharita Kanjilal (2023, 10) argues, "claims to caste-blindness is common among liberal, upper-caste elites in India [Deshpande 2013, Shepherd 2019b] and especially its diasporas [Kanjilal and Mankekar 2022], serving to elide caste, while simultaneously re-signifying upper-caste practices as universally 'Indian,' and caste privilege as cosmopolitanism, secularism, or simply unmarked 'culture.'" Our interlocutors from oppressed castes were, for the most part, loath to disclose their caste identity. Perhaps the fear of being humiliated, of being subjected to overt discrimination, or an unwillingness to relive past humiliations, combined with aspirations to middle-class status, may have been why these interlocutors felt this way.[19] On our part, we felt no compulsion to push our interlocutors to disclose or speak about their caste positions. Nevertheless, as we will elaborate later in this book, the presence of caste hierarchies in the BPOs where we worked, as well in the lives of our interlocutors, was persistent, complex, and replete with contradictions (Appadurai 1986; Dumont 1981).

The place of caste in the BPO sector is a lot more complex than it is in the IT industry, which continues to be dominated by men from upper castes and workers from the middle and upper classes (Fuller and Narasmihan 2007, 2008). Indeed, BPOs drew in young people from socioeconomic backgrounds, castes, and religious communities that were considerably more diverse than the software industry (Upadhya 2016, 23). Women accounted for 40 percent of the workforce in BPOs, including at the managerial level, unlike the software industry where they continue to be underrepresented

(Upadhya 2016).[20] Last but not least, in a national context scarred by the consolidation of Hindu nationalism and economic and physical violence against Muslims, a substantial number of the agents we came across were Muslim.[21] To this (limited) extent, BPOs appear to have destabilized older hierarchies of class, caste, gender, and religion.

But let us be clear: BPOs have, by no means, done away with these hierarchies. In India as a whole, over the past few years, caste conflicts have accelerated, and violence against Dalits, Bahujan, Adivasis, and other oppressed communities has intensified; religious polarizations have sharpened as Christians, Sikhs, and, particularly, Muslims have been increasingly subjected to state-endorsed violence; disparities between rich and poor have deepened. Rather than conceive of BPOs as anachronistic or exceptional, we are interested in how the *fraught* coexistence of these disjunctive spaces—increasing caste and religious violence and deepening inequality on the one hand and, on the other, the apparently egalitarian spaces of BPOs—compels us to reconceptualize futurity.

The shifting demographics of agents have additional implications for the generation of futurities associated with the industry. Because the entry-level workforce at most of these companies was straight out of PUC, the majority of employees tended to be very young, between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. Since the industry was itself very young, people who had worked in it for more than ten years were deemed veterans. Most upper-level managers, as well as middle managers, had come up the ranks and were in their late twenties or early thirties. They were in charge of thousands of employees spread across different locations around the world. These companies were characterized by a youthful culture and were filled with ambitious people who often did not do well in India's rigid educational system. The exception to this rule was that CEOs were almost all recruited from other industries or were themselves founders of call centers or BPOs.

Why did shifting demographics make for different futurities? Unlike the first generation of middle-class, upper-class, and primarily urban agents who were working for "pocket money," during the years when we conducted our fieldwork people in the industry sought to forge careers for themselves in BPOs or, if they were unable to do so, move laterally to other branches of the service industry such as event management, hospitality, or sales. Rather than regarding their jobs contemptuously, as did so many of the earlier generation of agents, they perceived their work in BPOs as a key to future success. At the same time, they were keenly aware of the volatility of the global economy and knew that, although they earned good incomes

by local standards, there was little security for them individually and for the industry as a whole.

When we started our research in 2008, the greatest challenge facing the managers and hr departments of bpos was the retention of agents: at that time, the industry was booming and agents seemed to move continuously from one job to another. According to Maria, who worked in hr in a mid-size bpo, the main aim of the recruitment team was to curb attrition, and to continuously hire new workers, as many as two hundred every week. Her company conducted two induction ceremonies every week, one on Monday and another on Thursday, and each of them had at least ninety new recruits. They had developed what she called a "nice welcome process" that consisted of arranging a breakfast for them, giving each of them a cd about the company, and taking their photo when they first came in, developing it, and giving them a print at the end of the day.

This period was followed by a pause in the expansion of the industry during the global recession in which lateral mobility for agents became a little harder. In 2008 and 2009, organizations were devoting most of their time to recruiting and retaining agents and had few resources left for process improvements or other kinds of innovation and streamlining. The industry was then growing at breakneck rates of 20 percent year over year. Turnover rates were extremely high: the common figure cited to us by different companies was around 40 percent annually. By 2011,the global recession finally hit the bpo industry in Bengaluru. Turnover slowed down considerably, and organizations reported that they could finally shift their attention to cost reduction and process efficiencies. Although elaborating on this is beyond the scope of this book, the industry again underwent momentous changes during the covid-19 pandemic: unlike other industries, the bpo sector emerged resilient owing to its reliance on technological innovation and cloud computing. Furthermore, because of the Indian state's "Work from Anywhere" policy, bpos were able to pivot to having agents work remotely: this was not without considerable challenges especially regarding the privacy of customers and the importance of supervision, but bpos met these challenges, with increased cybersecurity measures and virtual supervision (Mankekar and Gupta 2023.).[22]

Acceleration, stagnation, movement, emplacement, duration, pause. Our interlocutors conceived of the future in divergent ways, and these futures were refracted by the disjunctive temporalities generated by intertwined processes of rapid transformation and stagnation, aspiration and anxiety, upward social mobility and precarity. *The Future of Futurity* is intended to

evoke the twinning of aspiration and insecurity for our interlocutors, the hope for a better future in a world in which the future is unpredictable and uncertain. Futurity, as an affective-temporal formation, and futures, as subjectively and collectively imagined, longed for or feared, dreaded or aspired to, and institutionalized through public policy, are frequently heterogeneous, messy, and contradictory, particularly for subjects and communities at the margins of class, caste, gender, and sexuality.

So what, then, is different about the futures and futurities surrounding bpos, and what do these disjunctive futures teach us about the reconstitution of futurity, and its viability, in our current moment? We track how the temporalities of labor, family, intimacy, sociality, and embodiment collude and collide in the performance of affective labor in bpos, and how they refract the production and extraction of value in affective capitalism. Conversely, the temporalities of affective capitalism, in various alignments and misalignments with the temporalities of the body, family, mobility and immobility, and translation and mis(sed)translation, have spawned distinctive futurities. How do these disjunctive temporalities compel us to reconceptualize the interweaving of work and life in the futurities generated by affective capitalism?

INTERJECTION

Delta Tech Park was built on the outskirts of Bengaluru in a peri-urban neighborhood called Green Meadows. We heard from several long-term residents that Green Meadows used to be a quiet outpost of the city: there were a few churches that served the Anglo-Indian community, a large mosque, a couple of small temples, and a warren of streets filled with small stores selling goods ranging from produce to furniture. Green Meadows used to have a bucolic air. Paddy fields lined the large lake that was the lifeline of the villages that surrounded it; cobras roamed the coconut groves that dotted the landscape while monkeys and parakeets screeched insults at each other. At the center of town was a mid-sized kalyana mandapa, a wedding hall where well-heeled Hindus celebrated the weddings of their children.

It is tempting to claim that once the it industry arrived in Green Meadows "everything" changed. It is true that the cost of land shot through the roof, with politicians and developers "persuading" villagers to sell their lands in order to build large tech parks, malls, and gated housing communities. Two-lane streets intended for suburban drivers became perpetually, permanently, ensnarled in traffic. The city of Bengaluru, octopus-like, started to encircle Green Meadows. But it would be a mistake to assume that the it industry "took over" life

in Green Meadows. The spatiotemporalities of high-tech capital have had to coexist, and often collide, with those of religion, ritual, and community.

Other forms of life have reemerged.

These past few years, several temples have been built along the main street of Green Meadows, indicating both the irrepressibility of faith and the success of Hindu nationalist grassroots organizing. The big mosque on the edge of town has been repainted; it has acquired a larger, more powerful public address system, and groups of the faithful congregate regularly. And there are now no less than three kalyana mandapas in Green Meadows: wedding ceremonies, sometimes last several days, accompanied by music pouring out into the streets from loudspeakers hung on walls that attempt, entirely in vain, to contain the sounds of celebration, the aroma of feasts, and the flow of guests. These kalyana mandapas are a source of tremendous frustration to those who work in Delta Tech, especially those who have to commute in cabs that drive recklessly across town to get them to work, only to be stalled by traffic and the swell of wedding guests outside their gates.

The lake, so long the pride of Green Meadows, foams and froths at the mouth, much like a rabid dog: mysterious, enormous clouds of foam rise periodically from its surface to float onto the streets surrounding the tech parks, creating ever larger traffic jams and making it still harder to get to work on time (Rao 2017).And, as if to reclaim their home, cobras have found their way into the manicured lawns of Delta Tech Park and the gated communities in Green Meadows that are home to the ceo s and expatriate managers of companies.

AFFECTIVE CAPITALISM IN PLACE

Nigel Thrift characterizes cities as "roiling maelstroms of affect" (2004, 57). These maelstroms of affect swirl around the sedimented pasts, presents, and futures of Bengaluru's chronotopes. Bengaluru is not the "product" of capital: it is, fundamentally, a place that has engendered as well as been produced by multiple histories and identities which are a source of both its richness and its conflicts (Massey 1991,27; 1994).23Rather than assume that "capitalism" *arrived* in this city, we turn to the sedimentation of past, present, and futures of Bengaluru to foreground how modes of value production have been shaped by history and by place (Upadhya 2016,34). As much as the city is shaped by its it and ites industries, Bengaluru's political-economic and cultural pasts have mediated the growth of the bpo industry and its heterogeneous futurities. At the same time, and importantly, this is a place formed through historical patterns of in-migration and the synergy—and violence—

1.1. Small Shiva temple.

generated when different, usually hierarchically positioned, cosmologies, temporalities, and spatialities cohabit in tense adjacency (T. Srinivas 2018).

While doing justice to its rich history is beyond the scope of this book, we highlight some features that continue to shape its multiplex identities and the heterogeneous futurities that are frequently in conflict with each other. Believed to have been founded in 1537, the city that we now know as Bengaluru thrived during the rule of Kempegowda during the Vijayanagara Empire. Its topography was shaped by a network of temples and tanks that attracted merchants and artisans from surrounding regions. Bengaluru was a major center of the textile industry, which was revitalized in the twentieth century: it continues to be a center of silk production. The 1930s saw the arrival of millhands, consisting of a steady stream of migrants from surrounding areas, to work in factories (Nair 2005, 55). After Indian independence in 1947, Bengaluru became the site of public sector units set up by the postcolonial government including, in the 1970s, companies such as Bharat Heavy Electrical Limited (bhel) and Hindustan Machine Tools (hmt)

that employed over eighty thousand people.[24] As relevant as its history as a place drawing migrants from different parts of the nation is, Bengaluru's self-representation is evident in the moniker Science City, buttressed by the establishment of the Indian Institute of Science in 1909, followed after Indian independence by the National Aeronautical Laboratory (nal) and the Indian Space Research Organization (isro). Its identity as a city of the future has thus preceded its current neoliberal avatar.

At the same time, despite its self-representation as a center of public sector industries and a city of science and research, Bengaluru has remained a city of multiple temporalities and spatialities (S. Srinivas 2016; T. Srinivas 2018) and, therefore, of futurities that sometimes collide with one another. The first Sufi shrines were built in the seventeenth century: many of these still exist, even if in conditions of precarious disrepair. Missionaries brought Christianity to the state of Karnataka in 1648, and in 1674 St. Mary's Basilica was built as a shrine in Bengaluru: it continues to serve as a major landmark in the city's cultural geography. After taking over Mysore in 1799, the British built a military cantonment in the city: today, some of the layout and architecture of central Bengaluru retain vestiges of colonial rule, and defense and military production remain important to the city. Bengaluru's cityscape remains a palimpsest of these histories, and it is to this "multiple city" (De 2008) that migrants come from all over the nation to find work in the it and ites industry.

Bengaluru's streets show evidence of the city's rich ritual and religious life (Mankekar and Gupta 2023). The Karaga Festival is an eleven-day festival during which a male priest journeys through the streets of the old city paying homage to temples and a dargah in order to receive and, eventually, embody the goddess Draupadi: the festival entails the participation of over 200,000 (two lakh) people who come from all over the region and is perhaps Bengaluru's most important civic ritual (Nair 2005, 36; see, especially, S. Srinivas 2008).[25] During the holy month of Ramadan, iftar is observed in homes but also in public celebrations in different parts of the city: on Russell Street and other streets in Shivajinagar, MM Road and Mosque Road in Frazer Town, Tilak Nagar, Rahmat Nagar, and Johnson Market. During the annual festival at St. Mary's Basilica, crowds spill onto streets in and around Shivajinagar.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Bengaluru is a site of the happy commingling of different religious communities: these sedimented pasts have cast long shadows over how its residents currently live and how it imagines its future. In 1928, the city experienced horrific Hindu-Muslim

violence known as the Bangalore Disturbances, followed by a second round in 1931. As we revise this book, Bengaluru, much like the rest of the state of Karnataka, has become a laboratory for the initiation of Islamophobic projects in contemporary India, ranging from the ban on hijabs in educational institutions to the coerced removal of loudspeakers that issue calls to prayer in mosques. Given that Bengaluru represents itself as a city of the future, these developments should give us pause. In addition to the future of this city and this nation, it is the future of futurity that hangs in the balance as devastating violence simmers under the thin surface of civility.

Other inequities and hierarchies have been reconfigured or recharged as disparate visions of the future come into conflict, with concrete implications for the agentive potentiality of futurity. Bengaluru's intense linguistic politics have tended to pivot around the intersection of class, migratory status, and religion: these volatile relations continue to shape the inequalities of language in the city and its bpos (chapter 1). Nor can we assume that migrants to Bengaluru are always welcomed with open arms. The city's topography is shaped by state-endorsed and extralegal acquisitions of land for tech parks and malls as the poor, particularly from Dalit, Bahujan, Muslim, and other marginalized communities, are pushed farther into the peripheries of the city. The pulsating energies of its streets are marked by the ebb and flow of religious fervor as well as conflict, with violence against Muslims and Dalits by majoritarian Hindus erupting in December 2015 (Mondal 2015) and again in August 2020 (Deutsche Welle 2020; *Times of India* 2022). These are the cultural and discursive factors that powerfully *refract* the multicultural and multireligious socialities, intimacies, and worlds of bpo agents, with powerful implications for how we may theorize futurities in all their multiplicity.

The spatiotemporal dimensions of these multiple futurities are manifest in the topography of the city. Bengaluru's landscape has, historically, been shaped by settlements segregated along religious and caste lines. Today, many of these neighborhoods persist and contrast sharply with tech parks, malls, and gated communities built by real estate developers for the new cognitariat—the engineers, senior managers, and venture capitalists of it and ites companies (Berardi 2013) (chapter 2). These gated communities were, of course, out of reach for the bpo agents with whom we worked, many of whom had to live in congested neighborhoods often at a considerable distance from the tech parks where they worked (chapter 1). Bengaluru attracts poverty-stricken people from surrounding rural areas, as well as ambitious young men and women who come to seek their fortunes from

far-flung cities like Ranchi, Guwahati, Kanpur, Srinagar, and other, smaller towns and cities across India. As bpo agents commute to work and back to their homes, the chronotopes of this city refract the worlds and lives that they craft for themselves. Even as they generate disparate futurities, these chronotopes *impinge on* the futures they imagine, aspire to, or dread.

In Bengaluru, futurity is inescapably imbricated with the symbolic significance of the it and ites industries. Exemplifying how affective-temporal formations of futurity are institutionalized in public policy and political economy, the Indian state has directly participated and invested in the growth of these industries. For instance, state investment in telecommunications infrastructure, tax breaks to multinational companies that establish bpos in India, the establishment of industrial parks and sezs to house these companies, and other such policies have been essential to the rise of the bpo industry (Gupta and Sharma 2008).[26] Discourses of national sovereignty have played a crucial role in the formulation of these policies, thus foregrounding the discursive and ideological production of capital and value (Bear et al. 2015; Upadhya 2016). These policies have been predicated on the belief that national sovereignty depends on the growth of the economy in the future: the assumption is that a strong economy will result in a modern, developed, and, therefore, sovereign nation. In this way, the future of the industry is tied to the emergence of India as a modern and developed nation-state—a form of futurity that effortlessly brings together global interconnectedness with emergent national power.

Thus there are multiple ways in which futurity has become institutionalized in public policy oriented to specific visions of the future of the city, the state, and the nation. The growth of the it and ites industries is a direct result of close collaborations between corporate and political elites in the state of Karnataka. This became particularly evident during the "it-friendly" government of chief minister S. M. Krishna from 1999 to 2004, who provided substantial financial and policy support to the it, ites, and biotech industries. This was also a period that witnessed the formation of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (batf), which aimed to boost urban infrastructural development; significantly, the batf's leadership consisted primarily of prominent it and biotech leaders who aspired to make Bengaluru the city of the future (chapter 2). Urged by it and biotech elites to improve the telecommunications infrastructure, the state government of Karnataka and neighboring Andhra Pradesh forged direct links with multinational capital bypassing the central (federal) government (Upadhya 2016, 47). Last but not least, state policies have been hand-in-glove with the hegemony of neoliberal

discourses of entrepreneurship, risk, and individual growth which have provided the ideological and discursive scaffolding for the consolidation of affective labor in the bpo industry (chapters 2 and 4; see also Mankekar 2015; Harvey 2007).

Foreign multinationals first set up offshore development centers (odcs) in Bengaluru in 1985, starting with Hewlett Packard and Texas Instruments. Subsequently, other multinationals set up shop initially to outsource low-skilled but labor-intensive coding. First built in 1991, software technology parks offered high-speed data links as well as a range of other services and benefits to these companies. By the late 1990s, ites industries and it had created sixty thousand jobs (Nair 2005, 86). Nonetheless, even though Bengaluru claims to be the Silicon Valley of India, this aspiration has hit many roadblocks, ranging from infrastructural problems to so-called cultural factors. For instance, many ceos and managers we interviewed insisted that the laid-back attitude of "locals," exemplified in the Kannada phrase *salpa adjust madi* ("just adjust a little") attributed to them, prevented workers from meeting deadlines or led to them producing shoddy work: these interlocutors disingenuously caricatured Bengalurians as too "easy going" to be productive or efficient.

Finally, the futures imbricated with bpos in Bengaluru also need to be understood in terms of the articulation of the heady combination of excitement and anxiety about the future(s) of this city. Some of these anxieties erupted after the 1980 census, which highlighted the city's exponential growth: worried citizens groups expressed the urgent need to develop infrastructure to handle this growth. These anxieties are also expressed in terms of a desire to preserve Bengaluru's "older" way of life: this is a nostalgia that flies in the face of its history as a city that has always witnessed considerable in-migration and change (Frazier 2019). This nostalgia is sometimes countered by the dream to make Bengaluru into a technopole and, at other times, paradoxically accompanied by it (Nair 2005, 18–19). Such discourses of Bengaluru's future are inspired by the example of Singapore's purported success in merging capitalist modernity and "Asian" culture (chapter 2). Bengaluru is also home to vibrant civil society organizations and ngos, ranging from women's organizations like Vimochana to neoliberal public-private partnerships like Janagraha that aim to address the anxieties about the city's future. The city's crumbling infrastructure and the persistence and growth of its informal economy and poor communities living in conditions of abject poverty contrast with the glitz of its tech parks, malls, and gated communities, raising troubling questions about its discrepant futurities (Benjamin 2000,

2006, 2010; Benjamin and Bhuvaneshwari 2001). For many residents, the future of Bengaluru as a world-class metropolis in the mold of Singapore is riddled with ironies. The sustainability of Bengaluru as a conurbation is very much in doubt because it lacks a dependable source of water, and climate change has made its already meager water resources unreliable. Thus, what is in play is the future of futurity in Bengaluru and not just its discrepant futures that may range from the utopian to the dystopian. And let us not forget: *other forms of life have reemerged*, undermining any assumptions we may have about the linear temporality of futurity.

STEPPING INTO THE FUTURE

Although the bpo industry generated multiple and discrepant futures, it was united in being singularly future-oriented. Future orientation was salient in bpos for two reasons: the workforce was very young, and the industry was inherently unstable because its services and platforms changed rapidly and depended on the changing habits of consumers in different nodes of global capitalism. One important way of producing futures is through infrastructure. The material spaces of bpos, as well as their organizational structure, generated a particular atmosphere of futurity. Agents saw their futures in terms of possibility, of crafting for themselves and their families a more comfortable life: their lives were immeasurably more hopeful than that of their parents and, indeed, that of unemployed or underemployed Indian youth, or those working in the informal economy where conditions were considerably more abject, desperate, and precarious.[27] The trope of growth was ubiquitous in how our interlocutors imagined and narrated both their futures and that of the Indian nation: theirs was a narrative that was hitched to the immanent possibilities of the present. This sense of hope for the future was materialized in the built environment in which they worked.

An Atmosphere of Futurity

The architecture of bpos is iconic of the futurities associated with the it and ites industries. All the bpos in which we did our fieldwork were located in large technology parks constructed and maintained by some of the largest real estate developers in Bengaluru. Typically, a tech park consists of a number of buildings located on a large parcel of land, from forty to one hundred acres large, in which hundreds of companies, large and small, operate. The "shiny skin" of buildings (Nair 2005, 92) consists almost entirely of glass and steel, with landscaping featuring green lawns, fountains, and other water

I.2. Embassy Golf Links Business Park (one of many technology parks in Bengaluru).

bodies, and meticulously maintained pedestrian walkways. One of the bpos we studied was located in a tech park that had been declared an export processing zone (epz). This firm had two separate buildings in adjacent tech parks, one of which was part of the epz, and the other in the domestic tech park. The firm had to ensure that all the processes in the epz tech park dealt with foreign companies and that no domestic work was conducted there.

For many Bangaloreans, the chronotope of tech parks iconized the temporality of the future in contrast to the rest of the city, which, with its power cuts, water shortages, dust, and crumbling infrastructure, represents the temporality of lag (we elaborate in chapter 2). Entering a tech park felt like entering the world of the future. It was stepping into a sensorium that manifested the lure of the global and the cosmopolitan. For many agents, particularly those who came from lower-income families or communities marginalized by hierarchies of caste or religious affiliation, the allure of these tech parks lay in their promise of a future based on meritocracy and equality and, equally, in their aesthetics and sensoria. These sensoria, with their uninterrupted supply of power and water, dust-free interiors, and the diversity of languages, foods, and aromas on offer in food courts where, regardless of the time of night, it felt like the middle of the day, were also a far cry from the congested neighborhoods in which most agents lived.

I.3. List of offices near entrance of technology park.

I.4. Typical office building construction of glass and steel.

Most tech parks featured a food court with a dozen or more food outlets in a central building, small cafés dotting the park, and other services such as banks, dry cleaners, a post office, and sometimes even a grocery store on site. The twenty-four-hour food courts offered cuisines from different regions of India and Western food like burgers, pizza, and pasta: this was where many agents tasted these foods for the first time. Some tech parks also featured gyms and retail outlets. Not unlike the malls adjacent to many of them, tech parks marketed a certain lifestyle: this is what made them *invoke* a particular kind of futurity. Many agents wanted to work in tech parks because they felt that doing so would enable them to enter into the future rather than be mired in the pasts they wished to leave behind. Being in a tech park and working in a bpo was thus about inhabiting the future and not just anticipating it (Adams, Murphy, and Clark 2009). Many agents reported that when they entered a tech park for the first time, they experienced an expansion of place and time: it was no longer about being in Bengaluru or even in India but about being part of a larger world. It was the contrast between this world and that inhabited by their families and extended kin—the world in which most agents had grown up—that was most seductive in how it promised a *sense* of globality as a distinct structure of feeling and aspiration.

So strong was the seduction of these tech parks that a few agents were motivated to give up much more stable jobs to join bpos: the built environment, the architecture, and the buzz of globality that they offered proved compelling. Maria's story typifies the allure of tech parks as workspaces. After finishing a ba in commerce, she was driving around with a friend who had just graduated from dental school. They were passing a technology park with "beautiful green lawns and fountains," and on a lark, they decided to go interview at a bpo located inside. The first stage of the interview took the form of a group discussion. They both did well and moved to the next stage; that is when they thought, "We could actually get this job." At that time, Maria knew very little about the industry, but she was curious. She made it through all the rounds of the interview process and four hours later she had a job offer in her hands. It was only then that she realized it was serious: she would have to decide whether she was going to take the job. Her friend said, "Won't it be fun to work in a place with such wonderful, big buildings?" They both accepted the offer and went into training. They were not serious about the job even during training, which they and the companies hiring them treated like an extension of college life.

When we started doing intensive fieldwork in 2009, such interlocutors were atypical. With the exception of some who had finished a bachelor's in

engineering, most applicants did not have college degrees. Prashanth and Amit were applying to a BPO because they could not find a job in a software company despite having an engineering degree: their grades were below the 65 percent cutoff employed by the large software companies. They hoped that working for a BPO would give them the soft skills necessary to eventually land a job in a multinational software company, but for the time being, their best option was to work in a BPO.

Nevertheless, the story of Maria and her friend draws attention to what working in BPOs represented to even these relatively privileged young people. They chose to work in a BPO because of what they sensed when they entered these tech parks. The built environment and architecture of BPOs carried tremendous affective valence. Many people that we interviewed were captivated by what some of them described as a "modern" work environment—the ergonomic chairs, open offices, climate control, and clean bathrooms. The air-conditioned, high-tech interiors of their offices were unlike most other workplaces in Indian cities and were about as distant from the home environments of low-income agents as one could imagine. Rather than employing a vernacular aesthetic that emphasized local history and materials, these offices gestured toward a high-tech future that was technologically sophisticated and modern.

Constructions of futurity were also generated by the unique organizational structure and culture of BPOs. All the organizations where we did research were characterized by a relatively flat organizational structure in which there were only four or five levels between the CEO and the new agent on the floor. This flatness was also emphasized in the design of buildings and office spaces. In the smallest BPO where we did research, all company employees, including the CEO, sat on the same floor in open cubicles.[28] In larger companies, CEOs may have had their own cubicles, but almost everyone else sat in an open office. Agents pointed out with pride that the CEO and other managers sat in a cubicle just like them and that they could walk over and talk to senior management whenever they pleased. When we asked them how often they had done so, it turned out that nobody had ever ventured to go and speak to the senior management. However, the symbolism of the CEO and other senior managers sitting in an open office was very important to the agents. Given that many of the agents we worked with were marginalized by hierarchies of class, caste, religion, or gender (and, sometimes, all of the above), forms of deference were deeply ingrained in their habitus. The open office symbolized a relatively democratic space that appealed especially to the ambitious young people whose aspirations were to transcend

their marginalized locations. We cannot stress more the affective potency of this ostensibly egalitarian work culture: their work environment contrasted sharply with that experienced by their parents and other family members. This was of tremendous significance for agents who experienced working in BPOs as a step into a more egalitarian future.

Each "shop floor" was a space that was devoted to one process and consisted of open cubicles. It could be a very large space with four hundred workers, or it could be a much smaller room accommodating as few as fifty agents. All agents in the same project or process worked for the same external company, doing almost identical tasks. For instance, if AT&T outsourced certain functions to an Indian company, all agents handling that function were part of the same process and were partitioned into a workspace that was not accessible to agents handling a different process—say, for British Telecom. The large companies we studied operated as many as forty different processes at one site, and that subdivision could be duplicated at other sites in other cities or countries. Thus, the management of these companies was an enormous logistical challenge because agents had to be trained separately for each process, kept in separate spaces within the same facility, and the different quality demands of each contracting company had to be managed and monitored. Typically, a large US corporation that was outsourcing would give the contract for a process to several Indian companies. The assumption was that this would lead to competition between companies. On the Indian side, this practice meant that a large BPO often had small contracts from a number of US, UK, Canadian, and Australian companies rather than just two or three large contracts. This had organizational as well as administrative implications in terms of where the management team spent its time and energy.

In India, some (middle-class) analysts and commentators have disparaged call center workers as "cyber coolies" who allow themselves to be placed in a subservient position to white people in the Global North by virtue of working in a BPO (for instance, Ramesh 2004; Trivedi 2003). While such criticism correctly points to the servitude engendered by national location and race in a system of global stratification, it fails to appreciate why many BPO agents desire their jobs as agents; it also problematically equates the predicament of BPO agents with indentured laborers. In fact, BPOs represented a space where some of these young people could escape from other systems of servitude ubiquitous in the world outside, where they were not forced to reenact the daily indignities of living and working as an oppressed caste or lower-income person in India. To some of them, the form of servitude

that bpo work represented was far more preferable to what their parents had experienced. Historically, servitude and so-called menial labor in India have been fundamentally imbricated with caste hierarchies because labor and occupation were, at least in theory, strictly regulated by the politics of caste. From the perspective of our Dalit interlocutors and others from oppressed and marginalized communities, the servitude of bpo work was a step up from the humiliating servitude of "menial" work performed by their parents and other kin.

As we have noted, while bpos may destabilize established class hierarchies they by no means eliminate them. Class hierarchies existed in subtle but insidious ways within bpos and deeply shaped perspectives on labor and, therefore, the generation of discrepant futurities. The differences in the attitudes of agents to bpo work were illustrated when Gupta interviewed Suresh. He had just quit his job at a prestigious bpo and thus felt free to speak about his experiences. Suresh was a college graduate and described himself as a person from a "well-educated family." He had applied to mba programs and was waiting to hear from schools. Since he had a few months with nothing to do, he did not want to waste time at home and that is why he applied to work at a bpo. He complained that his starting salary was the same as those with an "ordinary junior college" (pre-university) degree. He thought that was unfair and that he should have been offered a higher salary by virtue of his superior education. When he joined the bpo, Suresh experienced complete culture shock. He said that the bpo did not attract "a very good crowd." For example, most people at work, including his supervisors, "used slang and colloquial language." Some of them were college dropouts, while others only had a 10+2 education and were there just to make money. When he saw how happy they were with what they were doing, he thought that they were just "a bunch of losers." After working for a month on a 9 a.m.–6 p.m. shift, he was moved to a night shift, 6:30 p.m.–3:30 a.m. That is when Suresh quit. He did not see a future there and, unlike the others, he did not need to support a family.

Some recruiters and hr managers hesitated to recruit college-educated agents like Suresh because, in their experience, higher education did not correlate with better performance. One coo, in fact, told us that if he was to choose between a college-educated candidate and someone with a puc who came from a poor family, there was "no question" that he would choose the latter. From his perspective, a candidate's ability to be a successful agent depended on factors other than their class background and even their level of English fluency: often, a person's desire to succeed, their "hunger," was

far more important than having a college degree. Employees from poorer families, he insisted, made better employees because they were more likely to stick with the job and, if they had native intelligence and were trainable, they learned what was necessary to do their job well. This perspective was corroborated by hr staff in other companies who told us that they sought candidates with a "fire in the belly" and a "go-getter" attitude. Middle-class college graduates often lacked the appetite for the tough parts of the job and were easily discouraged by initial difficulties. In myriad ways, then, fractures of class deeply shaped the production of discrepant futurities. But the fractures of class operated in bpos on a transnational scale and not just within the nation-state.

In addition to class background, there were other markers that differentiated a candidate who had potential. Maria, who had worked in the hiring team at both large and midsize bpos, said that she knew if a person would drop out from their body language—if their body language was very casual, it did not bode well. In addition, if the job candidate "asked tricky questions," or "gave stupid reasons" for wanting to work there, or simply had not bothered to learn anything about the company or the industry, they were unlikely to survive the cut. Those who were hired received two weeks of foundation-level training and two weeks of process training. Foundation-level training was geared toward improving basic communication skills and working on issues of grammar, intonation, speed, clarity, and others. Process training consisted of learning details about the specific process for which the agents were being recruited, such as making reservations on a travel portal or a credit card security process. From the offer letter to the end of training, Maria estimated that only 60 percent of candidates survived. For example, during the month of training, if a trainee took leave for two days, they were let go.

Irfan's case illustrates some of the complex dynamics that shaped the selection of agents. He came from an upper middle-class Muslim family that owned a very large plot of land in the center of Bengaluru. He lived on one floor of a house with his wife and two children, and his mother, who had retired from a job as the head of a prestigious private school, lived on the other floor. Unlike most recruits, Irfan spoke fluent English and had no trouble constructing grammatically correct sentences. However, his educational background had been adversely impacted because he had to switch schools in his penultimate year of high school when his mother moved from a different state back to Bengaluru. In Karnataka, he was required to take Kannada as one of his subjects, and he got a failing grade in that subject because he

just did not have enough time to learn it before the exams. As a result, his high-school grades were too low to gain admission to college. He drifted from one job to another without securing steady employment. When Gupta first met him, he was in his early thirties, competing to be an agent with people who were at least a decade younger than him. Irfan did very well in the foundation level course because his English skills were superior to other trainees. However, he failed to make it through the next round of training because he spoke slowly, clearly, and deliberately and that was not good enough. He could not muster enough enthusiasm and energy in his voice to engage the customer. Irfan went through several rejections at different call centers. When Gupta last spoke to him a few years later, he had separated from his wife, who now lived with their children and her natal family, and he was contemplating moving to the United States, where a close relative wanted him as a worker in their gas station business. He was ambivalent about migrating to the United States but felt he had no other choice—all other paths to upward mobility appeared blocked.

For some workers, BPO jobs not only offered them opportunities for upward mobility but also enabled their entire families to move from the precarious lower and lower-middle classes to the relatively secure middle classes (chapter 1). Many companies provided health insurance to several members of workers' families, including parents and siblings. For example, one of the larger BPOs offered 100 percent coverage for medical costs after three months of employment, and 80 percent coverage for up to four additional family members who were dependent on the employee. For most of our fieldwork from 2009 to 2016, BPO workers with some experience found themselves in a market where they could move to a better job in a competing firm. At the same time, like many corporate jobs, there was constant pressure to achieve a high level of productivity, and companies could lay off even productive workers.

What might the purported demographic expansion of the Indian middle classes have to do with the generation of futurities? NASSCOM, the trade association for the information technology industry, estimates that workers in the ITES sectors together totaled about 1.2 million employees (IANS 2018). That constitutes a fraction of the middle classes in India, which is minimally estimated at 5–6 percent of the population (approximately 70 million people) (*Economist* 2018; Kochhar 2021; Meyer and Birdsall 2012).[29] Employment growth rates have remained relatively flat because the high growth rates of the Indian economy have not been accompanied by a rapid increase in jobs, leading to what has been termed "jobless growth." One of the reasons for

this may be the highly capital-intensive nature of new growth with a high organic composition of capital that fails to employ much labor. This is why, despite high GDP growth rates, the vast majority of the population cannot dream of a better future.

FUTURITIES AND THE TIME(S) OF AFFECTIVE CAPITALISM

Growth was a predominant trope for the leaders and managers of the companies in which we worked and, more significantly, for BPO agents. Growth of the self, growth of the company, growth of the industry, and growth of the nation-state were brought together in the discursive registers of BPO employees, not always without friction. Visions of the future affect what is done today and may bring about their own fulfillment: the present is constituted by the future as much as by the past.[30]

Because the industry transformed so quickly, leaders had to constantly guess which way to steer their companies. The stakes were high because predicting the future incorrectly could result in the failure of the company. It was not surprising that upper-level executives of BPOs were constantly trying to "stay ahead of the curve" and discern trends in the business, demonstrating how planned and imagined futures act recursively on the present. Futures are important to social life because the future shapes the present and represents the horizon of possibility of present action.

The centrality of the terms *growth* and *learnings* in the discourses of our interlocutors lay not only in the number of times these terms were repeated but also in the affective charge with how they were deployed in their autobiographical accounts. The term *growth* could encapsulate promotion within the organization but also personal growth and the acquisition of soft skills. *Growth* could include increases in salary, moving up the corporate hierarchy, learning new skills and technologies, or the development of the agent's own human potential. It was seemingly goal-oriented on the one hand and completely open-ended on the other. In other words, precisely because the term was so amorphous, an agent satisfied with her job and happy to be working in a particular company could claim to be experiencing growth despite no outward markers such as a pay raise or advancement in rank. Similarly, agents talked a great deal about learnings (always in the plural), especially when recounting events or incidents in which they had been successful in overcoming challenges or even when they were speaking of occasions when they had experienced failure. *Learnings* constituted a nebulous term

indexing personal growth and professional development. Both *growth* and *learnings* were future-oriented—the purpose of each was not about being strongly anchored in the present; rather, the use of these terms signified the ability of agents to reach somewhere else (better, further, higher) in the future (chapter 1). Of course, the expectation of growth and learnings could work negatively on the present as well. When we asked agents who had quit their jobs why they had done so, they often told us that they felt their experiences of growth were limited in that company; similarly, agents often voiced disappointment about the slow pace of learnings. In general, since the workflow in bpos had been heavily Taylorized, work life was experienced as repetitive and monotonous unless it was accompanied by rapid promotions or the acquisition of new skills and education. Therefore, future orientation could sometimes discourage agents from working harder (cf. Berlant 2011).

The fractures of time and space that result in discrepant futures are not unique to the bpo industry nor are they the result of postmodernity (Harvey 1991). However, their particular configuration is profoundly influenced by the industry, its location, and the (im)mobilities of class, location, and social space. There are features of the world that lie beyond the company, industry, city, or nation-state in which our interlocutors live and dream (such as climate change, nuclear war, global capitalist crises, and pandemics), and these pose an existential threat to their ability to imagine a future. Does it mean, then, that the futurity constituted by these discrepant futures is itself in doubt? It is this question mark that hangs over all possibilities, all imaginings of the future that can be thought, sensed, or experienced (Mendieta 2020). The contexts in which discrepant futures are imagined, whether utopian or dystopian, throws the future of futurity into uncertainty.

Each of the following chapters examines futurity by focusing on one important theme. We intersperse interjections throughout the book to *enact* some of the disjunctions that we witnessed and experienced during our fieldwork. These interjections break up our arguments with recollections or reflections that cannot be smoothed out or papered over by the "flow" of our analyses: our intention is to take a pause, and to interrupt our narrative.

Chapter 1 considers the fraught relationships between mobility and growth, and immobility and stagnation, in contexts shaped by mutations of racial capitalism. Mobility was central to the lives of agents and to the bpo industry as a whole. The future of agents depended on movement toward the future across geographies, social locations, and cultures. Agents often moved to cities far from their homes where bpos were located,

they moved up the class ladder and became tenuously middle-class, and they moved across cultural boundaries to be able to help clients in the Global North. The itineraries of bpo agents were physical, virtual, temporal, social, linguistic, and experiential. What threatened their future was immobility; what they feared the most was stasis, feeling stuck, not learning new things constantly. Movement, they believed, could enable them to achieve a brighter future. Movement, here, serves an existential function since it is about the ability to become, about potentiality that is fulfilling, about futurity, and about a *sense* of being on a journey. At the same time, being placed within dense social networks gave agents a grounding and rootedness that enabled them to negotiate the uncertainties and challenges that they faced at work.

Chapter 2 diagrams the relationship between the workplace and life outside work by theorizing malls as infrastructures of aspiration. The futures that bpo agents dream about are shaped by spaces such as malls. Malls function as pedagogical sites to gain knowledges that mark the agent as cosmopolitan; this is where they can acquire the cultural capital that is seen as an essential part of the "soft skills" needed for their futures. Malls enable virtual travel that is temporal as much as spatial, enabling agents to comport themselves in spaces of modernity but also providing the resources necessary for future growth, professional stability, and success. As infrastructures of aspiration, malls generate futurities through forms of becoming.

Chapter 3 focuses on bpos as exemplars of affective capitalism built on intimate labor across geographical distance and new, previously unmonetized domains. How does affective capitalism bring together new configurations of intimacy, alienated labor, profit, and racialized value? How is the relationship between service work and servitude mediated by racial capitalism? The virtual and imaginative travel in which bpo agents are engaged, as well as the intimate relations they forge with customers and other agents at their workplaces, can interrupt the purported "flow" of affective capitalism by unleashing eruptive and disruptive potentialities. Instead of reprising the story of the ravenous expansion of capitalism into new, intimate domains of social life, about the colonization of life by capital, we highlight the uncertain directionality of the immanent, about the potential in the lines of flight created by intimacies.

Chapter 4 emphasizes how affective capitalism is imbricated in the granular embodiment of bpo agents as racialized and gendered subjects. Agents were racialized at work through aurality and not through visual markers; they experienced racial subordination, aspiration, and anxiety, viscerally, even when they were unable to articulate their feelings. Even though the

regimes of labor were relentless, our interlocutors were more than just laboring subjects: the rhythms of labor collide and collude with other temporalities, including those of family, ritual, and religion. Moreover, the lines between the laboring body and the desiring body blur so as to foreground the coproduction of bodies and affective capitalism. Futurity is predicated on the entanglement of bodies with technology, of the organic with the inorganic, and of the human with the more-than-human, to produce discrepant temporalities. The body of the worker is shaped not just by regimes of labor but by the articulation, as well as disarticulation, of temporalities that result from these relationalities.

The conclusion draws out the implications for futurity in our arguments and braids together the themes of the different chapters on mobility and translation, malls, intimate labor, and corporeality and embodiment. Taken together, these themes enable us to theorize futurity in terms of potentiality and becoming. Rather than forecasting prescriptive futures for agents and the bpo industry, our focus on futurity is shaped by our interlocutors' own gesturing toward potentiality, by their own sense of becoming as a *mode of being*; futurity is, simultaneously, existential and material.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 A PUC diploma is also known as "10 + 2" to indicate twelve years of schooling.

2 Our research was conducted with three BPOs that catered to international customers. There is a large, and growing, BPO industry that caters to the domestic market that is considered to be a less desirable source of employment. Wages and working conditions in domestic BPOs are not as high as those that provide global services, and they are considered less prestigious places to work. Many workers whose English is not good enough to work in international BPOs end up working in domestic BPOs. Some see such work as a first step toward a job in an international BPO.

3 The first call center we visited was in 2003, a small mom-and-pop operation that was being run in a large house in Gurgaon (now renamed Gurugram), a suburb of New Delhi that was fast becoming the home of call centers and IT firms (Aneesh 2015). At that time, the largest call center in Gurgaon was Daksh eServices, whose six thousand employees became part of IBM when the company was acquired in 2004.

4 Compare with Andrea Muehlebach (2011). Unlike Muehlebach's interlocutors, most of the agents we worked with were from lower-income or lower-middle-class backgrounds and belonged to socioeconomic strata that had never benefited from the promises of Fordism or harbored fantasies of it.

We propose that postcolonial affect rather than post-Fordist affect might be a more generative framework for understanding BPOs. Muehlebach and Shoshan's claim that Fordist nostalgia pervades even those places that may not have experienced Fordism does not have much empirical purchase in a country like India (2012). Fordism does not have an afterlife even as a pipe dream in India where, for most rural people, the fantasy of a life with a social safety net constructed by the state, combined with a future as industrial workers in high-wage occupations, had little purchase.

While the analytical framework of post-Fordist affect can be tremendously productive, it cannot be transposed to countries such as India, where more than 90 percent of workers have historically been employed in the informal sector. The issue is not simply of empirical or historical specificity but of the theoretical and analytical traps inherent in an assumption that capitalist formations, and workers' experiences of them, are the same everywhere. This assumption is particularly problematic because it proceeds from beliefs about the universality of historical and political-economic formations of the Global North and attributes a singularity and homogeneity to capitalism.

5 "Thus, while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. . . . There appears here the universalizing tendency of capital, which distinguishes it from all previous stages of production" (Marx, in Smith 2010, 127).

6 Our work is in dialogue with analyses of the relationship between capitalism and temporality in India's New Economy; in particular, Aneesh (2015); Amrute (2016); Poster (2007); Upadhya (2016); and Vora (2015).

7 At first, the hope was that uneven development would allow nation-states in the Third World to leapfrog stages of development (Trotsky 2010; Gerschenkron 1962), and this idea is central to the notion that development would level standards of living across the world. However, over time, it became clear that the unevenness produced by capitalist development is systematically reproduced across both regions in the world and within nation-states. As Ashman (2012, 65) succinctly puts it: "Neoliberal globalization has produced neither convergence nor catch-up."

8 Wallerstein's oeuvre is extremely important in rethinking beyond and across the nation-state (1991, 1997, 1999).

9 In the decade in which we studied the industry, BPOs changed from being heavily dependent on voice processes to becoming much more software mediated, from the use of chatbots to analytics to track customers' desires and anticipate their needs. Although we may not yet live in Berardi's dystopian

vision of a global hive in which all workers are gig workers inputting code into a giant interconnected machine whose form and overall shape is clear to none. An analysis of the impact of AI on "the future of work" is beyond the scope of this book.

10 Gottfried and Chun (2018, 998), for instance, foreground how care work has become a "robust site for theorizing about the global and the transnational."

11 Compare Castells's (2000, 21) theorization of the informational society as "a specific form of social organization in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period."

Even though the BPO sector involved the creation and exchange of intangible commodities, unlike software, it was never considered a "knowledge industry" (Amrute 2016; Upadhya 2016).

12 Pivoting away from the hypostatizing and fetishization of caste on the one hand, and its invisibilization on the other, we theorize caste as a *dynamic* mode of stratification that has taken on new forms in conjunction with the globalization of capital, neoliberal governmentality, and the ascent of Hindu nationalism. We follow David Mosse's (2020) insistence that "'caste' is not a transhistorical social category, but refers to any of a wide variety of phenomena including the identity of endogamous groups (*jatis*) or clusters of them, a division of labor, a social classification, the attribution of inherent or cultural difference, a public representation of social rank, a network, a set of values, social judgements or discriminations (of people, spaces, markets, practices), an administrative or legal category, among others" (1225–26).

The term *Dalit* refers to a sociological and political identity claimed by those who, within a dynamic system of caste hierarchies, are deemed to be "lower" caste. Its etymology may be traced to the Sanskrit where it refers to that which is crushed or broken. The political mobilization of Dalits draws substantially from the work of B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit scholar and political leader, who was the author of the Indian constitution. From the 1960s onwards, a powerful social movement emerged in Maharashtra that aimed to seek liberation from caste hierarchies. Inspired by the Black Panthers movement, the Dalit Panthers appropriated the term *Dalit* to invert the symbolic markers of their oppression and signify their pride in their Dalit self-identity (Govinda 2022). Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in Dalit political mobilization which has "coincided with the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the struggles for dignity born of social experiences of continuing discrimination and humiliation in the age of the market" (Mosse 2020, 1233).

In our discussion of caste in the worlds of BPO agents, we have preferred the terms *Dalit*, which refers to the political self-representation of

the Ambedkarite movement, and *oppressed caste* over *low* or *high caste*. We also use the term *Bahujan* to refer to the larger political identity of Dalits, other subordinated castes like the Sudras and OBCs ("Other Backward Classes," as inscribed in the Indian constitution) and, in some political contexts, tribal populations and Muslims (for a detailed elaboration of these terms, see Nigam 2021, 133). However, as Nivedita Menon (2019) points out, while the term *Dalit Bahujan* refers to the political alliance of non-Brahmin castes against the Brahminical order, it is important that we not assume a concurrence of political goals between Dalits and OBCs because "the latter are also the proximate exploiters that Dalits face in many contexts, even more than relatively distant Brahmins" (153–54).

13 Without reflecting on the limits of his narrative about the century of the future, Berardi (2011) constructs ethnocentric conceptions of the future as universal history, both the story about the faith in the future brought about by the Enlightenment, as well as the "idea that the future is over" (18).

14 In our engagement with intersections of caste, class, and gender, we are particularly indebted to activism and scholarship in Dalit feminism, including but not limited to the work of Omvedt (1979); Dietrich (1992); Manorama (1992); A. Rao (2005, 2009, 2017); Rege (1998, 2000, 2010); Sivakami (2006); Moon and Pawar (2008); Paik (2014); and Sharma and Geetha (2010). We have already noted that, as a political category, the term *Dalit* does not refer to a fixed or static identity, and this is particularly crucial to note with regards to Dalit women. In her foundational discussion of Dalit feminist epistemology, Rege (1998) insists on the heterogeneity of Dalit women's experiences. She also foregrounds that a Dalit feminist standpoint perspective is an epistemological and political project ensuing from learning and unlearning from the lived experiences of heterogeneous Dalit women: she insists that, rather than a static or essentialist "position," Dalit feminist standpoint perspectives can transform subjectivities and privilege can be unlearnt such that non-Dalit feminists can aim to "reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists" (WS-45). Rege's formulation of the transformation of non-Dalit feminists has been interrogated and critiqued by several scholars, some of whom are Dalit, who are concerned about the appropriation of Dalit women's experiences; see, for instance, Datar (1999); Kulkarni (2014); and Guru (2005).

15 The scholarship on Indian middle classes is too voluminous to cite here. On the dynamic and heterogeneous formation of the middle class*es* in postcolonial India, see Mankekar (1999). While Fernandes (2006) and Fernandes and Heller (2006) present a sociological perspective on the "hegemonic" formation of the Indian middle class in postliberalization India, Mazzarella (2005) interrogates and unpacks the aspirations and anxieties in discourses of middle-classness (see also Kapur, Sircar and Vaishnav 2017; Krishnan

and Hatekar 2017). Jayadeva (2018) demonstrates the importance of the English language to middle-class identity. There is also a large literature specifically on the formation of Bengaluru's middle classes. On the relationship between the IT industry and the formation of Bengaluru's middle classes, see, especially, Radhakrishnan (2008, 2011); Upadhya (2016); and Nisbett (2007, 2010).

16 For a thoughtful commentary on the politics of naming surrounding the category of Dalit, see Gopal Guru (1998). Guru posits: "The category dalit provides both an element of negation (to state constituted categories or harijan) and permits the conjunction of categories belonging to the same logical class (Buddhist, bahujan)" (6).

17 On the inextricability of caste with the gastropolitics of food, see Sucharita Kanjilal (2003).

18 Several Dalit feminist scholars have theorized the productive articulation of Dalit feminist and African American feminist theories. See, for example, the pioneering theorization of Dalit feminist standpoint theory by Sharmila Rege (1998); as well as Devika et al. (2013); Govinda (2022); Jyothirmai and Ramesh (2017); Paik (2014); and Soundararajan (2012).

There has been a lively debate about the pertinence of analogies between caste, as experience and episteme, in India and race in other parts of the world (see, for instance, chapters in the volume *Racism after Apartheid* edited by Vishwas Satgar [2001]; see also Pandey 2013; Wilkerson 2020). Engaging this debate is beyond the scope of our analysis.

19 In an essay aptly titled "Dalit Middle Class Hangs in the Air," Gopal Guru (2017) argues that Dalits who acquire middle-class status are sometimes hesitant to publicly declare their caste status.

20 This is despite the fact that, according to Upadhya (2016), IT and software are considered a suitable occupation for women notwithstanding the long hours that they demand; this is not true of BPOs where women tended to be stigmatized, in media representations and by landlords, neighbors, family and community members, because they worked there.

21 This may, in part, have been a result of the fact that Muslims form the largest minority community in Bengaluru and in the state of Karnataka (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs 2011).

22 For some examples, see Phartiyal and Ravikumar (2020); GEP (2020); CXOtoday.com (2022); Akhouri (2022); and Rely Services (n.d.).

23 We align with Doreen Massey's (1991) advocacy of an "extroverted" sense of place, in particular, her argument that "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (27).

24 These figures did not, of course, account for the large numbers of people employed in the informal economy who, by 1991, amounted to close to 70 percent of the total workforce (Nair 2005, 83).

25 Because it involves a visit to a Muslim dargah, the Karaga Festival has also been described as a festival of communal harmony (Shilpa 2022).

26 For insightful and nuanced analyses of the symbolic importance of IT to Indian nationalism, see Amrute (2016) and Upadhya (2016).

27 Only 10 percent of India's labor force of more than 470 million people is in the formal sector (Kumar 2017).

The term "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) may be more applicable to the many poor young people who migrated to Bengaluru from other parts of Karnataka and neighboring states than to BPO agents. These young people expected it to be a city of opportunities, only to struggle to find jobs commensurate with their abilities or expectations because of their poor English. Given their educational qualifications or technical knowledge, they thought that such opportunities were within their grasp, yet jobs proved elusive (Jayadeva 2018, 10).

28 See, especially, Carla Freeman's (2000) powerful analysis of the politics of "open offices" in the informatics industry in Barbados.

29 The middle class is variously defined in terms of consumption patterns, employment, and political orientation (Fernandes 2006, xiv–xix). In 2005, the business consulting firm McKinsey estimated the size of the middle classes to be around 5 percent of the total population. The firm projected that approximately 41 percent of the population, or 583 million people, would be middle class by 2025. However, ten years from the time that that report was prepared, it does not appear that the numbers of middle-class people have expanded as much as was once predicted (RUPE 2015). In fact, Kochhar (2021) estimates that the middle class in India shrank by 32 million due to the pandemic in 2020 and was now approximately 66 million strong.

30 We can modify Koselleck's (2004) account of open futures by drawing on Appadurai's (1981) investigation of the history of a temple in South India that revealed how heterogeneous constructions of the past were used by different groups to legitimize their actions in the present.

CHAPTER 1. MOBILITY, EMPLACEMENT, TRANSLATION

1 Our theorization of mobility and emplacement in this chapter is indebted to Caren Kaplan's foundational work on mobility in contexts of high-tech capitalism, and that of other feminist scholars who have theorized the politics of mobility—in particular, Ahmed (2000, 2006); Ahmed, Casteda, and